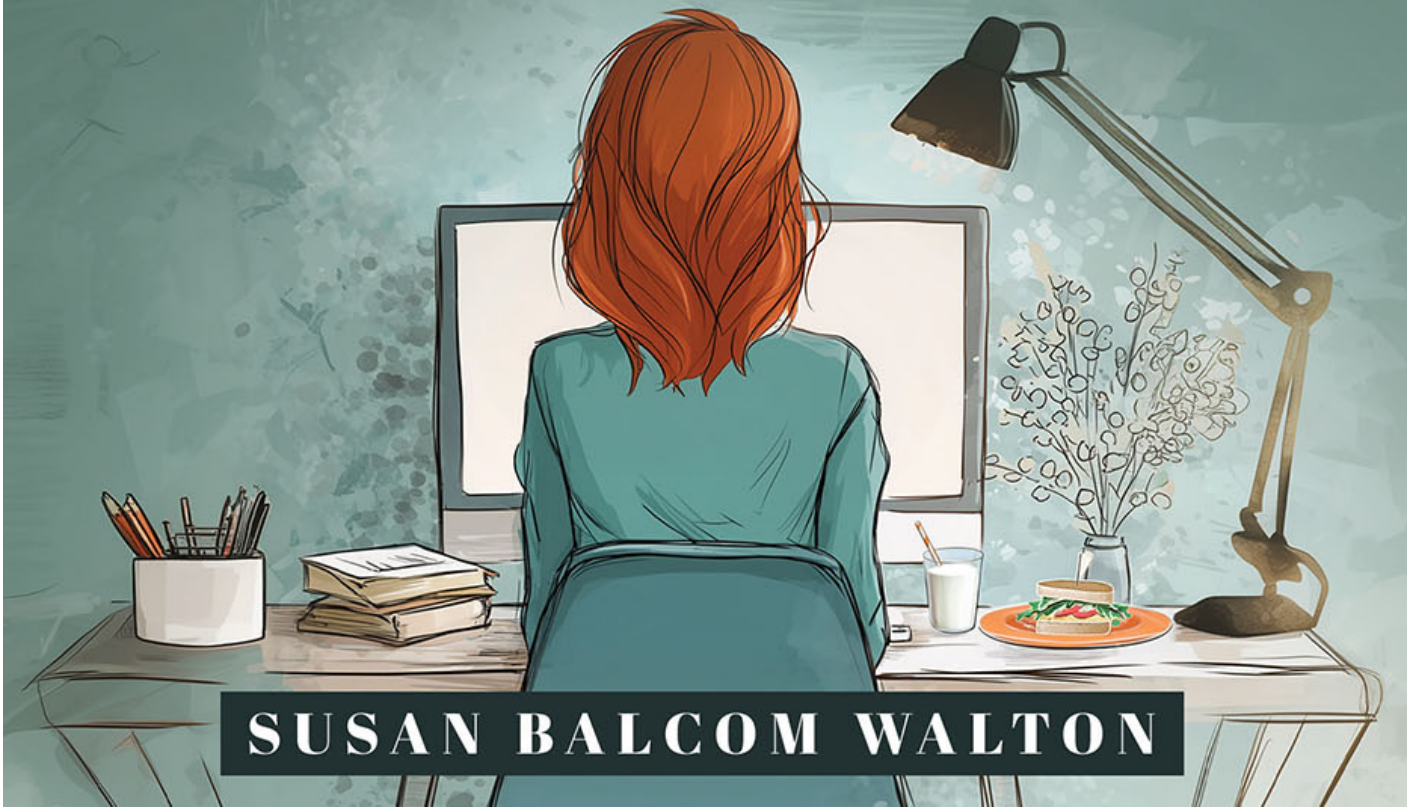
Lunch with the Widows

hi

hello

What I Learned About Living After My Husband Died



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To Mark,
who was there at the beginning,
and who'll be there at the end.

