



Guest Column: A Widower Learns From Heart-breaking Loss

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Dr. Peter Lichtenberg

*In this issue, Peter Lichtenberg reflects on being widowed twice before age 55. He has written movingly of his experience in **Grief and Healing: Against the Odds** and in the February 2017 issue of *The Gerontologist*. Dr. Lichtenberg is professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation. He is also director of the Institute of Gerontology and the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A.*

I was widowed first in November 1984, when I was 25 years old, and second in February 2014, when I was nearing 55.

It's not only that I lost both of these women to an early death, but also these relationships were once-in-a-lifetime love affairs. Becky and Susan were everything to me: friend, colleague, lover and confidante; the person I most wanted to have fun with and the one I wanted beside me in a crisis. These grief experiences were so different and yet similar. One informed by the other, yet each a whole new chapter in my life.

Becky, my first wife, made everyone feel at ease with her humour and good nature, and she was a friend to so many. She was a swimmer – a vibrant, healthy woman – and I loved her as I had loved no one else before. We married in Elkhart, Indiana, on June 19, 1982 – a beautiful, sunny day. Two years later, in the fall of 1984, we were busy planning our future. I woke early on November 14 and, though Becky was nowhere near me, I immediately recognized she was dead – and she was. She had died of an arrhythmia while jogging.

Twelve years later, I began dating Susan MacNeill. I felt as if Becky had handed me to Susan and given her blessing to our life together. My dream had truly resumed, with a life and home full of love and friendship. Susan and I played tennis, went running, watched movies, shared novels and reveled in the companionship and love that filled our every sense.

We also worked together, which drew us even closer. We were a great team. We published many articles and our research yielded findings about, and approaches to the assessment and treatment of older adults in medical rehabilitation settings.

We married on a sunny day in late September 1999. People rarely saw us when we weren't caught up in talking together.

In 2010, despite Susan's regular mammograms, metastatic breast cancer burst into our lives with a five-centimetre tumour in one breast and a three-centimetre tumour in the other – and almost no symptoms. Nearly half of all women have dense breast tissue, and the detection of cancer in dense breasts using routine mammography is only 27 to 30 per cent successful. Despite having tumours in both breasts, as well as her bones and liver, it took an ultrasound to find it.

I could share many things about living life while a stage 1V cancer takes its toll on a loved one. I am amazed at how much living we did over the next 44 months. How we kept getting closer mentally, physically and spiritually, and how little it mattered whether Susan had hair or breasts. All that mattered was the bond that grew stronger and more resilient as Susan's body weakened and began to let go.

Susan's death came quickly. Her heart stopped on Feb. 9, 2014, just hours after being hospitalized for breathing problems. On February 22, I stood at a pulpit before more than 300 people and delivered her eulogy.

Coping with loss

In 1984, I found no description in the grief literature that described my profound loss. It wasn't until I read *Team of Rivals*, a highly acclaimed study of Lincoln and members of his cabinet by Doris Kearns Goodwin, that I found a description that I could relate to. She describes the devastating effect of losing one's spouse or love interest during the "entering adulthood" phase of life.

Salmon Chase, Lincoln's Secretary of State, lost his wife during childbirth when he was 23. He wrote to friends, "I feel loneliness the more dreadful, from the intimacy of the connection which has been severed." For months he would walk around his house muttering to himself, devastated by his loss.

A young man's loss often contains trauma as well as normal aspects of grief. My grief lasted a decade and I had to fight through depression and demoralization.

Over the years, colleagues working in developmental psychology reminded me that you can only understand development through longitudinal study. My grief at 25 and 55 were not only the discrete experiences of a young man and a middle-aged man. Rather, the grief I experienced at 55 was shaped in part by the grief I experienced at 25. From planning Susan's memorial service and given her eulogy, to having friends stay with me after her death, to seeking out a writing course to help my healing, to keeping Susan close to me throughout my grief, never letting go, my grief was much healthier at 55.

I did not become depressed, and although I was vulnerable, and a year after Susan's death found myself heading toward an unhealthy dating relationship, I ended it and healing continued. Although I wish I could have saved Susan – as I wish I could have saved Becky – I did not suffer

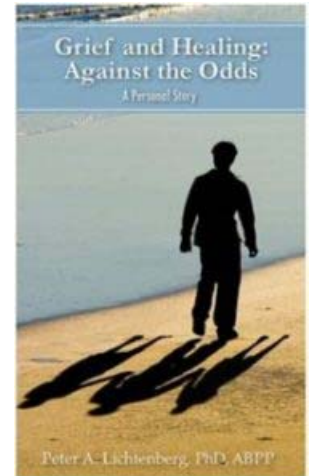
the guilt or self-blame and anger that I did when Becky died.

