Finding the Path Toward Hope:
a grief recovery story

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Introduction

On the advice of my counselor, I decided to write about how I managed to overcome the persistent grief that I found myself battling after the death of my wife over four years ago. The circumstances of my recovery are unique to me, and may not apply to all who find themselves in a similar grieving situation, but perhaps the description of the distress, the desperation, and the steps taken to overcome the ensuing depression may help them overcome their grief and the feeling that the grief is never going to end.

My wife and I were married for 52 years and had a relatively typical family; we had 3 children who graduated from university and started their families. We were relatively successful in our careers and retired in the 1990s. We traveled extensively through the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, and South America, and we had plans to go to new places and revisit some places that we had enjoyed.

It all changed when her health began to fail in late 2008. She lost her eyesight suddenly, and her health deteriorated rapidly over the next 2 months. One morning in January, 2009 she collapsed at home. She died in the hospital about a week later.

Her death left me with a deep feeling of loss and a lack of purpose in living, leading to a deep depression that had no end. Family and friends assured me that there would be an end, but when I started looking ahead, I did not have a clear concept or definition of what acceptance was, and I had no idea how to begin the journey towards it, how I could ever reach it or how I could even know when I had reached it.
After much study and contemplation on my part, and with the help of many people and the passage of much more time than I had ever expected, I can say that I have reached the desired “acceptance,” and that I feel the happiness of having accomplished my goal. I am not truly happy, because that would require my wife to be at my side once again, but I am “happy enough,” as my daughter says. Happy enough to be able to enjoy what is left of my life, to actively participate in and contribute to life, and to make good use of my time, however long or short it may be.

Gentle reader, if you are in need of help with a grieving situation, I wish you success. It is my hope that sharing my successful struggle to overcome these dark feelings and come to acceptance will help you to begin your journey towards overcoming your grief.

Jaime H. Cuadros
Hacienda Heights, California
September, 2013
The events of my life and my progression through grief are unique to my upbringing, culture, emotional make-up, life history and my loss. Every person's grief is as unique as the loved one who was lost, but there are certain tools and actions that I feel can be helpful to grieving persons, whether their loss is new or the person now finds him or herself stuck in a similar circumstance of deep, protracted grief.

My grieving process lasted about 4 years. At one point or another during this extended period, each of the activities that follow helped my transit through this time of turmoil and tribulation. They are listed in no particular order of importance or occurrence, as each one became important as I became ready to use it.

**Journal**

The first action, and as it turned out, a very important one, was to start writing a journal, in which I wrote my feelings of the day, my interactions with family and friends, my recollections of good times, the things I wished I had said while there was time, and all the things I wished I had done differently. When this was first suggested to me by a relative who had used a journal to help her cope with the loss of her father, I did not think this activity would have an impact on the way I was feeling, and resisted the idea. But soon after that, I talked with a friend who had lost her husband a couple of years earlier; she told me that writing the journal had helped her immensely, until one day, after making daily entries for about a year, she realized that she did not need to write in the journal anymore. She also told me that the present state of mind that I found myself in would eventually fade away and the grief would be gone; so, wait and it will happen. At first, I did not really believe her, but as time passed, I found her words to be true and helpful.
There is one note of caution. Once you have written it; do not read the journal, especially going backwards. Once I was looking for a particular incident that I had written about sometime before, and as I was searching and reading back in time, all the grief and despair came rolling in, and it got worse the farther back in time I went. I found myself reliving all the difficulties and feelings of that time and that the experience had caused me to regress in my progress to acceptance. That feeling lasted for many days.

I still have all of the volumes of my journal sitting on my bookshelf, but I will never read from it again.

**Counselor**

Seeking the help of a therapist or counselor was the next most important action. Depression is the biggest obstacle in coping with the grief associated with the death of a loved one, and if it is not properly addressed, it can lead to the death of the grieving person, by natural causes or by suicide. I know; I was there. Overcoming depression might take anywhere from months to a few years to come back to a somewhat normal life, and is definitely not a do-it-yourself project.

