

The Birthday Dream

-- Marge Kalin

I have been a widow for eight years. My husband, Rich, died in March 1990, after a ten-year struggle with brain cancer. The struggle was not his alone. Our family suffered with him, and the length of his struggle took its toll on all of us.

December 29, 1997, would have been Rich's sixty-third birthday. That night I had a dream. As I put words to what the dream meant to me, I felt it might be useful to share my thoughts with other families who are struggling to put their lives back together after the death of a loved one.

In my dream, I was packing to go on a trip with a group of women. Concerned about what I might need, I was fussing over what I should take and what I should leave behind. I took several things out of my suitcase and then replaced them. Just when I thought I had everything figured out, I suddenly started packing another suitcase for Rich. I packed the tan slacks he always liked and worried about what else he might need for the trip. However, while I was doing this, I knew that he wasn't going on the same journey I was planning with my women friends. I was worried about his being angry if I didn't pack the right things for him even though I knew he was no longer alive and wouldn't be traveling with me in this life any longer.

My journey through life is different now. At some level I've decided that I don't want another partner—partly because I can't imagine falling in love with someone new, and partly because I know marriage is hard work. The problems resulting from my husband's long, debilitating illness and my responses to his illness made our last ten years very, very difficult. I'm afraid to even consider another relationship. It took a lot of energy from both of us to make our marriage work, and I don't feel whole enough to try again. What energy I have is devoted to trying to reinvent myself as a single person.

At this point in my life, I'm comfortable with family and friends. I'm trying to unpack some of the baggage I've carried for a long time and replace the fear and worry with a more adaptable, more spiritual outlook. At the same time, I'm still dragging a lot of the past along with me. I'm spending time and energy trying to keep my family connected to each other—the family we were when Rich was alive. But the truth is that I really don't want things to be the way they were then.

I want a more peaceful life now. Our children are grown with families of their own. But while I'm trying to "pack my own bags," I find myself still thinking about what Rich wanted, trying to lessen the impact his illness had on our family, and helping my grown children move forward.

Even though I'm now traveling through life alone, I still carry lots of baggage from my thirty-five year relationship with Rich. I know he's gone, but subconsciously I rely on his judgments, and I worry about him. The pain of his illness and how it affected our relationship keeps me from wanting to create another relationship; it keeps me from "traveling forward in life." I need to figure out how I can successfully unpack the baggage I've been dragging along for so many years, and feel free to embark on a new voyage.

What do I need to "pack" for my own journey into the future? What is important to me? How have I changed? What do I need to keep, and what do I need to throw away? It's not easy to make these decisions alone after spending more than half my lifetime making decisions as a couple. But one thing is clear, either I will travel forward through change or I will remain stuck in a lonely time and place.