

The Unrecognized Widow

By: Patricia Morrow

The day of my husband's accident was the last time I would ever see the man I loved and married as his true self. It was the last time he would think, talk, act, smell and look like the man I was married to for the last 11 years. It was the day that that person died and a new one born. Did I ever stop loving that person? No. Did I get the funeral and the outward acknowledgement that the old person had passed? No. It is this small population that has to hide their pain and look at everyone that surrounds them with smiles and superficial words of "thank God they are still alive." Never feeling completely free to ever move on—after all, where can you find closure when they still walk beside you?

It is for this reason I envy those widows who get to always refer to their loved one as my late husband or my late wife. They always get to claim ownership of a wonderful relationship and a life shared with someone that is no longer with them today. They are validated, understood immediately and require no further explanation.

No person, unless they have lived this, can understand the inner pain and turmoil that one lives with existing in this way. When your spouse sustains a severe traumatic brain injury and is too impaired to ever walk back into their old life as an employee, a spouse, a parent, a supporter, it is the spouse that is left, that has to experience the emotional pain alone. It is you as the spouse that has to slowly learn to accept, let go, and move on in order to become sane and feel normal again. To insist on making this new person exist as their old self is selfish, and not fair to them. Imagine trying to let go of

your deceased loved one but yet for the rest of your life, you have to look after their body and the new person that occupies it.

You do not understand why all those health-care professionals, extended family members, friends, and acquaintances look at you and feel that you should always be grateful because this person is alive.

You believe you should honour your wedding vows and take on the responsibility of looking after this new person in their old home. After all it does say "in sickness and in health."

Should you wait just in case they "wake up?" Not realizing it, they are actually asking you to stay stuck in those years before this tragedy happened and remain the old person that you were. Not realizing that this experience has also changed you.

By your moving on, they assume that you do not or must not have ever loved this person and are forgetting them. Not realizing, it actually means you could not love them more because it

has become an unconditional love, a selfless love. That you have actually set the one you could not imagine living without, free.

That you are failing your spouse by not keeping everything the way it was. Why can't you look after them, they walk, talk, feed themselves, toilet themselves what's the big deal. That is what they would do! They could never imagine going on without their spouse or best friend beside them. That their commitment must be far greater than yours.

It is actually harder to move on than it is to stay. To stay you never have to completely let go or change. You are seen as a wonderful, committed, devoted, dedicated, and a loving spouse. To move on, you must accept, you must grieve, and you must say good-bye to the old person. You have to realize that not everyone is going to support your decision and relationships around you are going to change and may even end.

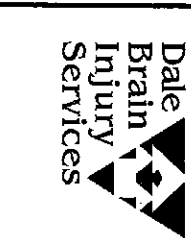
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Sandra's Story

From her office in a small northern Ontario hospital, Sandra watched people with acquired brain injuries come for treatment. Her heart reached out to the patients, but she really never thought it would happen to her. It didn't. It happened to her husband Gerry. Coping, at first, was difficult, but Dale Services is helping Sandra and Gerry to set goals and build a new life. They take it one day at a time. We're with them every step of the way.

We build futures.

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It was our wonderful case manager who could see what I could not, and set me on my way, to an eye opening experience. It was not without work though, the anguish and devastation was more than I could bear at times. It was not the ending I had hoped for, or the life I chose for my three children. But it would free me of my past life and allow me, to allow myself, to start a new life. It would allow me to let go of the idea of visiting the old person I missed and so desperately wished would show up. I could now take the time to get to know, accept and learn to like this new person, without having any expectations of who

I feel they should be but rather enjoying who they now are.

I struggle with presenting myself outside to the world. Am I a widow, am I separated, in moving on and starting a new relationship I want to feel free in presenting myself as a couple with this new person. I struggle with words, with guilt, and feeling like I have joined the population of failed marriages referring to my injured spouse as my ex-husband. So, at this time, I choose not to say those words, he is my children's father and always will be. I am not there yet but I am going to keep

moving forward. I feel the need for change not just for myself but also for those who live in silence with me. Awareness needs to be brought forth. This population needs to be understood. We cannot sit alone struggling with words and feelings of failure. We need to be heard. I am only one but I choose not to sit in silence anymore. Awareness and acknowledgement needs to occur for the unrecognized widow. ❖

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