And to the widows,
who helped me navigate the journey in between.

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Making Solo Decisions

Napoleon Bonaparte, the French emperor and general, is thought to have once observed, "Nothing is more difficult, and therefore more precious, than to be able to decide."[1]

Decision-making as a couple can be challenging enough, and one of the first challenges of widowhood is making decisions *alone*.

There are the widowhood-related decisions that suddenly crowd into our lives in the immediate wake of loss—funeral arrangements, what to do with personal belongings, and so on. At the same time, we're faced with all the decisions we made before but with one fewer member of the decision-making team.

There are a *lot* of decisions to make. According to recent research by behavioral modification app Noom, the average adult makes about 122 *informed* (or conscious, data-driven) decisions every day.[2]

Those of us who become single later in life might take a little comfort in thinking that many major life decisions (education, marriage, children, career, relocation, etc.) have already been made. However, there can still be plenty of big decisions. A 2021 *Psychology Today* article by Dr. Adrian Camilleri found that women over sixty anticipate facing at least three more big life decisions of some sort.[3]

In that initial Thanksgiving Day Zoom lunch, decision-making was one of the first issues Kathy addressed. We explored how our approach to decision-making—and the decisions themselves—can change profoundly after widowhood.

A few years into her widowhood, Kathy found herself making the major decision to relocate and build a new home. As she did, to her surprise, she

found that her architectural and decorative tastes had changed. She decided to decorate her house completely differently and parted with many of the items from her previous home.

The home Kathy shared with her husband, a beautiful home I remembered visiting several times, had been filled with rich, ornate, glowing woods and deep jewel tones. Now Kathy was creating a home in pastel beach colors with simple lines and lots of natural light. Even her children were surprised by the contrast.

In our chat, Kathy talked about her journey through those decisions—her surprise at discovering that as a single, she had developed different tastes and a desire to make different decisions from those she'd made as part of a couple. We talked about the initial small stab of guilt about making different choices than we might have with our husbands at our sides. We talked about the delicate dance of dealing with other people's surprises about those choices. Ultimately, we talked about the realization that we and we alone were now in charge of those decisions and that we alone had to manage any good and bad outcomes.

Kathy's advice? Follow your instincts and your heart, make the best decision you can, and then *own it*.

As I spoke to Kathy and other wise widows who had already begun their solo journeys down the Boulevard of Big Decisions, I gained confidence in my own decision-making. Based on their advice, I formulated a three-pronged approach to decision-making.

Decision-Making and the Three I's

What I've learned from solo decision-making is that identifying a good decision takes more than two "eyes" to see—it takes three *I*'s, and those three *I*'s are:

- **Inspiration**: The promptings and guidance of the Spirit.
- **Information:** Data we can observe and collect about possible decisions and their outcomes *before* we make those decisions.
- **Intuition**: Inclinations we have toward the *rightness* or *soundness* of certain courses of action based on our values and experiences.

Note that this last one, intuition, should never be confused with a fourth *I*—impulse. Avoid that one at any cost. Like impulses, intuitive responses can come on suddenly, but they are generally based on the experiences or knowledge we've acquired and our sense of wrong or right. Impulses are generally based on sudden urges minus background context. Let's say, for example, that following a string of maintenance issues with your car, winter is approaching, you're starting a new job, and your intuition is telling you to find a more reliable vehicle. That's much different than stopping by the nearest automotive dealership and impulsively buying a vehicle after only twenty minutes of browsing.

In an ideal world, here's how the three *I*'s work for me: If I've inquired of the Lord and am keeping myself open to spiritual promptings, if I've done my homework, and if my experience and values tell me this is likely a good or acceptable course of action (even if it isn't the *only* good or acceptable course of action), I feel confident following that path until and unless my thought process and impressions tell me otherwise.