Help from a counselor is essential, and should be sought as soon as possible, because deep grief changes the chemistry of the brain and creates perceptions that are hard to dispel later on. When I started seeking the help of my counselor, I chose the cognitive approach, rather than relying on medication to help through the early stages of grief. I wanted to be aware of the changes and understand what was happening as I progressed through the path to acceptance. However, this is a very personal choice. Some people find anti-depressant medications to be tremendously helpful, if not essential, to resolving their grief.
Even if you don’t think you need it, you should consider getting help. If, after reflection, you do decide you need it, do not let anything stop you from getting it.

Books

During an earlier time in my life when I was struggling with depression, my wife gave me two booklets from the Elf-help series published by Abbey Press. These booklets are small and short. On the left-hand page is a sentence or two expressing one thought, and on the facing page is a charming illustration of an elf character depicting it. The booklets were *Overcoming Depression* and *Self-esteem Therapy*. I read them but did not follow their advice; they seemed more like platitudes rather than “how to” advice.

Shortly after my wife’s death, I found these booklets and read them again. This time, I found them relevant, and I acquired several more from the series. One booklet in particular, which spoke to me now that I did want to listen was titled *Grief Therapy* by Karen Katafiasz. It contains a total of 35 dictums, of which I will share a few that really struck me:

18. *Mourn not just for the loss of what was but also for what will never be. And then gently, lovingly let go.*

   This was a wonderment to me, as I read it, and at the end I did not know how to “lovingly let go.” It would be a long time before I would learn how to do that.

6. *Give yourself time to grieve. It may take several years just to accept the finality of a loss, that someone is gone forever and even more to work through your emotions.*
16. *Let your grief be personal. In a letter, in a poem, a drawing, and a journal entry—or even in an imaginary conversation with the one you have lost—pour out the feelings you may never have the chance to express. This will foster healing.*

31. *It may seem as if you’ll never feel truly happy again. But be assured that you will—and your joy will have richness and a depth that come from your having known profound pain and profound healing.*

I read this booklet, almost every night, before going to sleep. I always felt it was talking to me, and describing my feelings, giving me hope about how things will change, ideas of how to help myself and the understanding that it will all take a long time.

I purchased eight additional Elf-help books and 22 Care Notes leaflets with titles relevant to grief management. They were all helpful to me at some point in my journey. I have listed the titles of these booklets and leaflets, all published by Abbey Press, in the Bibliography section.

As part of the cognitive approach I began to read the books recommended by my counselor and other books related to cognitive psychology. I wanted to understand how my mind worked in developing such deep attachments and dependencies that practically paralyzed me in the early weeks after her death and created the perception that my life was over, even if I was still alive.

Another source of information was magazines, such as Scientific American Mind, where almost every month there was a report of progress in the understanding of how the brain works and the amazing trends in brain research.

However, the books that helped me the most were by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. These were especially helpful in the early weeks, when they provided a guide to what was to
come and the promise of the grief eventually coming to an end. Other books provided an understanding of the building of marital bonding, attachment style, and living and ageing (Gottman, Erikson). On a personal note, books have always been my way of learning and tapping into the knowledge of more experienced people, then applying their suggestions; it works for me.

A very helpful book at the beginning of my journey to acceptance was a novel by Wendy Mass, titled *Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life*, where the character discovers that there is no grand scheme of life, and that we need to appreciate each event, past and present, for what it is and to appreciate the people around us who helped us become who we are. I found this idea very powerful and meaningful, especially at the beginning of my journey.

A very interesting book that I read at the end of my journey was *Saturday Night Widows* by Becky Aikman, in which the author narrates how she and five other widows, ranging in age from 45 to 57 years old, over a one-year-period, formed a support group, managed to overcome their grief and find new lives and relationships. Each one of them handled her grief in a different manner and experienced some of my difficulties. What I found most interesting was the comparison of the different ways that men and women handled their grief recovery. Overall, this book gave me a look into how younger people handled the grief of losing a spouse, and how their recovery paralleled all the stages of my grief recovery.

