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Dear Friends,

As most of you know, Martha, my wife and partner for 56 years, 6 months and one day, went to heaven on November 12, 2006. I know that many of you don't really know how to talk to someone that has lost a spouse. You ask, "How are you doing?" The response is usually, "OK". Of course that is not the true picture.

Getting over the loss of a spouse can never be fully understood until you experience it. *For you couples, I hope and pray that that is a very long time from now.* For those of you that have lost a spouse, you understand. You never get over the loss but life goes on and you are a part of it.

During the past several months I have been thinking of "Life after Death". That is my life after Martha's death. In mid May, I was talking to my good friend, Neal Jones, pastor of Columbia at Greenspring, about these thoughts. He suggested that I document these thoughts and present them at the Columbia at Greenspring Monday night church service on June 11, 2007.

I spent a month documenting my experiences in coping with the loss of my Martha. I made the presentation on June 11, 2007. The presentation went well. I have had a lot of positive response.

This presentation provides the answer to the question, "How are you doing?" A copy of this 20 minute presentation is attached.

Moving to the Greenspring Retirement Community is one of the two most important decisions that I have ever made. Of course the most important was to marry Martha and moving to Greenspring is a close second. If you want to know more about Greenspring visit the resident created and maintained web site at, www.ericksoncommunities.com/gsv.

I welcome visitors at any time. My apartment is very spacious and cozy. We have excellent facilities, more complete than most small towns. Our 2,000 residents enjoy three club houses, four restaurants, beauty shops, banks, meeting rooms, conference center, theater (free movies), six doctor medical facility, pharmacy, fitness center, pool and much, much more.

Merv

Life after Death

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June 2007

Introduction

Is there life after death? I will leave it to Neal¹ to address this question in the biblical context. I will address this question in the context of *my life* after the death of *my wonderful wife, Martha*.

Martha went to heaven on November 12, 2006. I was devastated and in shock. My mate of 56 years, six months and one day was gone, never to return. Until you have lost a mate you cannot comprehend what this loss can do to a human being. Many of you have gone through this tragic event and understand while others of you cannot understand until you have experienced this tragic loss.

Background

I met Martha while I was a student at Auburn University. Martha was a local girl working as a cashier in a diner. We dated for a year. I graduated and was ordered to active duty in the Army as a new 2nd Lieutenant with orders to Germany. I did not want to go away for two years without Martha. I bought a ring, proposed, and she accepted. I reported to Fort Dix, NJ. Martha followed a week later. We were married in the Post Chapel and went to Germany. During the next three years we doubled our family size by the addition of two sons. We then spent three years in New Jersey, four years in Japan, and three years in New York State and then we were transferred to the Washington area. After two years in Washington I went to Vietnam for one year. I retired two years after my return and we remained in this area until our move into Greenspring.

About 5 1/2 years ago Martha developed two compressed disk and was diagnosed with serious osteoporosis and dementia. She was on morphine for pain. We moved from Vienna to the Greenspring Retirement Community, Springfield, VA in December 2005. Upon arrival at Greenspring her weight had dropped from her normal weight of 130 pounds down to 99 pounds.

¹ Neal Jones is a resident of Greenspring and the pastor of Columbia at Greenspring. He is the retired Senior Pastor of the Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, VA.

Fall

In August 2006 she fell and broke her ankle and was admitted to our Rehab facility. This event triggered Alzheimer's. During the next 10 weeks she went downhill, contracted pneumonia and went to heaven on November 12, 2006.

Biblical Strength

For the past several weeks, Neal's Monday night messages have been based on the Beautides. One of these directly addresses grief.

"Blessed are they who mourn: for they shall be comforted. (Mathew: 5:4)"

Family

How could I have survived this tragic event without my family? We have two sons. Michael lives in Harrisonburg, VA and David lives in Stafford, VA. Both have given us the daughters we never had, Janis and Bonnie. Each has given us our grandchildren, a boy and a girl in each family.

David was here within an hour after Martha arrived at the emergency room. Michael and the rest of both families arrived the next day as well as my sister, my brother-in-law and one of their daughters arrived from Alabama. Michael came prepared for a long stay. He stayed with me for 10 days. What a comfort he was.

The family was again here a month later when Martha was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Research

Shortly after Martha's death I went on the Internet to try to find out what to expect. I purchased several books on Loss and Grief. This research identified many different reactions to the loss of a loved one. Some of these are:

Shock

I think everyone goes into some degree of shock after the death of a loved one. Even though you may know that death is getting close, the actual death is hard to accept, especially if it is your spouse. For me the shock was relatively short lived.

