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Published in the United States
by eBooks2go, Inc.
1827 Walden Office Square, Suite 260, Schaumburg, IL 60173

ISBN-10: 1-5457-3886-6
ISBN-13: 978-1-5457-3886-3

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication

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Introduction

My heart was broken and shattered into a thousand pieces when my soulmate, best friend, wife, and lover, Babe, died. I wrote about grieving while I grieved to give an account of the emptiness threatening to overwhelm what remained of my defense mechanisms. I wrote about grieving to chronicle the emotional storms buffeting me. I wrote about grieving to connect at a visceral level with all those who walk the journey with me. And, I wrote about grieving to discover a path through the intense suffering I experienced and shared with those who also deeply grieved the loss of a loved one.

I began writing this book less than a week after Babe's funeral. As I journeyed through the grieving process, I learned grieving and its soulmate, suffering, hurt like hell. At first, I thought I was unique in my suffering. However, reality peeled away the scales from my eyes and I soon recognized the millions upon millions who shared the same journey.

I learned those who grieve become invisible to many people. I now know what it is like to walk among those who grieve. In the past, if I caught a hint of their suffering, I kept them at a safe distance. I offered a short hug and kind words such as, "I'm sorry for your loss," and "Let me know if there is anything I can do." I now walk among them, invisible to those who have not yet experienced grieving.

As I grieved an incredible loss, the journey gradually unveiled its gifts to me. It gave me a chance to stand outside myself and see what had long

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lay hidden from me. It became an ongoing mentor, teaching me what is important and what is superficial in life. Grieving taught me that life is a gift and love is all there is.

I am still journeying toward my destination, but I now have a heart filled with hope. I know there is a way through grieving. I know love determines the destination. Love wins. Love always wins. Love conquers grieving.

Dancing Alone - Learning to Live Again is for all who grieve and want to believe the power of love will lead to healing of the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain experienced from a devastating loss. Experiencing life as it once was is no longer an option. The grieving path calls us to live. It is a call to love.

As you read this book, you will meet M. I created M to walk with me in my grieving journey. The fictitious character of M became my much needed sounding board. She led me with her wisdom, love, and insightful, probing questions. M, like Babe, listened to me and she was not afraid to criticize me. She helped me to relearn to love again.

Throughout this book, you will read my journal entries as I periodically express my deepest thoughts and raw grieving emotions. I related each journal entry to an aspect of grieving I experienced, keeping a box of Kleenex nearby, as I often wrote my journals with tears running down my cheeks. Journaling acted as both a cathartic and healing process for me. “Tears are the blood of the soul” according to Portuguese author Paulo Coelho.

As I journaled, I gained insight into my grieving. I saw how it was affecting me and those around me. I became aware of what I was doing, or not doing, to come to grips with my grieving. Journaling provided an unsuspecting benefit to me and I recognized small steps of progress with each entry. Each small step gave me hope and allowed me to summon the courage to continue.

We are, after all, brothers and sisters who share a common grieving club membership. Suffering crosses borders, gender, religions, race, and ethnicity. Atheists and agnostics alike suffer just as much as believers. Grieving hurts like hell.

The onset of grieving is where my story begins, but it is not where it ends. *Dancing Alone - Learning to Live Again* is my experience of the grieving journey. I learned grieving isn't easy, and I had to learn how to love all over again.



The Parallel Universe of Grief



SORROW

*Sorrow like a ceaseless rain
Beats upon my heart.
People twist and scream in pain,
Dawn will find them still again;
This has neither wax nor wane,
Neither stop nor start.*

*People dress and go to town;
I sit in my chair.
All my thoughts are slow and brown:
Standing up or sitting down
Little matters, or what gown
Or what shoes I wear.*

~ EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY¹



Imagine awakening in a parallel universe. You and your life partner left a great job, friends, and colleagues to pursue a dream. The dream vanishes more quickly than the morning dew as it turns into a nightmare. In this parallel universe, you're alone. Your life partner is no longer alive. Your children all live more than a thousand miles away. You're frozen, unable to think, move, or make rapid-fire decisions. And, even if you were not frozen, you stare at your reservoir of strength and courage only to find it empty. You want to scream for help as the words form in your mind, but silence rules and a monsoon of tears begins.

