

Hearts and Hugs

“I’m going to pick out your next husband for you.”

That declaration sure raised my hackles—“Who on earth do you think you are?” I think I might have replied.

Donald can be forgiven. He was 19 years older than I, realized he wasn’t going to last forever, and he didn’t want me to be wearing widow’s weeds for the rest of my life. Perhaps I should acknowledge he also had a controlling personality.

As it happened, a few months after his grand pronouncement, he had a stroke that left him living for many months at Lady Minto while I sold a multi-level townhouse, bought a one-level rancher, and got it renovated so he and his wheelchair could come home. Murray volunteered weekly in the extended care unit of Lady Minto. He played the piano and I love to sing. In a weird and wonderful way, Donald’s stroke played a pivotal role in Murray coming into my life a couple of years later. He would have called it part of “life’s rich plan.”

February is supposed to be all about hearts and flowers, chocolate, and happily ever after. But life isn’t always like that, is it? Donald died about 15 months after his stroke and Murray died from dementia twelve years after we started living together.

Though I’m twice-divorced and twice-widowed, don’t weep for me because I am thriving. Up to this point, there had always been a man in my life, so living alone was new

for me. But now I wonder where in my active life I would find time for another long-term relationship.

A senior who's been living on his own for a long time told me recently he's just about given up on finding Mr. Right. He is reconciled, though, because he realizes "maintaining a good relationship takes a lot of time" and he's not sure that's how he wants to spend what he has left to him.

Trying to cope with someone else's habits, needs, and demands can be very challenging. Then there's the issue of a whole new set of in-laws who always come along for the ride. Usually, there's one that has more baggage than you want to help carry.

I ought to know. Each of my spouses had some excellent qualities, but I found that mothers-in-law and step-daughters were often more than a handful. Lucky me: Murray's daughter is great. So why would I want to replace her?

It's a good thing I'm well-satisfied with my current status because the chances of my encountering my own Mr. Right for the fifth time around are very poor. Statistics Canada reports that in 2011, 31.5% of women over age 65 live alone whereas only 16% of senior men do. Women tend to stay widowed, but men often remarry. Almost invariably, they choose younger women, and I was one of those younger women three times in my life. If you are also a younger woman, you might have my experience of

becoming a caregiver and then widowed sometime in the future.

So what do we widows do? Aside from being able to handle our finances, and figuring out where we want to live in our old age (not at the end of some lonely road or up on some mountain, I'd like to suggest), we should consider learning how to do the odd jobs we once relied on our husbands to do. Otherwise, we need to hire people to do them for us; letting jobs go undone is not a plan.

Most important to our survival, I'd say, is to hone our natural skill to "tend and befriend." According to Professor Shelley E. Taylor, distinguished research professor of social psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles, the female stress response is to "tend and befriend." The theory has its origins in the observation that those tending young children, the sick, or the elderly, are sufficiently burdened to be unable to fight or flee with success. In evolutionary terms, if women didn't band together and support each other, we didn't survive. Tend and befriend is in our DNA.

And so, we widows (and widows-to-be) need to learn how to give each other a friendly, helping hand. Since it mostly comes naturally, we don't have too much to learn. All we have to do is seek each other out for exercise, walks, coffee, lunch, theatre, and the movies. We can also rely on each other for advice about whom to hire for all those jobs we can't or don't want to do.

Let's celebrate our newfound independence by giving each other some really good chocolate, a very big hug, and an invitation to be each other's friend.