

HOSPICE *of the* VALLEY

Bereavement Literature

RESIGNING YOUR COMMISSIONS

Marriage involves looking out for each other. It's hard to give this up, even after the death of your spouse.

I'm weary, and sort of punch-drunk, after a six-hundred mile drive from South Padre Island. Brian [our son] helped me arrange for Coast Guard assistance in scattering Cynthia's ashes there, a place that meant so much for us. While I stewed for three days in a motel room, waiting for weather to clear, I tried so hard to plan things perfectly. When our launch finally was able to put out to sea, the station executive officer told me that there's no standard burial-at-sea service in the Blue Jackets Manual, and asked if I wanted him to turn back and get a chaplain. Instead, I did the service myself, quoting from memory the passage from Romans I had chosen for Cynthia's memorial service, ending with the assurance that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. After committing her ashes to the sea, I sat and cried all the way back to the shore. But I think Cynthia would have been pleased, and it seemed right for me to step in and do one last thing for her; I've had over forty years of practice, and it's going to be hard to stop. (Author's journal)

I've made a profound discovery. For forty-three years, three as a couple and forty as husband and wife, I have felt the self-imposed pressure to do what was best for Cynthia, to do what would please her, to take care of her. After her death, in my daily prayers, I have continued to pray for assurance that she is safe, happy, and in God's care. It hit me yesterday that if I truly believe what I've been saying all these years, I have assurance that it's a given that she is indeed all that. And what I need to do is resign my job of protector/caregiver/husband and let it go. I have to assume that God will keep His end of the bargain. I know that she more than kept hers. (Author's journal)

Habits are easy to form and hard to break. Over decades of marriage, it's easy to fall into routines of action, even habitual thought patterns. One of these is the habit of taking care of your spouse, something that becomes unconscious over the years. When you make even the simplest decision, you automatically factor in what he or she would think of the action. Without conscious thought, you approach situations with the unstated goal of not creating hardship for your partner. And always in the forefront of your mind is the reflex to be protective.

When you are no longer two but one, even though your actions and their consequences no longer affect your spouse, it's hard to break the habits of a lifetime. In the days and weeks that follow the death of your beloved, there are many opportunities to protect him or her. This protection begins with the obituary. There's a real temptation to take on a commission as press agent. You want everyone to know all the merits and accomplishments of this person and to realize the world will be a duller, less complete place without him or her. You want to be certain nothing is left out that might attest to the person's deeds and worth. It's as though you were introducing this person with whom you shared your life and want to be certain the world is duly impressed.

At some point, you will be able to look back and realize that your spouse wrote his or her own obituary in the hearts of family members, friends, and the community. What is written in the newspaper, or what is said in the eulogy at the memorial service won't last in the memory of those who read it or hear it. What is enduring are the examples that were set, the acts of kindness and love that were committed, the way in which a life was lived. This testament was written long before the obituary was set down on paper, and it will last much longer. Rather than giving

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yourself an ulcer over whether you left out anything important in the composition of a memorial piece, recognize the impermanence of those words. Consider the more permanent memorials that were constructed years ago: happy memories made with a grandchild, trips to the store for a neighbor who was ill, and a joyful voice in the choir.

A similar job you may need to resign is that of chief architect of monuments. Let me give you an example. There's nothing wrong with looking at a well-kept garden or beautiful flowers and saying, "She/he did that." But if your mate had a green thumb, and yours is permanently brown, your efforts to make that garden an everlasting monument to your departed spouse are doomed to produce frustration and to end in failure. Cynthia was an avid gardener, deriving a great deal of joy from it, and was able to make almost any plant grow and flourish. As you might expect, when I was left to handle all those flower beds, those bushes and shrubs, and the garden, my first reaction was to delve into all her gardening books in a frantic effort to keep everything alive and looking wonderful. When a plant died, it was as though I was experiencing her death all over again. This went on for months, until her brother, a farmer, reacted to my expression of anguish by saying, "They're just plants." They may have been planted and nurtured by my late wife, but if they had died while under her care, she would have merely pulled them up and gone about her business. In the end, with help, I've managed to make our flower beds attractive but low-maintenance. This doesn't detract from my memories of Cynthia's magic with flowers. I've just chosen to resign myself-appointed commission to carry forward that torch.

The monument you are trying to maintain might not be flowers, but something else your husband or wife left behind. Don't feel you have dishonored your spouse by not carrying on his or her work. Another good piece of advice came from my oldest son when I told him I'd decided to eventually sell the farmland that Cynthia had loved (and I had tolerated). He simply said, "Dad, the worst thing you could ever do would be to try to keep living Mom's life for her." I commend that advice to each of you, whatever your circumstances . . .

- Richard L. Mabry, M.D., in *The Tender Scar: Life After the Death of a Spouse*