Fear and anxiety fill every cell in your body. If you're to survive, you must do things foreign to you. You must face impossible choices. You want to hide, go back to sleep, and hope your world will be right again when you awaken. You want to be alone. You fight despair and depression with hope nowhere in sight. You were always strong, filled with confidence and courage. Now you question your strength to handle this parallel universe; not knowing how you'll manage daily affairs. You question life. You quickly discover the parallel universe is not Camelot.

The parallel universe is invisible to all who do not know the suffering and deep sorrow you carry when someone you love dies. You're learning a new language. It is the language of grieving. It is in this parallel universe where I find myself ...

HOW DO YOU MEND A BROKEN, SHATTERED HEART?

I try to survive moment by moment. Most of my moments are filled with tears, a stomach twisted tighter than a cord of rope, and eyes and mouth that have forgotten how to smile. I go to bed hoping tomorrow will be better than today. It can't be worse, but it often is worse. I desperately hold on to the prospect of a rainbow appearing on my horizon. I need a glimmer of hope, and all I see are charcoal clouds surrounding me. I'm lost on a road I've never traveled before.

Before my world turned upside down, Babe and I shared dreams over morning coffee. We were spontaneous; we'd take off on a moment's notice from our home in San Antonio, Texas, and take a day trip to the hill country or to Austin, or head to Vegas or the Rockies. We turned life into a continuous adventure. We filled each moment with love—a deep, abiding love. Arguments were few and minor. Each moment together was a



love song we thought would never end. Then, without warning, our world spun out of control. Our happy, joyful, adventurous world turned chaotic.

A riptide caught hold of us and swept us far from shore. Any reluctance I had to enter this world vanished because the riptide took hold of Babe and carried her far away from me. Wherever the riptide carried her, I would follow until I could follow no more. I was not aware of the depth and breadth of suffering, pain, and loss I was about to experience. I quickly learned you don't know until you know. I did not know I would soon become a grieving man. Only when it happened did I know.

I remained by Babe's side day by day, clutching her hand telling her over and over, "Love wins, love always wins. It will win this time too." All the while I spoke these words, I lied next to her watching her life slip away. I felt powerless to alter her suffering. I refused to listen to doctors who told me my hope was an illusion. I was angry at doctors who declared her dead before she stopped breathing. I held tight to prayer and the belief a miracle would happen.

Being next to Babe was my job. I rose at four thirty in the morning, prayed, exercised, showered, and cleaned up. I made a to-go breakfast and a cup of coffee and headed to the hospital or hospice to be with her. I thought of nothing else. My only thought, my only actions, were to hold her hand, tell her I love her, tell her love wins, and pray for a miracle.

Nurses, certified medical assistants (CMAs), and doctors bombarded me with pleas to accept reality and tell Babe it was okay to die. I told them of the deal Babe and I made that we wouldn't quit on each other. I wasn't about to quit now. I ignored them. I sealed my prayers and thought patterns within my vault, and only I held the combination. I never denied the reality of her diagnosis. I considered the possibilities of multiple outcomes. Only God knew the outcome, I reasoned.

I prayed unceasingly for a miracle. I said countless rosaries, novenas (traditional prayers), and prayers of petition to saints. Babe's thirty-two thousand Twitter friends prayed for her. Babe was relatively new to Twitter. She didn't seek out followers, but they flocked to her simple human wisdom. She also had a knack for reaching out to Twitter followers in need of a compassionate or inspiring word.

Our five daughters and I watched and waited with our prayers unanswered until August 19. Then, one prayer was finally answered. Five hours before Babe died, I finished praying a rosary for her and asked God

for the first time during her struggle, “Your will be done, Lord. If you want to take Babe home, your will be done.” I added, “But I’m still praying for my miracle. Please heal her.”

My prayer was answered, but not the way I wanted. Babe died five hours later. When she died, my tears began to flow and continued to flow unannounced, unpredictable, and at the most inopportune times. I am left to negotiate my way alone through the parallel universe. I thought I was the only one who grieved this deeply. I quickly learned I am one of a growing legion of people who suffer as I do.



