

# BY YOUR SIDE

SUPPORT IN BEREAVEMENT



## SUMMARY

### Luce Des Aulniers

Surviving while preserving the memory of the deceased

### Death took two life partners from me

### Do I need therapeutic help?

## RECLAIMING YOUR LIFE

A few months have now gone by since the death of Laurence's husband. She has since made a lot of changes in her life. She has gotten back into sports, she now has a new circle of friends whom she met through her dance classes, and a week ago she decided to repaint the house "in my own colours", as she likes to put it. For Simon, who preferred more subdued tones, had categorically rejected the bright red that Laurence had once proposed.

"I sometimes feel like I have gone back to being the person I was before my marriage," she confides to her brother. "I would

never have thought I'd have the strength to get through this and go it alone... I did not think I was capable of being so independent and organized."

Although she is doing much better, Laurence still feels very alone certain evenings when Simon's absence weighs on her more than usual. She still cries on occasion, leafing through a family photo album. Other times, however, the memory of fun moments spent with Simon makes her smile.

So little by little, Laurence is reclaiming her life without Simon being around. In addi-

tion to rediscovering aspects of her personality she had forgotten, she has developed new and hitherto unsuspected resources. Simon, still important in her life, remains a memory which sometimes makes her nostalgic, and sometimes makes her smile.

This third instalment in a series of four is intended to help persons in mourning to better understand those vague feelings that make us want to reclaim our life.

Produced by the funeral cooperatives movement, this publication is designed to offer support to persons in mourning. The participating funeral cooperatives provide this publication free of charge to persons in mourning who have ordered funeral services from them for a family member.

Presented in four instalments, the By Your Side series gives you a better understanding of the emotions associated with bereavement. Offering clear, accessible information, the instalments present some thoughts, personal accounts, concrete methods and resources that can help people through their mourning process.

Part 1: Shock, denial and disorganization

Part 2: Reorganization

Part 3: Reclaiming your life

Part 4: Transformation and healing

Attentive to the suffering of persons in mourning, your funeral cooperative understands how important it is to face this trial in an atmosphere of respect. May you find the strength and comfort to move forward on your path to peace and serenity.

## SUMMARY

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#### Luce Des Aulniers

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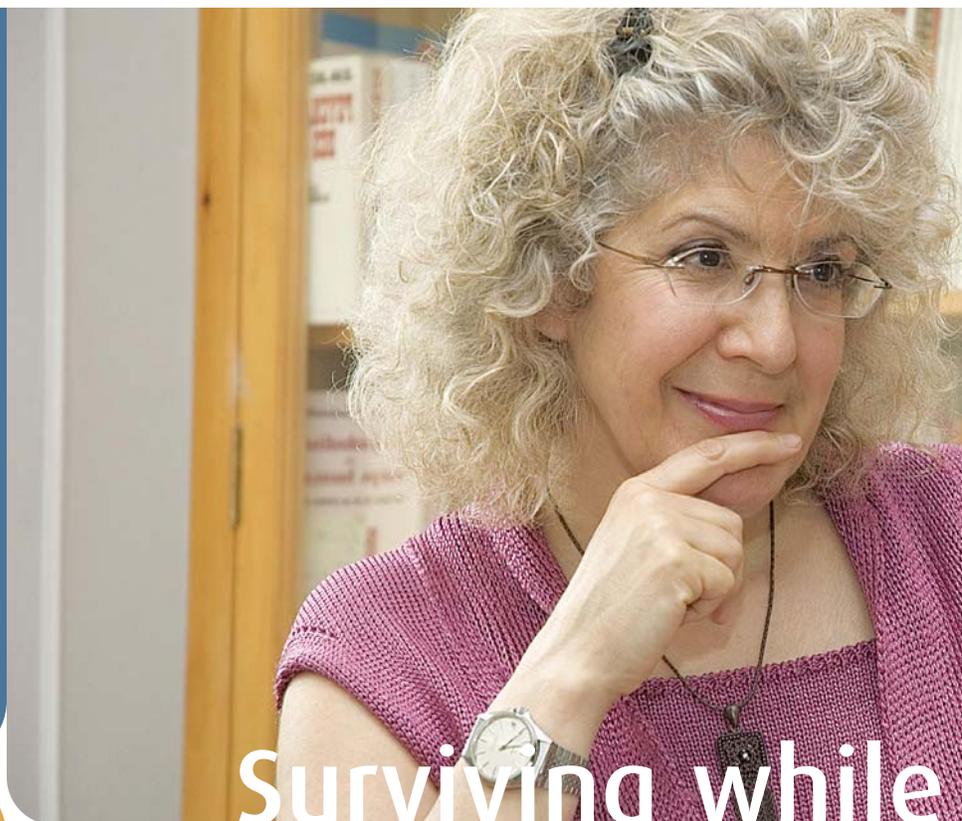
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We would like to thank Ms. Luce Des Aulniers, Ms. Josée Jacques, Ms. Suzy Fréchette-Piperni and Ms. Liliane Sévigny for their contributions to this instalment.