**Music**

Music had always had an impact in my every day living, from classical works to popular music, especially while I was growing up. Later, as an adult, music was interwoven into my everyday living. The lyrics of popular songs began to
be connected to people and events, always pleasantly. After my wife’s death some lyrics began to take on a different meaning—one of loss and regret for what I had lost. Over time, it all began to change again, and the good memories associated with the music became more important than the sad memories. Then, I realized that I was coming closer to the desired acceptance.

Music can also be a powerful mood changer. Songs about love and loss can cut like a knife, while songs of hope can bring the promise of a relief from the burden of grief and loneliness. When I was feeling overwhelmed by sadness, I could lose myself, for a short time at least, in a favorite piece of music.

I think that music can be a powerful vehicle to change grief into acceptance; however, this might not be true for people for whom music did not have such a powerful attachment or was not so ingrained into their lives.

Dreams

Dreams also became an important indicator of my progress to acceptance. I was able to catalog the sequence of dreams that began after her death into categories or groups, by content. I see a progression in the dreams.

In the first dream I had the day after she died, we are in a small street in Paris, outside of the hotel. I can’t see her, but she is to my right side.

I say to her, “Let’s meet outside of that café two blocks down the street in a few minutes.”

Then we separate, and I walk to the café and sit down at one of the outside tables to wait for her. After a while, I notice the sun is setting, and I realize that she is not coming back. I say to myself, “I have lost her forever.”

I begin to cry in the dream, and I continued to cry after I woke up. This dream was the most emotional and
wrenching of all the dreams and set the tone for my descent into depression. Other dreams in this group were more emotionally neutral, but similarly set in our travels abroad, where I was often searching for her during the dream.

In the next group of dreams, I am at our present home or in similar houses, usually under repair. She is not there most of the time, but sometimes I “know” she is in the next room, but out of sight.

In another stage of dreams, she arrives in the middle of the dream, which is set in a place we had never been before; there are other relatives present, but I (or we) are no longer searching for her. In the dream, there is very little interaction from her with the rest of the other people there.

At the next stage of dreams I am alone, going places, not necessarily looking for her anymore. I am trying to accomplish a task or trying to go somewhere to give a report, but encounter difficulties such as being unable to find paper or being barefoot with the roads in poor condition. My wife is not present or in my thoughts.

As I approached acceptance, the subject of the dreams changed. In these dreams I am always alone and the events that I dream about are totally devoid of references to my past struggle with depression and my loss. The main content of these dreams is related to events that happened during the previous day and other unrelated events, just as normal dreams are supposed to be. I feel that whatever brain pattern was affecting my dreams during the earlier periods, it now has changed; they are now normal dreams that deal with events of the day, and she is no longer in them.

I have described the categories of the dream sequences and my interpretation of their relevance because my counselor thinks that they are a very important part of the understanding of my progression from depression and despair to acceptance and back to a normal stage of living under changed circumstances. Of course, I had no conscious control
of this progression, but it is an interesting set of markers in my march to acceptance.

It is interesting to note that in all the dreams that I reported, there is no dream where she comes in view to talk directly to me about how everything is or is going to be OK and not to worry. I understand that this type of dream is called a “visitation.” I have known people who have had this type of dream, and it has had a profound effect in their recovery from their grief. I have never had such a dream, to my profound regret.

**Family and friends**

I was so immersed in the grief of my loss that I rejected any approach to console me or offers of support from my family and friends when I was floundering in despair and hopelessness. It took the efforts of one of my relatives to show me that there could be hope in listening to other people and in their words of support and understanding.

My children had lives to lead and were kept busy with the interactions and obligations of work and their young families. In contrast, I felt that I had no one to interact with and nothing to set a pattern or give a shape to my daily routine.