Grief lessons

Healing from grief was different with Becky and Susan, due partly to my age and stage of life, as well as how they died, and the resources available to me. But the feeling of all-powerful grief was the same.

Although, I reject any idea of "knowing" what might be good for others suffering from loss, here are some strategies that helped me through my grief.

1. Don't underestimate the immediate, early power of loss. Have someone with you as your loved one's life ends or soon after.
2. Have the right person stay with you after the death. This will not happen automatically. You must ask for it. You might, as in my case, even discuss it ahead of time.
3. Plan and be prepared. Young, old, it does not matter . . . what do you and your loved one want at the end of life and after? How much have you planned for your family and your financial future? Be clear and specific.
4. Arrange the funeral or memorial service the way you (and your loved one) want it, and let others help you with the final details.
5. If you have children, find a way to maintain their routine.
6. Communicate, communicate, communicate with children's teachers and principal, with neighbours, friends and family – especially during the first month.
7. Find a professional, skilled in dealing with death and dying, who can listen and accompany you on your journey. Deaths that happen not in the expected order (such as Becky's and Susan's) cause a lot of internal disturbance and questioning. This professional will become more central as time passes and others in your network move on from the loss.
8. Think about how you want to talk about your loved one and do so. I found it awkward to talk about Becky, but have continued to bring Susan into my conversations, and that feels a lot better.
9. Keep notes, letters, pictures, etc., that you can view, read and re-read. Affirmations from your loved one are a powerful force in healing.
10. Understand depression and how it can overlap or co-exist with grief. Depressive states, which can be experienced not only as sad, tearful or angry, but with self-recrimination and long-lasting feelings of hopelessness, need to be treated. I struggled with depression immediately after Becky's death, and six months later I quietly slipped into depression after what I (and others) thought had been a period of healing. I have had my moments, hours and even days of dark thinking since Susan's death, but I have been much smarter about combating these to experience real healing.



How grief changed me

The course of my life changed when Becky died. Becky and I were going to work together; she as a physician and me in her office as a geropsychologist. I never dreamed of a research or administrative career. My career became so much more important to me than it would have otherwise.

I found an exceptional mentor and my career took off when I met Jeff Barth in March 1986. I had embarked on the next stage of my healing. I now had direction and a future. Jeff was the acting director of psychology at Western State Hospital in Staunton, Virginia, where they had an opening for a director of geriatric psychology. Within the first 10 minutes of my interview, I knew that I wanted to work with him and benefit from his wisdom and experience.

I moved to Virginia, and I threw myself into work. Jeff mentored me and, by his example, showed me what it took to become a professional and advance in the field. At first, Jeff believed in me much more than I did in myself. Then, he did what good mentors do: he broke the task down so that I would know, on a tangible level, who I was and what I could accomplish.

I left Virginia in 1991 for a more challenging and rewarding job in Detroit. Once there, I found my desire to live a fuller life also emerged.

I met and worked with Susan MacNeill. We had such fun. Being together was so easy and laughter was such a part of our friendship. Right after we got engaged, Susan gave me a card that read: "Came for friendship, but stayed for love." Susan's blessing in my life set the stage for a series of wonderful personal and professional experiences and accomplishments. I embraced the idea of living as full a life as possible; not just for me and Susan, but for Becky, too.

More broadly, my experience of grief set the stage for my work with others – not just vulnerable older adults, but staff, faculty, students and the public. I endeavored to communicate openly and honestly with older adults but never take hope away, nor give up helping them pursue their own goals. Also, my experience of grief sensitized me as an administrator, heightening my awareness of how people can feel under-appreciated or even invisible.

Into the future

By following a much healthier and normal path of grief after Susan's death, three years later, I was able to find love again. I am a very loyal person so it was hard to let go of Susan's prominent role in my day-to-day life – even after her death. I struggled with this for several months while Debbie patiently waited to see if I had room for her in my life. I want to live fully, and I could hear Susan and Becky urging me to step forward into the present and resume a full and satisfying life.

I finally took their advice and now cannot believe my good fortune to find someone as special to love and share life with as Debbie.

Editor's note: You can order a copy of Grief and Healing [here](#) [1].

Article printed from Aging Horizons Bulletin: <http://aginghorizons.com>

URL to article: <http://aginghorizons.com/2017/04/guest-column-a-widower-learns-from-heart-breaking-loss/>

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[1] here: http://www.iog.wayne.edu/outreach/grief_and_healing.php