# Surviving while the memory

Once the stage of profound grief is over, the gradual return to life brings us to a much calmer period which we call reclaiming our life. Are we then nearing the end of mourning? What are the signs that tell us that we have gradually distanced ourselves from our loss?

We invited Ms. Luce Des Aulniers to address this subject, but also to describe the way that we approach death and bereavement in our society. Luce Des Aulniers is an anthropologist, author and professor in the communications department as well as the death studies centre at the Université du Québec à Montréal

*In bereavement as in mountain climbing, the journey is more important than the arrival.*

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PHOTO: FRANÇOIS LAFRANCE

***When the other dies, he takes from me part of my own identity, the part that used to exist in his eyes.***

sonality. So does the bereaved person change? Of course. The void created by the loss necessarily brings about a change, but it is not any kind of spectacular transformation. I am talking about a subtle personality modification, one that usually is unconscious.

***Generally speaking, what is the greatest difficulty to be overcome during bereavement?***

When the other dies, he takes from me part of my own identity, the part that used to exist in his eyes. So the task of mourning is to fill that void with something rich drawn from our relationship with the deceased and from his or her particular qualities. All the same, is it accepting the actual death of the person that is more difficult, or our own disorganization when the death occurs? Or is it our own limitation and our powerlessness in the face of death? This reflection, like the ordeal of the bereavement, plunges us into the deepest parts of our beings.

***Given the way that our society deals with death in general, is facing it more difficult these days?***

Actually it is both easier and more difficult at the same time. First, it is easier because there is a major trend today to have “use-

***At what point might a person think that his or her mourning is ending?***

In fact, the process of mourning never ends. It is only once we accept that fact that, bizarrely enough, we feel less weighed down, and so more available for other relationships. Why? Because then we are focussing on the present moment. For example, the climber who is too obsessed by the mountain top ends up forgetting to admire the landscapes that nature offers him on the way up. In such conditions, what is so important about reaching the peak? In bereavement as in mountain climbing, the journey is more important than the arrival.

***In concrete terms, how exactly do we reclaim our lives?***

The person no longer thinks of the other just as something missing, but as a bright memory, though also with areas of darkness: an important element of the past. We think of the qualities of the deceased that we loved, and without quite realizing it, we integrate them with his or her per-



***Are there risks of relapse, of more difficult moments, even when the person reaches this stage?***

Yes, very often. However each time the relapses are shorter and less painful, but they do persist. Like spells of grief, in the most preposterous circumstances. Some people still weep occasionally, even years after the death, and that is perfectly natural. We are expressing our grief, and that expression is simply part of what we are as living beings.



ful” relations with others which are neither deep nor close. What I would call “couldn’t care less” relations. For example, lots of relationships are created between people simply out of self-interest. Under such conditions, losses are trivialized, and relationships are readily interchangeable and replaceable.

***And why is that more difficult?***

First of all, because these days there is an insistence by those around us that we get to the acceptance stage. We are urged to be finished with our grief as soon as 

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## **Bereavement is not an illness, so it is not something you recover from**

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possible, so that we don't remain unproductive for too long. Then there is this refusal to accept anything that is unpleasant, uncomfortable and disruptive. In short, bereavement is more difficult to live through because there is an obligation to be normal, with no emotional deviations. We mark out the personal progress of an individual according to very specific

phases, which we call the stages of mourning. Of course these are important, but only for information purposes. They should be used mainly as a guide, because each person's path is unique. When a loved one is lost, there is always an element of the uncommon and unpredictable, which follows from the distinctive qualities of the relationship that two persons had with each other.

### **What can help us through the grieving process?**

Learn to choose what we can be consoled about, as opposed to what we cannot.

Certain aspects of our relationship with the person will always be gone, inevitably, but this is also part of learning the limits of love. Bereavement is not an illness, so it is not something you recover from: it is a process of detachment, which brings us to make new choices from among a mixture of the unknown and a continuity of values: so we survive the death of the other and we cause him to continue to live symbolically, at the same time.

## Tips and advice



### ON HOW TO GET THROUGH CHRISTMAS AND ANNIVERSARIES

Every year is filled with holidays and anniversaries of all kinds, which are often painful periods for persons in mourning. In these times we are led to remember the intensity of the void left by the deceased. However, there are certain tips or ways of approaching these events which can make them easier to get through, chiefly in the first year of the bereavement:

- During the Christmas period, it is preferable to do your shopping earlier, and with a family member.
- Cleaning the house or preparing meals for a holiday or birthday party may seem too much for you, too distressing. So ask for help, buy prepared meals, or ask each guest to bring something. If on the other hand you enjoy these activities, do them in a reasonable manner, without exhausting yourself.

