



Maryanne and John

On September 29th, 2000, my husband, Constable John Petropoulos of the Calgary Police Service, was investigating a break and enter complaint at a warehouse when he stepped through an unmarked false ceiling, fell nine feet into the lunchroom below and died of head injuries. There was no safety railing in place to warn him – or anyone else – of the danger. The complaint turned out to be a false alarm; there was no intruder in the building.

My wake-up call, however, was devastatingly real. John was 32. We both were. So began my free-fall into the grieving process...a young widow with a broken heart, a shattered soul, an empty home and a determination to ensure something good came out of such a senseless tragedy.

Over the past 19 years, I have worked with the John Petropoulos Memorial Fund (JPMF) to help raise public awareness about why and how to ensure workplaces are safe for everyone, including emergency responders. Please visit the JPMF website to view our TV ads and safety video.

I became an author, playwright, screenwriter and blogger. Writing my book, *A Widow's Awakening*, helped me heal. Publishing it has helped others on their journey through grief.

Over the years, I have learned an awful lot about grief – the good, the bad and the ugly. There is the old saying, “Time heals all wounds,” but I beg to differ. Time lessens the pain, yes. But in my experience, it’s what we do with our time that will ensure whether – or not – we truly heal.

In fact, I would be as so bold to suggest that on some level, we may not want to fully heal – ever – because that might somehow lessen the love we had for the one we lost. But being happy again might just be the greatest tribute of all to our loved one.

If you have recently (or not so recently) lost a loved one, here are 5 healthy ways to help heal a broken heart:

1. Be aware of what you are choosing as coping mechanisms.

Unhealthy coping mechanisms are ways by which we try to escape our pain...alcohol, drugs, eating (too much or not enough), shopping, incessant busyness, becoming a workaholic, etc.

If the coping mechanisms you’re using are no longer serving you, make a conscious change to healthier ones, such as:

- Get physically active...whatever it is, make it a habit.
- Get out into nature...a walk in the woods can soothe the soul like nothing else.
- Consider getting a pet. My two dogs helped me get through the toughest years. They were always happy to see me and their enthusiasm made me smile. They gave me unconditional love and their needs forced me to get out for a walk every day.
- Volunteer. When we are helping others, the focus on our own tragedy diminishes.
- Read inspirational books and watch uplifting movies, especially comedies.
- Be around people who love you, listen to you, support you and can make you smile.

2. Honour the hurt.

The sooner you acknowledge (admit to yourself) the full extent of your loss and the seemingly bottomless depth of your hurt, the sooner you’ll be able to heal. When we deny our own truth – as horrific as that may be – we only postpone the healing process.

Here’s a trick: whenever hurt comes to the surface, don’t run from feeling it. Instead, STOP whatever you are doing and simply FEEL the loss, the sorrow, the pain, the hurt, the anger. Yes, you will cry...but not forever. The sooner you release those emotions, the better.

3. Express/share what you are thinking and feeling.

Talk to a good friend and/or a professional about what you are really experiencing. Be honest! You may be thinking and/or feeling some awfully strange stuff (says I from experience), so the sooner you can get that OUT, the better.

The catch, however, is to choose the person wisely. They must be a good listener, empathetic and non-judgmental. Most importantly, it cannot be about them. You know you’ve found a good person to talk to when you leave the conversation feeling better than when you started.

4. Find a positive outlet for negative emotions.

Whether that is finding a way to transform your hurt into something beneficial for others, finding a personal way to honour who and/or what has been lost, or simply finding joy and purpose in your new life...do something purposeful that is meaningful to YOU and brings you moments of happiness again. Those happy moments will begin to expand. Nature abhors a vacuum, so be very aware of what you allow to fill it, especially negative thoughts.

5. Take it one day at a time – baby steps!

Give yourself permission to make mistakes because you will...again and again. And that’s okay. For me, the grieving process felt like one step forward then two steps back. But the more small steps forward

I took, the less time I spent beating myself up for going backwards.

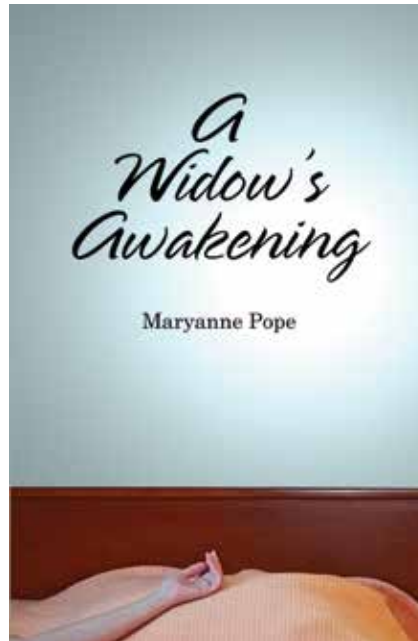
And remember: “The only courage that matters is the kind that gets you from one moment to the next.”

– Mignon McLaughlin

If we have the courage to truly love in this life, we will get hurt. Grief is a natural, normal and healthy response to the anguish that goes with learning to live without someone we have loved very much. Grief has a very significant role to play, yes – but it’s up to us to recognize when it has become more of a hindrance than a healer.

Maryanne Pope is the author of *A Widow’s Awakening*, the playwright of *Saviour* and the screenwriter of *God’s Country*. Maryanne is CEO of Pink Gazelle Productions and Chair of the John Petropoulos Memorial Fund.

If you would like to receive her weekly blog, please visit PinkGazelle.com.



A WIDOW'S AWAKENING

is the candid portrayal of Maryanne’s journey through the first year of grief after the on-duty death of her police officer husband, as the result of a preventable fall at an unsafe workplace. Engaging, powerful and heart-wrenching, this book captures the immense difficulty of accepting the unacceptable while learning to transform loss into positive change. Over 2000 copies sold. To order a copy (\$20 each), please contact Threads of Life.