Denial

Some go into denial, refusing to accept what has happened. I think denial can be a major impediment to moving forward with your life. Remember you cannot bring your loved one back. They are in a better place where there is no pain and the sun shines every day. Fortunately I did not experience denial.

Guilt

Remember that you did not cause the death of your spouse. Death is in God's hands. You should not have any guilt over the death. Guilt can be very destructive to you as you continue down the road of life. I did not experience guilt.

Anger

Some times a death may be considered to be someone's fault. This can cause anger. I have a close friend who lost his first grandchild a few days after birth. He blamed the medical staff. He was very angry. I have counseled him that he must get rid of the anger for it is not helpful but is detrimental to his own mental health. I did not experience anger.

Loneliness

I don't think that anyone can lose a spouse or loved one without being lonely. This is something that stays with you for months or years. From my experience I expect I will be lonely for the remainder of my life even though I expect that with time I will cope with it better.

Sadness

I think that everyone that loses a loved one goes through a period of sadness. Do I have periods of sadness? Certainly I do, but with decreasing frequency. I am a positive thinking person and I am always looking on the bright side.

Depression

Depression is experienced by many that lose a loved one. I have always said that "depression" is a word that is not in my vocabulary. I did not experience depression

Apathy

I think everyone experiences some degree of apathy after a major loss. I did. It took me several weeks to get my life back to normal. For some time I had no interest in returning to my hobby, building model airplanes.

Suicidal feelings

The worst reaction to a loss of a spouse is thoughts of suicide. This was the furthest from my mind. I want to live and remember all of the good times we had. I have a friend that lost his wife a few years ago. She was only 50. He built a shell around himself. I, together with several of his friends, tried repeatedly to take him to dinner but he never showed up. I learned recently that he tried to commit suicide. I know I will see Martha some day but I want to live a long life.

Overflowing of emotions

In the past months I have learned a lot about emotions. My emotions overflow frequently. I think this is good therapy. My emotions can overflow at the drop of a hat. I am not ashamed when this happens in public. I never try to hold my emotions back.

Church Support

About four years before moving to Greenspring, we changed churches. I got the word out to both churches about Martha's passing and about the funeral arrangements. I was so overwhelmed by the support we received from both church's that I decided that I had to attend the former church once again. I was warmly welcomed. I decided that I had to attend both churches on alternate Sundays. This worked for about a month and I then decided that I had to attend both churches. I now attend the Oakton United Methodist 8:30 service, then breakfast at Bob Evans and then I attend our former church in Vienna, the Church of the Good Shepherd, for their 11:00 service. I have the best of both worlds.

That is not enough; I also attend this Columbia at Greenspring² service. I know where Martha is. I need to work extra hard to make sure that someday I will be able to join her.

Party

Many times during our time together at Greenspring, Martha would say to friends, "If I live until December I will be 80." Did she know that her life was short? I think that she did and was very brave about it. Her birthday was December 19th. She told me early in our marriage that December 19th and December 25th were two separate events, never forget. I never did. On her 70th birthday I gave her a surprise birthday party. It was a glorious event with about 50 of her closes friends. She missed her 80th by 39 days. What better tribute to this wonderful lady then to celebrate her life and her 80th birthday. We did that in January with most of the same friends that were there 10 years ago plus some additional friends. Neal and Betty were there. This event was not free. Each guest had to bring their written memories of Martha. These memories are now my treasures.

Neal, Betty and Bill³

Martha and I met Neal and Betty a little over a year ago. We were able to attend several services in the spring and summer of last year. When Martha fell and broke her ankle, she went to Renaissance. During the next 10 weeks, Neal, many times with Betty, visited Martha several

² Columbia at Greenspring is a Monday night ecumenical church service held at the Greenspring Retirement Community. Neal Jones is the pastor.

³ Betty is Neal's wife and partner in Christ. Bill is Bill Reynolds, a resident of Greenspring and a retired Methodist minister from Texas

days each of the 10 weeks she was there. There is no way I can fully express just how much these visits meant to me. Following Martha's death Neal and Betty have been my best friends at Greenspring and been a great support in my recovery.

Shortly after Martha's passing, Bill Reynolds gave me some written material and a copy of one of his sermons. These materials help me to understand my grief and that God was always beside me.

Friends at Greenspring

It is your friends that can make your Grief to be less painful and diminish more quickly. I have many friends here in Greenspring. Besides the friends I have in this service, there is a group that I meet with five nights a week after dinner. We have coffee at Town Center⁴ and do a lot of laughing. I also have a group of men that I eat with at the Potomac Café several days a week. All of these friends help to keep me straight.