However, I've found that widowhood and grief wreak havoc on the three *I*'s. We may find ourselves mired in such grief and sadness that we don't feel in tune with the Spirit or even our own intuition. At those times, I've learned that when there's so much we don't know, it's vital to not lose sight of what we *do* know and to hang on to that. The first *I*—inspiration, or the promptings of the Holy Spirit—not only teaches us new truths but also reaffirms and reminds us of truths we already know. Elder Kevin Pearson once said, "When adversity comes, don't let something you don't fully understand unravel everything you do know. Be patient, cling to truth; understanding will come."[4]

This can make all the difference as we make decisions in the early days of widowhood. One example of how I applied it to a basic, practical decision came just a few months after my husband's death. Mark collected political campaign memorabilia—buttons, pins, bumper stickers—for years. Many were old and unique. After he passed away and my children and grandchildren sorted through and selected the items they wanted, I still had a large number of pieces in his collection. We never specifically discussed what to do with the remaining memorabilia, but I knew that collecting them had been an

important part of his life, especially in his youth. I pondered and prayed about what to do.

I didn't know for sure what Mark would have wanted, but I realized that, based on our years of experience together, I did know a few things that could be helpful to me now. I knew that when he was young, he loved learning about the history of the campaign items and their corresponding elections. I also knew he loved his alma mater, Brigham Young University. So armed with what I *did* know, I came to a decision with which I was instinctively comfortable and that our family could wholeheartedly support. We donated the collection to Brigham Young University's Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy to become part of a permanent display.

The message of hope from every widow I've talked with has been that the decision-making fog does eventually lift and we do regain our footing with inspiration and intuition. That said, the second of the three *I*'s—information—can be hard to come by. Fortunately, it's an *I* we can do something about.

Making Good Decisions: Getting the Information You Need

One challenge of losing a spouse with whom we had a good partnership is that our ability to absorb and apply good data to our decisions is swiftly and mercilessly cut in half. Suddenly, we're on our own.

My late husband and I were a good match, not only philosophically and temperamentally but also in terms of our knowledge base. I was a liberal arts communications professional with a broad grasp of social trends, current and historical events, arts and entertainment, and human nature. Mark, a scientist by training, provided a love of observation and data collection that forms the foundation of sound reasoning. Between the two of us, we had most of the skills we needed for life's basic decisions.

But when Mark died, all that changed. I suddenly felt like I was holding one of those old-fashioned viewfinders. When I held the viewfinder up to my eyes, I found that the right-hand lens had been blocked. I now had only half a view of every picture.

I immediately began to feel the effects of having to make bilateral or multilateral decisions with a unilateral set of tools. What kind of tires should I

purchase for our SUV? What kind of wood stain best suited our large front door?

I should add here that I wasn't in this dilemma because we had divided all our work into traditional women's work and men's work. Mark bought our tires because he was interested in them. I wasn't. I planned our vacation itineraries because I took a stronger interest in the process. But now I was trying to do *all* these things, even the things I didn't know anything about. And I needed help with the avalanche of large and small decisions.

Try a Virtual Viewpoint

One of the earliest tips I received from the widows was to utilize the power of instructional videos on platforms like YouTube. Before I was widowed, I primarily used YouTube to watch fun pet videos and vintage concert footage. However, it has since become my go-to for figuring out how to replace my vacuum cleaner filter, program my video doorbell, and replace the defective knob on a gas oven. I quickly learned that there are multiple instructional videos for everything. In looking for an instructional video on YouTube, I would watch several to see which worked best for me in terms of clarity and detail.

I learned that to maximize the number of videos to choose from, it's a good idea to search a couple of different times and vary the search terms each time. For example, I learned to enter the phrase "replace salt in a water softener," and then I'd try "add salt to a water softener." Each yielded a slightly different menu of videos. For brand-name repairs and information, I made sure to enter the brand name. All those resources helped me find helpful information on day-to-day operational issues.

