

The
Tender
*Life After the
Death of a
Spouse*
Scar

SECOND EDITION

Richard L. Mabry

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The Tender Scar: Life After the Death of a Spouse

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

When I first tried to write *The Tender Scar* I was tempted to portray myself in a better light by explaining and justifying some of my actions and attitudes. It didn't work. It was only when I succeeded in transferring my unedited feelings to paper, opening myself to criticism and making myself vulnerable, that the book became the kind of work I wanted it to be. The book carries with it some of the raw emotions I felt, and perhaps that's why it's helped so many others.

The Tender Scar has been ministering for a decade to those touched by the loss of a spouse. When the publishers asked me about a revision, my reply was, "This book was written while the pain of Cynthia's death was still fresh enough to make my thoughts valid. I don't want to change a thing."

More than a year after Cynthia's death, God blessed me once more with the love of a wonderful and understanding woman, Kay. I find her insights into the writing life I've slipped into after my retirement from medicine both accurate and helpful, although sometimes they sting a bit. It was Kay who suggested that I might add a chapter to the book about what I've now experienced for more than fifteen years—a second marriage that creates a blended family. And as my

new journey with Kay differs from my journey with Cynthia, you'll find my writing in this new chapter to differ from my writing in the first edition of *The Tender Scar*.

I hope you find the totality of this work helpful.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

If you've picked up this book, chances are that you—or someone dear to you—have lost a loved one. Perhaps a spouse.

Every marriage includes the dream of “living happily ever after.” Some part of us realizes, of course, that the time we share together with our spouses will eventually end. But the human tendency is to put that bit of reality aside. Too often we successfully ignore it until our “ever after” comes to a screeching halt. Mine did at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, September 14, 1999. This book stems from the aftermath of that event and is based on my observations and comments as someone who's been there, done that, survived, and continues to work at reaching the other side of grief. It is unapologetically personal, because my experience is all I can write about with certainty. It has a Christian perspective, because both Cynthia and I made Christ an integral part of our lives and our marriage. And although “happily ever after” might not be possible, may these pages offer comfort and inspiration that starts you on the road to “hopefully ever after.”

One bit of advice I received after Cynthia's death was to begin journaling. This can be a means of achieving some catharsis of the pent-up and varied emotions experienced by the recently bereaved. My journaling began as emails to my family, my closest friends, and

my pastor, along with an occasional letter written posthumously to Cynthia as well as entries meant just for me. This book is an outgrowth of that journaling. I have taken the seminal portions (the text in *italics* at the beginning of each chapter) and used them as jumping-off points for discussion, including recommendations and words of comfort for the bereaved. I've tried to convey the emotions I was feeling—the good and the bad, the highs and the lows—hoping that this will help you know that others have felt the same way you do. My comments offer help for the person wondering, “When will this end?” or “Is it normal to feel this way?” or “What have other people done about this?”

You may have already heard or read that healing from the death of a spouse will take about a year, two years at most. I've learned differently. The length of that journey has been indeterminate for me, as it will be for you. But I'm far enough along on the path to look back from a clearer perspective and comment on the emotions and reactions that are common to the grieving individual. If even one chapter of this book helps just one person get through his or her own passage through the valley of the shadow of death, then my efforts will have been worth it. Thank you for sharing my journey.

We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed.
We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. (2 Cor. 4:8)



Dear Lord, we acknowledge that Your ways are not our ways. Your agenda doesn't always coincide with ours. Only in the fullness of time, when we stand before Your throne, will we truly understand why terrible things happen in this world. We pray that those who mourn will be comforted, those who feel incomplete will achieve healing, and that, in all we do and say, we will have the grace to finally say with a willing heart, "Thy will be done." Grant this peace to all those experiencing the desolation of loss. We pray in Your healing name, amen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book could never have become a reality without the help and inspiration of a number of people. I acknowledge the loving support given me by my church families at both Cliff Temple Baptist Church and Duncanville's First Baptist Church, and by my pastors, Glen Schmucker, Charles Lovell, and Keith Brister. I also received encouragement from my children and their spouses—Allen and Lynne, Brian and Catherine, and Ann. God has given me a second blessing in the form of a loving and caring wife, Kay, who has been not only wonderfully understanding and helpful during my continuing journey but has been my strong right arm during the process of creating this book. The experience of attending the Christian Writers Workshop in Glorieta, New Mexico, was a watershed event in my life and my Christian experience. From that point, God inspired me, and mentors helped me, to take an unformed conglomeration of journaling and transform it into the pages you see here.

