



## Carry On

By Thom Dennis, D. Min., LCPC, CT

For years Jim and Joannie hosted a St. Patrick's Day party to celebrate their family heritage. They dreamed of, one day, traveling to Ireland to kiss the Blarney Stone. However, the needs of their growing family always seemed a higher priority. On their 25th wedding anniversary their children surprised them with money saved from babysitting and part-time jobs to help their mom and dad realize their dream. For a variety of reasons their trip was postponed and the Ireland fund was slowly drained to pay for things like piano lessons, school supplies and college tuition.

When Joannie got sick, their dream was once again postponed and an entirely different set of priorities topped their wish list. She was only 56 when she died, and suddenly Jim was faced with not only the loss of the love of his life, but realized he also lost a series of less tangible things: his daily routine, his identity as a married person and, probably most demoralizing, their once hoped for future. Jim and Joannie were not only going to go to Ireland, they imagined themselves spending

their retirement years traveling America in an RV, enjoying the fruits of their labor.

In the first few months after Joannie's death Jim struggled with many of the same things that other widows and widowers grapple with. He canceled credit cards and wrote thank you cards, he went back to work, and struggled to develop a new routine. During that first 12 to 18 months, Jim managed all of the firsts in the typical masculine fashion that one might expect of a man of his generation. However, piecing together his shattered dreams took much longer. Now in his eighties, Jim looks back on those years and admits that not a day goes by that he still doesn't miss his wife, but he is grateful for the blessings he has received. Although he never bought that RV, he did visit 49 of the 50 states and he kissed the Blarney Stone - once for Joannie and once for himself.

For those who have recently experienced the death of a loved one, Jim and Joannie's story may seem oddly familiar. Of course, the details of any relationship are unique. Still, the impact of a loss causes ripples in people's lives in surprisingly predictable ways. Loved ones are often blindsided by how overwhelming grief can be. This is due largely to the fact that the death of one

person causes multiple losses. These additional losses are sometimes referred to as **secondary** or **auxiliary** losses. The following is a brief reflection on some of those other losses.

### **Identity**

The loss of identity: “Who am I now that I am no longer ‘Sandra’s husband’ or ‘Billy’s mom,’” is often one of the biggest challenges for the bereaved. One widower calls this experience, “the shift from we to me.” We tend to define ourselves by, and gain satisfaction from, being in relationship. When that is taken from us, it will naturally take awhile to reorient our identity, to emphasize other aspects of our personality, and to find new interests and activities.

### **Roles**

Similarly, our identity is often tied to the roles we perform. When someone dies, family and friends who also functioned as primary caregiver often say they feel like they were fired or lost their job. One woman said, “I used to know exactly what my day would look like. Now I don’t know what to do with myself.” Part of the challenge is simply connected to developing a new routine. Underneath that is the loss of a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment that comes with caring for a loved one.

### **Family structure**

When a family member dies, it is often difficult, or next to impossible, to find someone to fill their shoes. The many hats they wore, the tasks they performed, and the position they held in the family structure, will all require adjustment. Jim acknowledges that Joannie was the extrovert in the family. When the kids called from college, Jim would say, “Wait a minute, let me put your mother on the phone.” Then he would listen in on the conversation from the upstairs line. After

her death Jim and his children were challenged to find new ways to communicate with each other. It took some time, but the process of rebalancing the family structure was enriching for everyone involved. For other families, the outcome is not always so maintain extended family relationships once parents have died. The result is not only the loss of the parents, but the loss of the extended family as well.

### **Lifestyle**

The death of a loved one often causes significant shifts in lifestyle. In the early phases of grief we may no longer enjoy favorite activities and we often have a diminished zest for life. Widows and widowers report that they feel like a third wheel when they socialize with their friends who are still in coupled relationships. Of course, one’s lifestyle can also be impacted by a loss of the income that person brought into the house. Stereotypically, men tend to rely on their wives for social connections, but everyone relies on the important people in their lives for the unique gifts they bring. Without them and their gifts, our lives are diminished.

### **Confidence and Security**

A woman in a support group for adults grieving the death of a parent, said, “Just having my mom around somehow made the world feel like a safer place. Now I feel so unsure of everything!” For some, the home, which always felt like a place of refuge, now feels eerily silent. The death of a parent, spouse, sibling or best friend often means major decisions need to be made without an important sounding board or confidant. Their absence can temporarily undermine our autonomy and confidence. Grief confronts us with those bigger (existential) questions in life, and sometimes our belief system is shaken to its very core. The loss of a firm foundation, whether that is one’s belief in a merciful God or a sense of fairness in the universe,

can be very destabilizing. A person's ability to tolerate ambiguity and their willingness to explore the questions that are raised by the loss will have a direct impact on how much they suffer with the loss.