Social Activities

I am a member of two clubs at Greenspring, attend this weekly service and attend the Men's monthly breakfast.

Three years ago I resurrected my childhood hobby, building model airplanes. I am a member of a local club that includes several nationally known model builders. They have been my mentors. We meet monthly and have lunch together every Tuesday. One in our group has a farm in Remington, VA where we fly several times during the summer. Although my model building has been limited during the past year, I have now created a small workshop and I am now back doing what I love and it is also good therapy for me.

Weston Priory

I have a close friend who I have known for more than 15 years, Joe Matney. Joe's mother, Janet, lived down the hall from us and passed away a few months after we moved in. His aunt, Jo Matney, also lives in Greenspring and has attended these services. For the past 16 years Joe has taken four additional men with him to Western Priory, a small Benedictine monastery in Vermont. This is a trip dedicated to prayer, reflection and fellowship with the brothers, relaxation and some sightseeing. I went on this trip about seven years ago and again the last year. This was excellent therapy for me. I have known two of these men for 20 years and two for 16 years. All are good friends of mine. A typical day included prayers at 5:00am, 1:30pm, 5:00pm and 7:30pm. We attended all. We ate with the 13 brothers and interacted with them a lot.

⁴ Town Center is one of the three club houses at Greenspring.

Reunion Group

For the past three years I have been the Secretary of an Association of Vietnam Veterans. I maintain the database of nearly 3,000 veterans. This keeps me busy a few hours to maintain these records and provide information to our membership.

Arlington National Cemetery

I go to Arlington National cemetery every Tuesday. I have a small stool. I sit and talk to Martha and tell her about my week and just how much I love her and how much I miss her. This is a good time for me. Do my emotions overflow? They sure do, but when I leave I feel much better.

Grief Counseling

I have completed a Grief Counseling course given by Hospice. This was an excellent way for five ladies and three men to get together with an experienced counselor and understand grief. The first thing I learned was that we men have always thought that we were the stronger of the sexes. Not true. You ladies have just let us believe this myth all of our lives. We men are the weaker sex. Of the five ladies in our grief sessions, not one showed any emotion when describing their spouse and their death. All three men broke down when trying to do the same thing. Our emotions overflowed. What we got from these sessions was an understanding of how we react to grief and an understanding how to cope with these feelings. I was very impressed with the course and I made some additional friends.

Special Days

Since Martha's death I have dreaded special days. These are times that I needed to be with family and friends. I spent Thanksgiving with my son and family in Harrisonburg, VA. On December 19th, Martha's birthday, I visited her grave site at Arlington. Her burial had been the previous week. I had flowers for her birthday and a wreath for Christmas. See, I did not forget that her birthday and Christmas were two separate days. This was an emotional day for me. On Mother's day I placed flowers on Martha's grave and then traveled to Fredericksburg, VA to have a special dinner in my granddaughter's home. On the following Sunday I traveled to Stafford, VA to celebrate my birthday with our family. I was pleasantly surprised by the arrival of my sister, my brother-in-law and one of their daughters from Alabama. I had a cake with 80 lit candles. I blew them all out, but it took me three puffs.

All of this was last year and this year has been essentially the same.

Travel

I have done some travel. I visited my sister and brother in Alabama twice and I went the Weston Priory in Vermont in last year. Last year I attended an International Model Airplane Contest in Indiana. This year, my son Michael and I will visit south Alabama to show him the area where my father lived during his childhood. I traveled to El Paso Texas in late August to visit an old military friend. Last November I took a cruise to Bermuda. Getting away for a short trip is also good therapy.

Health

During the illness of a spouse you concentrate on taking care of your loved one. You may neglect your own health. I did. After your loved one is no longer with you, but in a better place, you should make your health a major priority. I have tried to do that. I now walk, at a fast pace, five miles each day. That is five round trips around the halls of Greenspring. I feel better and I have lost 14 pounds.

Conclusion

I think that when we lose a spouse or loved one, we must go through a period of grief. This period should not be forever. Life goes on and we are a part of it. God has spared me, there must be a purpose. I am seeking that purpose. Maybe it is for this lifelong Methodist to be involved with a Baptist preacher. Being involved with this service has been very meaningful to me. I have helped with greeting and I maintain the attendance records.

My life with Martha has been a blessing and the Lord continues to bless me.

In conclusion, the chorus of a well known hymn expresses my feelings;

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living,
Just because He lives!