Surviving Loss

After her mother and husband died within a month of each other, **JoAnne Funch** learned important lessons about overcoming her grief and building a new life.

IT WAS UNEXPECTED when my mom passed away in 2005. On the flight home, I told my husband that if something happened to him, I wouldn't know what his wishes were. But he never liked to talk about death.

Less than a month later, he fell from a ladder, sustained a head trauma and died. I never even got to say good-bye. Not long after that, my sister-in-law was diagnosed with breast cancer and one of my dearest friends had a heart attack. Later that year I found out that my father had prostate cancer. My immediate reaction was just disbelief. You think, this can't be happening.

Today, my family members are cancer-free and my friend is doing well, but what I went through profoundly changed how I look at my own life. These are the things I want to share.

1. Believe in Something

I was in a fog for a while after my husband died. It just takes time for reality to sink in that someone you love is gone. My father spent a month with me and we talked a lot about what happened. I knew he understood what I was feeling, and that made me stronger. Belief in God also sustained me. I prayed that I would have the strength to cope, and I prayed for help—whatever that meant for the given day. Believing in something beyond us does create hope. Faith means not having to ask why. It just is.

WHO
JoAnne Funch

HOMETOWN
Minneapolis, Minn.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED
It's easier to cope with grief if we let people help us. We're not meant to do everything on our own.

2. Reach Out for Help

I learned right away to let people help me when they offered. Sometimes they weren't sure what I needed, so I learned how to ask. I used to joke that I was married to Tim "The Tool Man" Taylor. My husband did everything around the house, so when he died, I didn't know how to do any of it. Plus I had a business to run—my husband and I owned it together—and when an associate offered to do whatever I needed at work to help me get through that time, it was huge. You become really humble when you realize you can't do it all on your own.

Sometimes I just needed to talk. I would call friends and see if they were free for dinner. (E-mails aren't very comforting to me—I always prefer to pick up the phone.) I talked with other women who were widowed and they reassured me that with time I would heal. Often it was hard to reach out, but it helped.

3. Celebrate Every Day

I took it one day at a time, and if the day went well I tried to celebrate that. When I felt bad, I thought about what I had instead of what I had lost and I focused on the living—like my dad and my sister-in-law—who were still here and needed my support. It's easy to just quit and crumple up in a pile of sorrow, so when I pushed on and got things done, that was a triumph. I look back and think, "I can't believe I got all excited

PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE WILSON; HAIR/MAKEUP: JEN SANTORO ROTTY, ZENOBIA AGENCY

about getting the weeds pulled and the lawn trimmed." But even that was a big deal at the time.

4. Share Your Memories

Going into that next year, I discovered that people wanted me to be "all better" and go back to being my old self, but I couldn't. My life is forever changed. People aren't comfortable talking about death, but they aren't really comfortable talking about life either. So I had to be frank. I said, "Don't pretend my husband never lived, because he was a big part of my life." I don't think people realized how important it was for me to talk about the people I'd lost. Otherwise you tend to think everyone has forgotten them and you're the only one who remembers. The absence is always there, but I don't feel so alone when someone shares a memory with me.

5. Find Your Own Way to Let Go

I had to sort through my husband's things many times before I was ready to decide what to keep and what to give away. But doing that taught me that people aren't their things. I started thinking about moving home to Minneapolis. I am blessed with a close family and they offered to help me if I wanted to come back. I'd been in California for 22 years, so that was a big decision. In the end I had to focus on the memories of our life and then move on to my new life. So I made the decision to go home.

6. Recognize What Matters

My idea was to live more simply. I downsized my big house with a pool to a smaller townhouse, and it was surprisingly easy. When you're going through a tragedy you do things in a mechanical way because you're focused only on surviving. But I'm not just surviving anymore. My dad and my brothers are here and I have friends nearby with whom I've stayed in touch over the years. If I need something they're glad to help.

These days I buy the better bottle of wine and order what I want in restaurants. At first my dad was amazed that I used cloth napkins whenever I had him over for dinner. But there's no need to wait for a special occasion to bring out those things. Every day is a special occasion.

JoAnne and her father at home in Minneapolis.

7. Appreciate Being Loved

The hardest thing I learned about love was how hard it is to lose it. Sometimes we take it for granted that someone loves us—I knew my husband loved me, but when I look back I see it so strongly now. He loved doing the simplest things, like painting a room, just because he was doing them with me. Even if I never get married again, I'll feel peaceful knowing that some loved me like that once. The heartache of loss doesn't get easier, but time has enabled me to regroup, recharge and remain steadfast in my belief that maybe it will.

—as told to Amanda M. Trimble

My Books on Grief

On Grief and Grieving by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler (Scribner, $14). "It helped me understand the stages of grief and exactly what I was feeling."

Grief's Courageous Journey: A Workbook by Sandi Caplan and Gordon Lang (New Harbinger, $15). "Good for recording your feelings about the past, present and future."

Grace for Grief by Michael and Brenda Pink (W Publishing, $10). "I started each day with this little book of daily quotes for inspiration."