### **Hope/future**

The loss of a future is particularly poignant for surviving spouses, but this can also be true for every other kind of relationship. Consider the sadness felt by a bride who always dreamed of her father walking her down the aisle or the heartache felt by a parent who looked forward to the birth of future grandchildren. Once anticipated holidays and birthdays will quickly lose their luster, without that special someone to share them with. In my experience, as was true in Jim's case, the loss of a once hoped for future remains the biggest secondary loss for most mourners.

In the first few weeks or months of grief, the principle challenge for most people centers around accepting the reality of the loss. Our hearts don't want to accept what our rational minds are telling us; my loved one has died and death is permanent. Hopefully, during this time we are well supported by family and friends and we are mercifully kept busy with a multitude of tasks. However, when

These supports and obligations begin to fade into the distance and there is less to distract us from our grief, the vast horizon of a future without the loved one looms large. It is hard to imagine a future without them. People wonder, "What's the point?" and, "Where is the fun in that if they are not there to share it?" They may also be fearful about their own wellbeing; "Who will be there for me when I am sick/old?" For many, a new wave of sadness (not to mention anxiety) begins to set in as the

awareness grows that the future will not resemble the one they had planned.

When one considers all the possible secondary losses, it is no wonder why the bereaved so often feel depressed and overwhelmed! Where once there were rainbows, now there appears to be only the hazy grayness of a gathering gloom; not a very rosy picture. My reason for focusing on these additional losses is to shed some light on just how complex grief can be. The key to any problem or challenge lies in the ability to identify all the complicating factors. By naming these secondary losses, we can then find ways to address them and better navigate our way to a brighter day. When a person accepts the challenge to work at addressing these other losses, they take an important step toward managing their grief.

It has been said that, time heals all wounds. I don't think that is exactly correct. Time alone does not heal. The very idea suggests that if we only bide our time, if we can just hang on and endure the pain, then eventually, everything will turn out fine. The problem with this approach is, when left unattended, some wounds fester. I would like to suggest a more proactive approach. As was true for Jim, the death of a significant other causes a wound to the heart that never completely heals, but that did not stop Jim from finding meaning and joy again. Jim brought to his grief a certain degree of intentionality. As his energy level returned, he looked for opportunities to redirect his interests. He experimented with new activities as if he were trying on a new suit. Most importantly, he tried to not get too discouraged when some suits he tried on didn't fit.

Although he would never have put it in so many words, he also discovered that a second requirement for building a new life is patience, arguably a quality of which we could all use more. Remember the old saying, "Rome wasn't built in a day?" Jim told me he realized the life he and Joannie created took years to develop, so he figured a future that did not involve her would require that "one-foot in front of the other kind of perseverance." As important as intentionality, patience and perseverance are, there are three more essential qualities: imagination, courage and hope. Courage is the character trait that enables us to face difficult or painful situations. Hope makes it possible for us to try something new despite all the evidence to the contrary. Imagination is the ability to see things that are not there. It involves picturing not what is or was, but what could be. I would like to believe in the possibility of a brighter day for all who mourn. You may not think of yourself as particularly courageous, hopeful, imaginative or patient, but that does not mean that you cannot develop these aspects of your character.

It is unfortunate that in our culture, those who mourn are repeatedly told that they need to **move on**. It might be better said that those who grieve need to **carry on**. We carry on as best we know how; trying to cope with the multiple losses we are confronted with when a loved one dies. The truth is no one knows what to do when a loved one dies and despite our best-laid plans, nobody knows what the future will look like. We will need to draw deeply from our inner resources in order to find a new direction in life. The good news is that even though that loved one has died; we carry a

part of them with us no matter what direction in life we take.



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Thom Dennis has over 25 years experience helping individuals and families come to terms with the death of loved ones.

Having worked in parish ministry in both urban and rural settings, he has firsthand knowledge of the concerns of counselors and pastoral ministers as they struggle to find ways to address the needs of those who grieve.

Currently he works as a hospice grief counselor, comforting the bereaved from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. He will bring compassion, insight, and a wealth of resources to you and those in need.

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