

Her Birthday is the Least of Her Concerns

Am I really doing this?

Sharon turned into the parking lot, in front of a flat-roofed red brick office building, surrounded by others that looked the same and had small signs on the doors. She made a guess and parked in front of one.

They could make the signs big enough to read from the parking lot, she thought. Or maybe it's just me.

She stopped herself from spiraling into thoughts about her eyesight getting worse, and aging, and wrinkles, and her upcoming birthday. She finger-combed her shoulder-length brown hair. She knew the hair color didn't look natural, but at least it kept her from seeing her mother when she looked in the mirror. Most of the time.

The clock on her phone said she was four minutes early. She had rushed out of the house without dinner, grabbing a protein drink from the refrigerator. Sipping it slowly, she tried to will her heart rate to slow.

It pained her to be late. But she is avoiding strangers and small talk. She used to love to arrive ten minutes early everywhere she went. She would work the room using her friendly smile. She practiced those conversational skills in college, long ago, and learned that she did not always have to answer truthfully. The truth was in her journal, and no one would see that.

But of course, tonight she will be honest. Not that anyone would check her facts. This was a meeting of people whose spouses had recently died. Picking up her gray cardigan and her purse, she climbed down from her tall pickup truck.

My trouble is too many choices without a path. Like I see a forest of various kinds of trees, growing close together. Each is beautiful, and beckoning. But there is no way to get through the beautifully-scented wall. I could walk through if I knew where to start, to find a path.

Her journal entry from the day before was mostly unorganized thoughts, but it had encouraged her. She walked into the meeting room, breathing in encouraging thoughts.

A few days earlier, she had searched online for grief support groups. Throughout the two years of COVID isolation, she sat on a few hundred Zoom calls, “meeting” people from across the country. She was ready for an in-person meeting. Even in addition to the online ones. She found this nonprofit organization near home and Tuesday evening seemed workable. Since she was not doing anything on Tuesday, or any other evening.

And I really hate being home at night with nothing to do. My identity for so long has been that of helper, fixer, and caregiver. Do I have a purpose?

The room was filling with people, mostly younger than she expected. The white plastic conference tables were against the walls; the chairs faced each other in a circle. No one made eye contact as they picked up nametags. One of the women kept her coat on, as though she was not sure if she was staying. She set her large, quilted purse on the floor and crossed her arms over her chest as she sat down.

“We have a lot to go over, and I want to make sure everyone gets a chance to talk. Can we go ahead and get started? We only have an hour.”

The group facilitator called everyone to order a few minutes before 6 p.m. They were still getting used to the early darkness and cooler nights of early fall. No one seemed to know where to sit, or how closely. She could see the adjacent kitchen through an open door and wished someone had made coffee. She missed that aroma in meetings. Sharon chose a straight-backed metal chair away from the door, on the far side of the big circle. There was an open box of tissues on the floor next to each.

John brought handouts and started the discussion. He seemed to be experienced with these groups, but Sharon learned it always took a few sessions for a group to gel. It helped if everyone shared their story, but she was not sure if she was ready.

One of the younger women, blond and freckled, squirmed as John described the format for the meeting. They would introduce themselves and talk briefly about the loved one they lost to help them learn to verbalize their own pain, while they also empathized with each other.

The woman, dressed in black jeans and a black sweatshirt, leaned down to pick up a tissue box and knocked over her stainless-steel bottle of water. The lid was loose, and it slowly emptied onto her handouts under the chair. She did not move to pick it up. The rest of the group looked at their shoes as John asked who would like to start.

James jumped in. He had lost his partner Antonio after a brief battle with cancer. “We were together for 18 years, and everyone loved him,” James said through tears. “When he got sick, all his work friends were shocked. He was tall and athletic, he was only 62, and we thought he could get through it. But the radiation and chemotherapy treatments... He wanted so much to keep his hair...” James stopped to catch his breath and twisted a tissue. He wiped his eyes again and waved to indicate that someone else should go on.

“I’ll go next.” A small-boned African-American woman spoke quietly. She appeared to be about forty, likely the youngest in the group.

“Raymond was so good to me. I don’t know how to get by,” she started. They had known each other since childhood. They both married young, to high school sweethearts. Her first husband, Mark, had died on a construction site at age 25. When she and Raymond reconnected a few years later. It felt like they had always been together. Her shock and grief at losing Mark, so young, was all coming back, now that she was alone again. Her head drooped and her bangs hung over her eyes.

“One night Raymond didn’t come home from work. And I freaked out, calling everyone we knew to find out if he was with them. I was awake all night and my sister insisted on making sure I wasn’t home by myself.” She later learned that he had crashed into a concrete wall on the expressway. She rubbed her arms as if trying to keep warm.

Janine, one of the women in her sixties or so, gasped at LaDonna’s story. She didn’t try to hide her tears, and the rest of the group looked at each other, then at the bare walls.

How could there be so much pain in this small room? We are just one room in one city in the world. I cannot imagine how much grief there is all over the world right now. God, how do we deal with all this pain?

Taking a deep breath, Sharon tried not to become overwhelmed.

There had been dozens of meetings and presentations about grief before. Sharon participated in church-based grief groups, and several online widows’ group meetings. Considering it her job now, she was ready to fill her day with these meetings, since she had little else to do. And the missing him was so big, she would try anything.