- Take time with your family to plan holiday get-togethers, and talk about what you want for these occasions.
- Some people find holidays and anniversaries easier when they change up the usual routine. For example, you can change the location and time of the event, or eat something different.
- Don't hesitate to express your emotions at these times. If you feel like crying, don't hold back.
- It is also possible to take advantage of these celebratory occasions to help someone. As a volunteer, for example, you can serve meals to the disadvantaged or visit patients during the Christmas period. This will be your gift to the memory of your loved one.

SOURCE: BOUCHARD-PICHARD, Rosa, *Le cheminement d'un deuil*, Éditions FPR, 2003. 128 p.

# Death took two life partners from me

One morning I was in my office when they came to tell me that my husband wasn't feeling very well. At the time we had a transport business and we worked at the same place. So I rushed out to discover that he was suffering from back pains.

After a visit to the chiropractor, then to Lac-Mégantic hospital, it was declared an emergency and we were sent to Sherbrooke. Jean-Yves finally died from a ruptured aorta... the evening of the next day.

I was totally distraught. Since it started as simple back pain, in no way was I expecting that he would die the following day! It was a total shock.

## **An immense void**

Since the children had left home, Jean-Yves and I had been living alone for the last ten years. Before he died, it was our habit to sit down in our rocking chairs each evening and talk about our day.

Now I was coming back from work to an empty house. There was no one to talk to any more. The void of absence... For me that was what was most difficult to accept.

## **"We can't stop living because people leave us"**

A year after Jean-Yves died, I met another man, Rosaire, whose wife had died nine months earlier.

In a situation like this, facing people becomes difficult. What will they think

about the fact that, a year later, I am already seeing someone else? In the end, we decided to stand up to this obstacle.

## **Death strikes a second time**

Four years passed since the beginning of our life together. Then Rosaire called me one morning to tell me that he was not feeling well.

## **"People often ask me which is the most difficult: the death that strikes without warning, or the one you see coming?"**

At the hospital, the diagnosis of cancer was very clear. Neither surgery nor chemotherapy was possible. "Either go back home or stay in hospital. It's over," the doctor brusquely announced.

So I took care of him to the very end. He passed peacefully, at home, surrounded by the people he loved.

People often ask me which is the most difficult: the death that strikes without warning, or the one you see coming? Despite these two terrible losses, I still do not know the answer to that question. Trying to help someone die when you want to keep him with you is extremely



**Liliane Sévigny is the president of the Coopérative funéraire du Granit. She also facilitates meetings of the bereavement self-help group created at the initiative of the Coopérative.**

difficult and emotional, whereas sudden death is a very violent shock.

All the same, throughout these two ordeals, I never told myself, not even once, that I would not manage to pull through. Jean-Yves and I always took a positive attitude to problems. We were continually braving the obstacles that rose up in our path. Even alone, I have held on to this attitude and have never become discouraged. I have always loved life, and I could not imagine putting an end to it because two persons had gone.

When I share my experience with persons who are bereaved, I now know that this is a painful hardship that is strewn with pitfalls. But I also know there is a light at the end of the tunnel and life can always bring us to smile again.

## **Liliane Sévigny**

Since the death of a family member, there are some people in my circle whom I have less desire to see. Is this normal?

When this sort of ordeal occurs, we sometimes realize which of our friends have really been able to help us and honour our way of mourning. So I think that, after the death of a loved one, we hold on to the best of our relationships. We give preference to the bonds that have meaning for us, and we try to avoid the superfluous relationships, or the ones that annoy us. We have a better idea of what is important in our lives and of the people who are especially dear to us.

*Josée Jacques, psychologist and author of the book Les saisons du deuil.*



PHOTO: FRANÇOIS LAFRANCE

## FUNERAL COOPERATIVES: Organizations based on human values

The cooperatives have been established to meet the common needs of their members. Existing in close to 100 Quebec communities, the 25 funeral cooperatives in our network strive to meet the needs of their members in a manner that respects our own values.

### *What are these values?*

#### **Solidarity**

This is a value of both the cooperatives and the members themselves. To support members who have lost a child, the cooperatives have set up the Solidarité program, which offers funeral services at no cost to families who lose a child under 14 years of age, up to a maximum of \$2,500.

#### **Democracy**

Cooperatives are democratic organizations run by their members, who have an active role in setting policies and making decisions. The men and women elected to represent the members are responsible to the members.

#### **Autonomy**

Cooperatives are autonomous organizations. Agreements made with other organizations or the use of outside funding sources must preserve the democratic power of the members and the independence of the cooperative.

#### **Equality and fairness**

Every member has an equal voice, since each person has the right to a vote during meetings, regardless of seniority in the cooperative, status on the board of directors, or ties within the cooperative. Fairness means that all members and clients are entitled to the same quality of service, regardless of the price of funeral services.