CHAPTER TWO

Losing My Love

Neither my daughter Prudence (Pru) nor I slept the night Babe died. Pru left her family in Albuquerque to comfort and support me during Babe's struggle. When Pru wasn't with me, one of her sisters would trade places. The night Babe died, Pru was staying with me and taking the night shift with Babe. I no sooner returned home from Babe's side when Pru called and asked me to come back to Sister Mary's Hospice as soon as possible. Babe had just died moments before I reached her. Pru and I held each other in this deep moment of grief as we stood next to Babe's lifeless body. I can't imagine the feelings of those who have no social support watch a loved one as they slowly die.

I heard Pru wandering in the kitchen and I saw light shining from under the bedroom door. I knew she was probably working on her computer or texting her sisters. Sometime around three in the morning, my body gave in and allowed me two hours of sleep.

At nine o'clock, the doorbell rang. Pru was on the patio talking on her cell to her husband, Daniel, as I answered the door. It was my dear friend M. We said nothing as we embraced. My tears started as a slow trickle and gave way to an overflowing river. M wouldn't let go of me. She held me tight and I knew she too was crying.

Babe and I met M at a conference on health, healing, and love. She was the keynote speaker. At the time, M was a renowned academic in the psychology of healing. M has a brilliant mind with a common-sense touch. During the conference, M and her husband, Peter, had dinner with Babe

and me. We quickly became friends. Four years later, Peter died when a drunk driver ran a red light at an intersection, plowing broadside into his vehicle. It happened on M's birthday.

After several moments, M ended our embrace. She took a step back, looked at me, and said, "Let's go for a walk." A single, small puffy cloud was the only mar in an otherwise perfectly blue sky. On any other day I would have been grateful for the brilliant sun and bright blue sky. Today I didn't feel any sense of gratitude. M and I walked a hundred yards in total silence. We walked by a home with two fenced-in dogs who normally barked at me when I walked past. Today, however, they remained quiet. It was as if they knew what I was feeling.

Finally, M said, "I understand. I know how you feel, Ray. You and Babe shared a deep, deep love I've rarely seen in other couples. It was special."

I nodded as tears returned and rolled down my cheeks as water overflows a river's banks during the spring runoff. I reached into my pocket for a tissue that was already damp from wiping tears away. "Babe was so good, M. I prayed and prayed and prayed. I did everything I could," I said through tears and a runny nose.

M said nothing. She silently walked beside me, giving no answers. I wondered if she was listening or just being a good friend, getting me out of the home Babe and I shared. We walked a quarter mile before she spoke, "Don't look for answers, Ray. I tried and tried and tried. The best I can tell you from my experience? There are none. Suffering is a mystery no human being can avoid. There is no remedy, it is unavoidable. I have no words to make you feel even a bit better. Suffering is yours in the same way Peter's death became my suffering. Unavoidable suffering offers no explanations, no answers, and all we can do is bravely face it. You and Babe couldn't help me. You were my friends. You supported me. You listened to me. You heard my story a hundred times as if you were hearing it for the first time."

"I can't stop the tears, M. If I knew Babe was okay. If ..."

M grabbed hold of my arm and turned me toward her, "She is okay, Ray. She is okay. I promise you angels will come to you and support you. They will be in the form of people—some you'll know, and others you've never met. Trust me. It happened to me. Without them, I don't think I could have survived Peter's death." M searched my face to see if I believed her. I shrugged and looked away.

I whispered, “I have to go back and prepare for Babe’s funeral.”

“The girls love you and Babe. Let them take care of it. Go along for the ride and make the decisions. Let them make the calls and do the organizing. When they leave, we’ll have coffee. If you need anything, want to talk, want to cry, or want to scream, text me. I’ll be over in ten minutes. It doesn’t matter the time. Promise?”

“Promise, M. Thank you.”

We turned and headed back to the house. I sensed M’s unconditional love and support. It gave me a deep sense of reassurance. When we reached my home, M stayed in the driveway and hugged me. “Remember to call for any reason, any reason,” she said. M got into her car. I waved to her as she turned the corner.