Consider Crowdsourcing

A few weeks after I began consulting my virtual tools, I was definitely learning to do more operational and home-maintenance tasks, and I felt proud of my progress. Then a major decision arose that required, quite simply, more decision-making firepower than I could get from an online video. Suddenly, Kathy's advice about confidence in decision-making took on new meaning.

I decided to buy a car.

At the time of his passing, Mark and I owned two cars—one a fairly small hatchback for commuting to work and dashing around on errands, the other an extra-large SUV, perfect for hauling grandkids and for taking long road trips. Now faced with the need to transport myself and my dog while also considering fuel economy, I decided to purchase a car somewhere between these two extremes.

I didn't know what kind of car I wanted, and this was going to be my first experience in purchasing a car solo. But I did know one thing: I wanted a white car.

This. Was. Huge. Mark had strongly disliked white cars. He thought they were ubiquitous (everyone had one), aesthetically uninteresting, and showed every scuff and smudge. And while he always made it clear I was welcome to have a white car, he also made it clear he preferred not to have one. Since we tended to interchange our cars and I liked other colors too, I avoided white.

But now I felt I could indulge my love of white cars. To me, they looked fresh and contemporary. They didn't show dirt as much as dark cars. I visualized a midsize SUV with glistening snow-white side panels. I started driving around to car lots after hours just to walk around and look at them.

At first, my enthusiasm felt a little disloyal to Mark. My kids picked up on it. One daughter, upon hearing of my intent to acquire a white car, cast her eyes heavenward in mock horror, wailing, "Dad! Dad! Mom's really gone off the rails! She's buying a white car!"

But as I pondered this and reviewed my reasons for wanting a white car, I overcame that slight guilt and, confident in my choice, moved toward a make and model and whether to lease or buy.

Since I had no experience in car-buying, I took my decision-making process to the next level. I decided to follow the inspiring examples of other widows who had polled their circles of friends for advice. After all, I reasoned, I was a communications professor. I had written my doctoral dissertation about social media. Thus, my course of action was clear—I engaged in some crowdsourcing.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines *crowdsourcing* as "the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than

from traditional employees or suppliers."[5] I crowdsourced my broader group of friends by contacting them online, explaining my dilemma, and asking if anyone knew someone who could guide me through car-purchasing, coaching me on what to consider, what to watch out for, and what to do and not do.

Sure enough, one of my former colleagues had a friend who had been a consultant in the auto industry and was an expert in the car-buying process. This kind gentleman met with me on Zoom, explained the purchasing process, answered my questions, and sent me information to study. He also made himself available to answer additional questions as I went through the actual purchase.

Situational Mentoring

One thing that eased my conscience about asking for the time and effort of someone I didn't even know was knowing I'd draw on his help for only a short period. In the workplace, this kind of relationship is referred to as "situational mentoring." It refers to mentoring or coaching relationships based on specific goals or needs and intended to last for only specific periods of time.

When a problem or challenge needs resolution over a relatively short time span, situational mentoring can be an effective approach. It's sometimes easier to get people—especially busy people—to be helpers and mentors over a short and focused period rather than an extended one. It can also be more comfortable for those of us who need help to ask for that help in smaller, more finite quantities.

When I approached my car-purchasing mentor, I tried to clearly explain what I was looking for and stressed that my need for assistance would only last a few weeks. His input, though brief, was incredibly helpful. He pointed out a number of factors I needed to consider, from leasing versus purchasing to negotiating an extended service warranty. He lent his support right up to the day I closed the purchase in the dealership's business office, sharing a few final ideas, including how to negotiate a better extended warranty (which worked, by the way).

I have a photo of me and my dog, Ivy, posing in front of our new car the day I drove it away from the dealership. As I look back on that photo, it makes

me smile. The expression on my face reflects excitement, anticipation, and confidence.

