

As a 37-year-old widow with four children, I could never have guessed that my experience would mold me into someone more than I was before.



FINDING *Peace and Growth* IN WIDOWHOOD

By Jeanna Jolley

It was about 8:30 in the morning on December 29, 1995. My four children, my husband, and I were enjoying a holiday vacation. I was at a Mia Maid activity when my husband, Lindsay, called, gasping in pain. He said he thought he needed to go to the hospital. I dashed home. Though his chest pain had subsided by the time I got there, I insisted we go to the hospital immediately.

Because he walked in, the medical staff at the hospital assumed the best—that this wasn't really an emergency, probably just some heartburn. They hooked him up to the EKG (electrocardiogram) and established that he was not having a heart attack. What I didn't know then was that an EKG can sometimes fail to detect that there's a problem.

We waited about 45 minutes for a physician, and then my husband went into cardiac arrest. As I watched the sudden scramble to action by the medical staff, I felt anxious but also strangely calm. Here was my husband having a heart attack, an obviously life-threatening event, but I was enveloped in both a "peace . . . which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7) and the terror and grief at possibly losing him.

The doctors and nurses worked on him for about 45 minutes and were going to give up, but I begged them to continue until his parents arrived. Upon arrival at the hospital, his dad immediately gave him a priesthood blessing, promising him that he would be here until his life's work was completed. After the blessing, I fully expected Lin to start breathing again and sit up. But he didn't.

Even now, almost 18 years later, the devastation of watching my best friend's life slip away fills me with terrible sadness. Yet as I reflect on my experience, I can see how, over time, widowhood has molded me into someone *more*, someone *better*, than I was before.



As I have attended the temple, I have felt that Lin was there many times, sharing the outpouring of the Spirit and the new layers of knowledge that only come from repeated visits to that sacred place.

A Knowledge of the Plan

As painful as it was to lose my husband, during that time I was also filled with comfort because I knew God's plan for us. I knew where Lin was and where he would be until my own life's work was complete and I could join him. I believed in the plan of salvation. I felt that Heavenly Father had important lessons for my family to learn, things that could be learned in Lin's absence—and maybe *by* Lin's absence. It was an opportunity to put my faith in the plan to the test. Did I really believe it? Or was it all just theoretical? In those critical moments, I found that I really did believe in our Heavenly Father's plan of salvation.

Since Lin's death, I've had plenty of tests of my faith, but I have never questioned the plan. During the times when I'm feeling sorry for myself, I remember that countless widows and widowers have lived successful lives and raised their children and grandchildren without their partners.

There are those who might use the loss of a spouse as an excuse for a dysfunctional life, but I have never allowed myself to do so. I have been determined that my family will survive and thrive. I have tried to teach my children that success in life is not based on what happens to us but on how we handle what happens to us—what we choose to make out of our individual circumstances.

Sources of Love and Support

Although my understanding of the plan of salvation strengthened me, the challenge of losing my husband was still formidable. My whole world was turned upside down. I was 37 years old. My children were 15, 10, 6, and 5. I had our business, our family, and our whole life to face without my partner and best friend. It would have been so easy to be overwhelmed.

Thankfully, I found great sources of support in my stake. Lindsay had lived in the area all his life, and his family was known throughout the stake for their steadfast loyalty to the gospel. Learning of our loss, people reached out to us in marvelous ways that let me know we were loved and valued and that Lin's legacy was treasured. People made money donations to help with funeral expenses, provided meals, made phone calls, and just showed love. I received many cards and letters, some of which recounted memories of Lin. All were precious and strengthening to me. We were also supported by good home teachers committed to serving and teaching us. These sources of support buoyed me up, keeping me from sinking down into bitter loneliness and constant longing for the companionship of my husband.

My experience taught me important lessons about what it means to "mourn with those that mourn" (Mosiah 18:9). I learned that even if we don't know what to say to someone who has just lost a loved one, we can provide comfort just by being there. We can cry with the person, offer a hand to hold or a hug, drop by for a visit, or simply send a note. It all helps. We might worry about saying the wrong thing, but if we focus on the person we wish to comfort rather than on our own anxiety, our love and good intentions will shine through. I knew that the intentions of those who

reached out to me were to comfort, uphold, support, and love me, and so I found it was almost impossible for them to do or say the wrong thing.

Because of the support I received, I didn't feel alone. Lin's life and death impacted many people. We grieved together and we comforted each other. It's true that his death affected me to a greater degree because I'm his wife, but the opportunity to share the grief with others was precious.

An Eternal Perspective

At the beginning of my life as a widow, every day and every week that passed made me feel that I was moving further and further away from my husband. But on the first anniversary of his death, I realized that to place undue importance on this particular date was to limit my perspective. After all, as the prophet Alma taught, "all is as one day with God, and time only is measured unto men" (Alma 40:8). Rather than focus on a certain date in time, I needed to consider eternity and how my relationship with Lin would ultimately transcend time. So I note December 29 as the anniversary of my husband's death, but I don't make it a day to grieve more deeply or to be gloomier or sadder than on other days. I grieve when I need to, not on a specific day.

Now I feel that instead of moving away from Lin, I'm moving toward him. I try to make each day a wonderful one in which I feel gratitude for the gift of life and find opportunities to bring joy to others.

An Eternal Partner

The Lord has richly blessed me throughout this whole experience. It has been extremely important to my emotional and

spiritual health to study the scriptures daily. I have found answers and comfort that couldn't have reached me any other way. As I have attended the temple, I have felt that Lin was there many times, sharing the outpouring of the Spirit and the new layers of knowledge that only come from repeated visits to that sacred place. I have relied heavily on the blessings of our temple marriage, knowing that ours is but a temporary separation. I know we will be together again. I am excited to see him, to find out what he's been doing all these years, and to share with him a new version of myself—a more evolved, more spiritually mature, more deeply committed eternal partner.

I still grieve when my feelings call for it. After all these years, I still cry sometimes. There are moments when Lin's death seems fresh again. I never think of myself as weak for grieving over my husband. I love him! I feel that it's okay to cry, to miss him. It will always be okay. But my grief is not inconsolable, because my Heavenly Father has been there every moment, filling me with His peace, His calm, His Spirit. The knowledge of His plan fills me with patience to wait upon His time for all things in my life.

I can absolutely testify that our Heavenly Father knows and loves us. Through the Atonement of His Son, Jesus Christ, our grief, pain, and loss can be lightened if we put our trust in that divine source of healing and strive to keep the commandments. The miracle of healing can surely deepen our faith in our Heavenly Father and the Savior and lead to growth beyond what we thought possible. ■

The author lives in Washington, USA.



THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST WILL BLESS AND COMFORT

"The fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ brings great comfort in stressful times of mortality. It brings light where there is darkness and a calming influence where there is turmoil. It gives eternal hope where there is mortal despair. It is more than just beautiful doctrine. It is a reality in our lives that if we can be obedient and obtain the eternal rewards that God grants us, if we will draw nigh unto Him and embrace the eternal doctrine, we will be blessed."

Elder Robert D. Hales
of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "The Eternal Family," *Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 66.