Thanks to the persistence of the people who cared about me and would not give up on me, I slowly began to appreciate the benefit of maintaining a closer interaction with my relatives and friends. Then, I began to move along the path of acceptance, slowly at first, but moving on. This was an important step. I came to realize that if I had taken it earlier in my grief management process, I would have perhaps avoided the terrible depression, where suicide was an answer. I now know that withdrawing into myself was a hindrance to my recovery and that frequent and close contact with others
is crucial to achieving acceptance. These days I really look forward to visiting old friends and family members and enjoy receiving visits from them in my home. These are things I never imagined would be possible when I was in my darkest times.

**Impact of religion**

In my discussions with my counselor and family, the subject of religion came up as part of the areas of consideration for a source of solace or comfort, leading to acceptance. The rationale was that most people, in time of distress, tend to lean on, or reconsider the training or exposure to their religious training or preference. Naturally, it would depend on your upbringing and how important it was to follow a religious discipline throughout your formative years.

Even if you have not practiced your religion in your adult years, you might want to explore this avenue. I found that reviewing and meditating on the tenets of a religion can have a calming effect and can help in establishing a forthright attitude and be a source of mental support in the path to acceptance. It is worth the effort to add this to your store of options, if you have the proper background, and you value it.

**Physical activity**

Physical activity, especially in the form of exercise, is well known to have benefits, from the point of view of maintaining good health, but I found that maintaining an average exercise routine, such as walking or bicycle riding, also improved my mental attitude and/or my coping ability, when I was immersed in the depths of a grief-induced depression.
This effect might have its roots in the physiology of exercise, the endorphins and other biochemicals generated by the exercise activity, but beyond that, I found that for me, my mind was not as focused on my troubles or the constant reviewing of the depressing thoughts, or the remembering of things that I did not do or say when it was appropriate, and other discrepancies in my perceptions and recollections. It certainly is worthwhile to make the effort to establish an exercise routine, even if it has to be broken up into moderately shorts periods throughout the day.

**Travel**

Travel is another activity that I have come to realize can have a beneficial impact, especially if it is targeted to some activity, such as visiting friends and relatives, to maintain connections and to see new places. For me, I did not accept this potential benefit for a long time, as I could not see myself walking down the streets of London or Paris without her, and all the other places that we had enjoyed as much. I decided that I could not enjoy visiting those places again. However, as time passed, I found that I was able to travel short distances to spend time with old friends and longer distances with my daughter and her family. I was surprised to find that, with each trip, I enjoyed myself more and more.

In general, I feel that it would be a good thing to travel to different places, as a form of distraction and healing.

**Projects**

My grief management was made more difficult by being retired from work and not having outside commitments to help me in keeping my mind occupied and not dwelling on my loss. Having a job or other outside commitments can
certainly help in avoiding the torment that comes with too much time available to ponder your loss. In my experience, people who had that type of distraction fared better in overcoming their grief.

Therefore, if you have a hobby or other interests, such as painting, writing, reading, sewing, etc, you can capitalize on the enjoyment and time consumed by devoting time to these activities to help you in your grief management. If you have the resources, volunteering at a charitable organization, police department, hospital or similar organizations can be of help, but it has to be a regular commitment and of interest to you.

Perhaps one of the most useful activities in working yourself out of depression is to get involved in a series of projects that consume a lot of time and require a somewhat high level of concentration. A few examples are: cataloging your records (LP or CD) or DVD collection; detailed cataloging of your library; organizing your photos into a scrapbook, restarting a hobby, such as sketching, watercolor painting, and writing stories or poetry. Of course, if you have a family to support and a job to consume your time, it might be difficult to dedicate sufficient time to have a curative effect, but then, if you have such obligations to give shape to your time, you may not need such a project.

Understanding the cyclical or wave nature of grief

As I began to progress toward acceptance, about every few months, sometimes even weeks, I began to experience what I called “regressions” in my perception of how I was handling the events leading to acceptance. Something, sometimes trivial, would trigger a memory or a regret of things not done, which would send me into a deep depression and despair of not ever coming to acceptance. This mood would last for anywhere from hours to days, but in the
end I would return to the same emotional place where I had been before the episode. My counselor, would explain every time, that that was the nature of grief recovery; that it was not “regression”, but rather the nature of progression, somewhat like a wave, that would come and go several times, but each time it would be a little better. It was hard for me to accept this explanation, but eventually, I came to accept it, as the incidents diminished and eventually stopped.