I truly believe that, although we may not understand how or why, God can take terrible events and use them for eventual good. If this book helps you, it is just more evidence of His willingness to do just that and a demonstration of His power and His love for us.

PLAYING THE BLAME GAME

“Did I do everything I could?” One of the overwhelming emotions that affect the grieving individual is guilt. The games of “What if I had . . . ?” and “If only I could have . . .” or even “I should have . . .” are endless. When considered through the perspective of time, most of us see these speculations as useless.

I still continue to replay the three-plus hours between the time of Cynthia’s stroke and the surgery meant to relieve the pressure in her brain. I repeatedly torture myself with thoughts of “Could we have gotten her to the medical center more quickly?” or “Should I have done this or that to speed up the process?” I’m a doctor, and I’m supposed to help people, to intervene, to take action. But things dragged on so slowly, and I felt so powerless. My colleagues tell me that Cynthia’s stroke was not a survivable injury, and everything that could be done was done. But, despite its lack of logic, I’ve continued to grieve over my inability to make things happen faster and better. I wonder if I’ll ever get over this guilt. (Author’s email to a friend who suffered a similar loss)

Husbands and wives spend years taking care of each other, thinking of their spouses’ needs, often subjugating their own desires and

plans for those of their mates. When a spouse dies, whether quickly or after an extended period of illness, the opportunity for what-if scenarios and the attendant guilt is enormous. These feelings can linger for months and years, crippling the surviving spouse with guilt. In most cases, an unbiased observer will tell us we did everything we could. But even if we didn't, we can't change the final outcome. As Omar Khayyam wrote, "The Moving Finger writes; and having writ, moves on."

There is also a feeling of guilt at being the one left alive. "Why couldn't it have been me?" we think. This may lead, in turn, to an attitude of "I shouldn't do anything for myself. I don't deserve to be happy." Often we can't enjoy the simple pleasures of life because we think our spouses will never again enjoy the things we continue to experience, and for that we blame ourselves. The little voice inside us says, "Why should I enjoy the sunrise when my spouse will never see another one?" The response may not be rational, but it certainly is real—and crippling.

Despite all the good advice in the world, guilt and what-ifs are part of grieving. The best advice I can offer is to talk things over with someone (repeatedly, if necessary), starting with an unbiased family member or friend. Expand the support base from there until you're able to not only say, "I did what I could at the time," but also, "I can't change it now."

Now may be the time to look for a support group. Sometimes you may find that friends, and even church staff, are too close to you. It's hard to open up around these people because you don't want to reveal your frailties and what you may perceive as shortcomings. If you're computer literate, you may find help through an online resource such as WidowNet (www.WidowNet.org), where it's possible to unburden yourself and receive advice and support in relative anonymity. In addition, though, it's best to seek human contact for face-to-face support. I was fortunate to find a widowed persons support group in my area through AARP.

Whatever the means chosen, now is the time to begin talking out the what-ifs and to start dealing with the survivor guilt that can

plague the widowed for months and sometimes years. The feeling of guilt is normal, natural, and—to a degree—understandable. But it need not be permanent.

Who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.

(Ps. 19:12 NIV)



Loving Father, forgive us when we sometimes take responsibility for things we can't control. We are imperfect, faulted, and frail. Pardon us when we stumble, admonish us when we stray, but always keep us aware that You are a God of mercy, grace, and love. We accept that we cannot undo our actions, revise our omissions, or change what we've already done. But we acknowledge that in Your love we start each day forgiven and cleansed. Help us to move forward, not necessarily always understanding but always trusting. In Your name, amen.