#### **Excellence**

Cooperative staff are urged to target nothing less than excellence in their conduct and methods. Based on a humane and professional approach, the mission of the cooperative is to offer all customers reception of the highest quality.

#### **Quality of information**

The funeral cooperatives movement has developed a range of information tools to help members better plan their funeral wishes and learn about the grieving process. The By Your Side series is an example of our desire to provide you with solid information and support.

In her hospital room, Josée rocks her little Marilou, who has just been born. This could be the greatest day in her life, except that, by a stroke of fate, this mother is rocking her baby in the knowledge that, in a few hours, she will breathe her last tiny breath. Never having had the chance to see daylight as a healthy child, Marilou will be going to join the angels, leaving her parents with the bitter taste of hopes dashed.

Perinatal bereavement is a term used when death occurs during pregnancy (whether an elective abortion or not), during delivery, or within 28 days afterward. Many underestimate the psychological significance of this bereavement, but the couples who are faced with it experience turmoil all the same. Oppressive feelings of failure, guilt, anger and disappointment await the parents who leave the hospital with their arms empty.

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***“When you lose a baby, you lose your future, everything you hoped for her, everything you dreamed of doing with her.”***

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*When Marilou died, it was the end of the world for me. I was exhausted. I was taking drugs to sleep. My only consolation was that I had the time to give her love before she died.*

### **People don't always understand**

“People tend to think that if you never knew the child, the grief will be much easier to deal with,” says Suzy Fréchette-Piperni, a consulting nurse in perinatal bereavement at the Centre hospitalier Pierre-Boucher. “But this is a loss which goes against the order of things, and takes the parents by surprise. When you lose a baby, you lose your future, everything you hoped for her, everything you dreamed of doing with her.”



## Perinatal bereavement

### The empty crib

#### **Within the couple**

“In a couple, the two individuals will not necessarily express their grief the same way,” says Ms. Fréchette-Piperni. Some spouses will expect a lot of support from the other person, but the other may be so devastated by his own sorrow that he will not always be able to offer the necessary assistance.”

*A few days after Marilou's death, my husband started renovations on the house, whereas me, I needed silence and tranquillity. I wanted to talk about my grief, and that's what I did, with my husband, but one day he asked me to be quiet. He simply no longer had the strength to listen to me talking about our daughter's death.*

#### **How to find help?**

Suzy Fréchette-Piperni stresses how important it is for the parents to express what they are feeling about the loss. To share their pain with people who have been through the same experience, they can turn to self-help groups such as “Les rêves envolés”, which welcomes people who have suffered this particular bereavement. There are also many other resources available: the family doctor, the local CLSC or a professional in private practice.

*Today I am doing much better. I have had a second pregnancy, which went very well. At home I keep a box of souvenirs of Marilou, the child who will be part of me forever.*



PHOTO: FRANÇOIS LAFRANCE

***Suzy Fréchette-Piperni, a nurse who specializes in perinatal bereavement, developed and introduced the perinatal bereavement support program of the Centre hospitalier Pierre-Boucher. She is also the founder of the self-help group Les rêves envolés.***

***Josée Noël de Tilly, member of the self-help group Les rêves envolés***

# Do I need therapeutic help?

The people around us, or a self-help group, will generally provide the necessary support to bereaved persons. But since every trial brings its share of problems, it may be that more of a helping hand is needed. A few points of reference may help you decide whether you require psychological assistance or not:

- You are always sad or have no energy
- You are often intolerant, angry, aggressive, violent
- You feel guilty, you brood, you still feel responsible two or three years after the death
- You feel like a victim of circumstance and cannot manage to escape this feeling
- Your family advise you to seek professional help

## Where to find a psychologist?

### At CLSCs

You can arrange an appointment by telephoning your neighbourhood CLSC.

SOURCES : PINARD, Suzanne. *De l'autre côté des larmes*, Boucherville, Éditions de Mortagne, 198 p.

### At hospital outpatient clinics

On a physician's referral, it is possible to consult a psychologist at the outpatient clinic of your local hospital.

### At schools

Persons attending an academic institution can meet with the psychologists of the school, CEGEP or university.

The services of psychologists working in public institutions are free of charge. Unfortunately, there are not enough of them, and the waiting lists can sometimes be long.

To see a psychologist who offers private services, simply telephone the referral service of the Ordre des psychologues du Québec.

**Tel.: 1 800 561-1223**

You can also consult the referral service on-line by going to the following address: [www.ordrepsy.qc.ca](http://www.ordrepsy.qc.ca), and then clicking on "Referral Service".

SOURCES: PINARD, Suzanne. *De l'autre côté des larmes*. Boucherville, Éditions de Mortagne. 198 p.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES: [www.psycho-ressources.com](http://www.psycho-ressources.com)