Owning Our Decisions

I reveled in the euphoria of making that first big solo decision during those first few weeks with my new car. I also learned that there comes a point when the euphoria of big decision-making begins to wear off and we realize that making a decision is only the first step. We are then faced with the results and outcomes of that decision—outcomes we have to own. Owning a big decision—*really* owning a big decision all by ourselves—is something that perhaps we didn't have to do as much of when we made decisions with a spouse.

A little more than a year after Kathy and I shared that Thanksgiving dinner, we had a chance to talk again, and we'd both learned much more along our respective journeys. Together we reflected on the fact that the decisions we make alone—like some of the decisions we had previously made with our husbands—have good and bad outcomes and that we have to accept and own both. I learned this after I bought the white car.

What did owning my car decision look like? Well, on the plus side, my car's brilliant white exterior was as beautiful as I'd hoped, and it didn't show dirt and dust nearly as much as dark cars, especially in hot, dry weather or after long road trips. Compared to other colors, my white car nearly always looked clean.

However, having a white car presented a couple of challenges I hadn't expected. For one, the paint showed scratches and dark smudges. Within a few months, the area below the rear cargo hatch of my car was covered with scratch marks from sliding suitcases in and out. I tend to pack heavy, and at five feet four inches, I couldn't always heave the forty-pound suitcase into the air. I would often just slide it up or down along the surface of the car, then tip it into the hatch without realizing I was creating suitcase "skid marks."

Another unforeseen consequence of owning a white car is that there are, indeed, lots of white cars out there. My late husband noticed this, but I hadn't really considered it until I owned one. Every time I exited a shopping mall or

supermarket, I came face-to-face with a lot full of them—white SUVs that, from across a parking lot, all looked suspiciously alike.

Over time, I realized that while my decision was what I wanted, and while I had made it carefully and thoughtfully, it wasn't a perfect decision. In pondering that, I realized that "bad" or partly bad decisions can nevertheless have some unexpected blessings.

What's So Good About a "Bad" Decision?

A less-than-perfect decision should be honored as a stepping stone to better decisions over time. Why?

- **It gives us practice and experience.** As the old saying goes, "Practice doesn't make perfect, but it does make confident." Every time we make one of those decisions, we're gaining a little more experience and getting a little more comfortable in our decision-making skin.
- **It gives us additional data for future decisions.** For example, the next time I buy a car, if I buy a light-colored one, I will get one of those clear film coatings that protects the hatch from the scratches and smudges of loading luggage.
- **The "wrong" decisions can help us crystallize what we really want.** This truth was reinforced by Kathy in a catch-up phone call we had about a year after our Zoom Thanksgiving dinner. In that second call, Kathy shared with me that, after three years in her new location, she made another major decision to sell the home she'd built there and move back to her hometown. While she didn't regret her time in the new location or the new home, she did find it brought into sharper focus the things she really wanted but wasn't getting from her new living experience—proximity to close friends, a more simplified existence in terms of home management and day-to-day routine, and the freedom to travel. As Kathy described it, things got to the point where every time she returned from a visit to her hometown, she felt a palpable sense of yearning as she drove away and crossed the state line. And so she eventually made an important decision based on those discoveries.

- **It teaches us important truths.** Maybe one of the most important things a less-than-perfect decision teaches us is simply that *we can do it*. We didn't always make perfect decisions when we were married, and we won't now. But we can make important decisions in a good way, and we'll move on and be just fine. Sometimes, as Kathy observed, no matter how carefully we make decisions, our expectations simply aren't met. And when that happens, we take what's good and learn from what's less than good. We hold our heads up and own it. We don't kick ourselves. We did the best we could, and we moved a step closer to making an even better next decision.

Figuring Out Where We Aren't Supposed to Be

Sometimes making a decision or putting ourselves in a good place starts with simply recognizing when we *aren't* in a good situation or place, and then acting to move away from that and change our situation.

I first learned this lesson years before I was widowed—back in the 1990s, in fact—but I've never forgotten it. I call this experience "A Map, a Dinner Party, and a Prison Farm."