I continue to try to ignore that giant Alone. Until he sits down on the bed beside me, no longer willing to be invisible. Another journal entry read.

Week after week, the other widows said it would feel less sharp and jagged. Someday there would be smiles at the memories, rather than sobs. They suggested books to read, podcasts to listen to, and more grief groups to attend.

A woman was describing her sadness at removing her husband's clothes from the closet. Then she smiled and said, "But I'm sure glad to have the extra space in the bathroom cabinets."

"It will get better. It will always hurt, but it will be better," so many widows said. Sharon was not sure she believed it. In some ways she did not want to believe it. His absence left such an enormous hole in her life, and she wanted to always remember and feel that love, even though it brought pain.

Grievers had a lot to deal with, and most of the ones in this room seemed to be privileged to be retired. Or working in jobs where they were allowed to take time off. Not everyone could even take time to attend these groups. For many people, there was too much to do after the loss of a spouse.

Jason said he had to arrange childcare for his two young sons for his evening meetings.

"And they each have their own counselors! How am I supposed to get off work to take them to their sessions-and still make enough to pay for the counseling?" Exasperated, he nearly rose from his chair. His story of their 38-year-old mother's sudden heart attack was jolting, but he also told their love story. He described her as looking like Linda Ronstadt from the 1970s, with her cutoff shorts and Mexican shirt.

None of us had time to talk about things like how to manage the unexpected medical bills or car payments that suddenly seemed impossible on one salary. We came together, in this random and diverse group, to understand ourselves better by learning what others were going through. Are we normal? Everyone asked some version of that question.

Where was I when friends and family members were suffering? How was I so blind to their pain? Can I learn from this and help others, someday?

She could see grief everywhere. It was obvious in the death of the father on “This Is Us” on television. It was in the backstories of the characters on “Yellowstone,” “Ordinary Joe” and so many other programs. She had always cried at the Hallmark commercials, but now she cried at everything, it seemed.

Why have I never noticed before?

“What do you do on the weekends when everyone else is busy with their families? How do you keep busy?” An older Asian man asked. He no longer worked. He had no children to care for and he had too much time on his hands. His wife’s dementia had been brief. They were both deeply religious. Their friends from their church choir kept him company through the many long days at first and even made sure he knew how to operate his washing machine. He smiled.

There were dozens of questions she wanted to ask the widows she had known for years. Her grandmother, her mother, her aunts had all been widowed. And she had never wondered how they managed. She saw them continue their daily routines, some for decades. How was she to learn how to handle this when no one would talk about it? There are so many things she wants to know. Things not on the handouts.

“I’m not sure if I belong here,” a young blonde said softly. Her story tumbled out as she made eye contact with each person in the circle. Anger and guilt kept her from sleeping and eating. She described waking up from a coma to find out that her husband had died from COVID, and his parents had the funeral for him while she was hospitalized. The infection had hit them both rapidly and she had no memories of the four weeks she was sick.

“He didn’t want to be cremated!” She was getting louder. “How could they not know that?”

“How could they have the funeral without me there? Did they think I was going to die, too? They didn’t care what he wanted. Or what I wanted.” She stopped suddenly and her shoulders shook as she cried.

John looked shocked. He breathed audibly and spoke softly, encouraging her to let the tears flow. The others shifted in their seats, cleared their throats, and looked at their papers.

“You belong here,” he said. “Everyone is welcome.”

Sharon tried to steady herself.

Making another note to herself, Sharon wanted to ask John if he had seen the recent articles about how long it takes to get back to normal. There was a newspaper story that called it complicated grief if people were still sad after a year. That was a ridiculously-short time!

I’m here for the 90-day plan.

The facilitator in one of her other groups smiled when Sharon said that. Of course it was a joke. But wouldn’t that be great? She doodled a smiley face on her handout, trying to distance herself from the pain in the room.

Can I recreate-or create- my life as I would have wanted, as I once dreamed it would be?

Can I rewrite this ending?

Sharon knew that she had spent all her life running. And now she wondered, *Am I running from, or running to?*

She made notes and lists on the handout, unable to slow her mind even now. She looked at the clock on her phone and was suddenly in a hurry to leave.

Noticing the date next to the clock, she smiled.

I have always made too much of my birthday. I am only one of the thousands of Americans who will turn sixty-five this year.

Yet she couldn't help being a little more introspective than usual.

Who do I want to be in my 65th year? How do I keep from limiting myself, or letting the world limit me? How will I know what to do?

She looked up from her notes. She could see the suffering in the room.

My birthday is simply one of 365 days in this long year.

Next week, when that birthday arrives, she knows she will be here, in a room full of people who look so different from each other. They hear that they are only different on the outside. Their ages and gender separate them, but they have each had a great love story.

In this room full of sorrow, she can see the love showing through tears. Her great love and her many tears will live on long after she answers the small questions of what to do with her life.

Today I can begin to look at the changes in my life as possibilities. I was not ready for him to die. There was no plan for what my life would be like.

It was frightening to simply be alone and let each day come. Each day was enough. But what about next week, next month? Sharon was beginning to see her life unfolding in new ways as these possibilities appeared.

She picked up her purse as John thanked everyone for coming.

Walking to the door, she took a deep breath and stepped out into the cool evening, warmed by a new resolve.