The year was 1996, and I was a communications manager at a large Fortune 500 petrochemicals firm. Along with several other colleagues, I had been invited to a sales team meeting in another state. The daylong meeting was to be capped off by dinner at a beautiful historic home located in the countryside outside the city.

At the end of the day, our host handed us printed driving maps to the dinner location. This was in the days long before Google Maps and phone navigation systems, so we were entirely dependent on this small piece of paper. Four of my male colleagues drove in one rental car, and I told them I'd drive myself in my own rental car and meet them at the dinner. They looked at me dubiously.

"Are you sure you don't want to follow us?" they said. Everyone who knows me knows I am a directional invalid. I can't find my way out of a paper bag.

But this time, I replied airily, "No, I have the map."

About thirty minutes into my journey, as the wide freeways gave way to tree-lined back roads, I started to feel a vague sense of uneasiness. This place did not look like the location specified on the map. Key intersections and geographic features, such as a bridge over a river, were not where the map said they would be. I decided to keep going and give the process a few more minutes, and then something happened to reassure me that I was indeed headed in the wrong direction.

I drove around a curve, and instead of seeing a lovely country estate, I found myself on the grounds of a state prison farm. Suddenly, signs, barbed wire fences, and guards flanked me on either side of the road.

I immediately turned around, backtracking a few miles to a small country store. The clerk perused my printed map and said, "Oh, here's the problem—the map's wrong. Back here at this last intersection, you should have turned right, not left."

I resumed my drive, following the new directions, and soon arrived at my destination. A half hour or so later, as I chatted with a group and sipped my 7UP, my four colleagues rushed in. The incorrect map had misled them too.

When they saw me, they exclaimed, "Oh, thank goodness you're here. When we realized the map was wrong, we were worried sick about you. How did you get here so fast?"

I looked at them and said, "Uh . . . I stopped and asked for directions."

They all gathered around me, oohing and ahhing as if I had just discovered the tenth planet (or the ninth, now that Pluto's been demoted).

And the moral of the story is this: Sometimes, ending up in the *right* place begins with the simple recognition that we are in the *wrong* place—and that we just need to get out of there.

If we find, especially during those lonely, chaotic early days of widowhood, that we're being weighed down by bad decisions but don't know what to do to make better ones, we can begin by simply doing what we can to maneuver out of our present bad situation. We can stop the car and turn around. We can ask the Lord for guidance. He will help us know what to do next, and *His* road maps are *always* accurate.

The Wisdom of the Widows for Widows

- We will find that our tastes, preferences, desires, motivations, rationales, and priorities change over time. *This will affect the way we make decisions*.
- Let that happen. You might even find you enjoy it.
- Remember that we now have three *I*'s with which to see: instinct, information, and inspiration. Used together, they serve us well.
- Our decisions won't always work out for the best. That's okay. Own 'em and learn from 'em.

The Wisdom of the Widows for Family, Friends, and Others

- Listen, really listen, to your widowed loved one's decision-making process and to their wants and needs.
- If you have significant concerns, speak briefly about those concerns, then hold your peace.
- Whenever possible, validate and encourage choices and give autonomy in decision-making.
- If you have concerns about a widow's decisions, make sure it's about *them*, not *you.* One daughter, for example, felt apprehensive about the way her widowed mother was making decisions about giving away her late father's possessions. This daughter eventually realized, however, that her reaction stemmed from her own fear of losing connection with her father and not from any flaws in her mother's decision-making process.

1. Though this quote is widely accepted as coming from Bonaparte, its precise origin remains unknown.
2. Jessica Jurkschat, "Number of Informed Decisions We Make per Day Revealed in New Research," August 9, 2022, yahoo!life, https://uk.style.yahoo.com/number-of-decisions-we-make-daily-revealed-102938055.html.
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4. Kevin W. Pearson, "Stay by the Tree, April 2015 General Conference Address, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/stay-by-the-tree?lang=eng.

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