Even now, there are times when something, such as realizing that it is her birthday today, will bring a wave of sadness. But I now know that it is only temporary; that the wave will wash over me and will eventually pass; and that through my actions and my thoughts, I have the power to hasten its departure when I choose.

**Mind-sets and the promise of not forgetting her**

In the first few days and weeks after her death I began to develop, what I call, “mind-sets”—preconceived ideas of what I should do or not do in the future.

First and foremost was the idea that I did not want to live without her. This evolved from thoughts of suicide to not wanting to live more that a couple of years, to maybe living for five more years, tops. As a corollary to this mind-set, I did not want to take care of any new medical problems or pursue an aggressive treatment of any new afflictions.

Second, I did not want to do the things that I had enjoyed doing before, because it could affect my perception that nothing is worth doing without her, and I might begin to enjoy doing things to lighten the feeling of loss.

As time passed, the second “mind set” began to become less firm in my mind, and I began to consider that now that the perception of my loss has changed, I could start doing some of the things that I had enjoyed in the past. When
I could actually do that, it would indicate that I had reached “acceptance.”

For me, that moment was reached when I did not have the grief and anxiety that used to accompany recalling events with her from the past. The memories were now more solid—a part of my permanent memory. They were now pleasant memories, with a very subdued tinge of sadness. This was a great step in my progression to acceptance.

Perhaps you have promised yourself that you will never forget your departed loved one—something that you could not even imagine that you could ever do anyway, when your life has changed so drastically.

But you will reach a point where these “mind sets” are being overcome by the events of all the things that you have to do, and you reach a compromise when the grief that drove you to this promise has subsided.

You know that you will not forget her, but her memories now occupy a different area in your mind, a more realistic place, a more permanent part, that you did not foresee or anticipate would happen. Perhaps it is a change in your definition of what “remembering her” constitutes.

I have come to understand that the temporary feelings of bittersweet sadness on the anniversaries of our wedding or her birth or death are to be treasured rather than wished away because they are a reminder of my love for her; not having them would mean that I truly had forgotten her.

**At the end, de facto acceptance**

When the time comes, perhaps almost imperceptibly, one day you realize that you no longer have the preoccupation with your loss. You are busy living your life and doing what you need to do for your everyday activities—
something that you thought you would never have the stamina to do. Then you will know that you have reached acceptance,

I have been using the word “acceptance” quite liberally, as a generic term, perhaps signifying “surrender” or “accepting” something not wholly in accordance with my desires. This is not the life I would have chosen for myself, but I can now accept it as mine.

Now at the end of my grief management struggle, I have come to realize that it is not a single act of acknowledgement, but rather a series of realizations that a particular difficulty is no longer a difficulty or an obstacle to the change that you want to effect. You see a series of minor victories in your effort to re-establish order and perspective to your new, now changed future life, of which the cumulative effect is “Acceptance.”

Final recommendations

For me, this has been an arduous travel from despair and depression to acceptance that has lasted more than 4 years. Even now, I cannot see a way that could have made it easier or happen in a shorter time: I had to work through all of the stages (sometimes many times) and understand each new insight and mental change as it was revealed to me and as I became ready to accept it.

At the beginning, the despair and the sense of loss seemed to have no foreseeable end, and that augmented the feeling of depression

However, doing the things that I have described above incrementally helped me to overcome the depression and come to acceptance. I cannot tell if any one of these things is more important than the others; I think that they all work together as part of a broad spectrum of activities necessary to reach the goal of complete acceptance.
The despair, the deep sadness, and the sense of loss will all come to an end.

According to my readings, most people accommodate in a matter of weeks, some in a matter of months, and a very few in a matter of years; I feel I was one of the protracted ones, but perhaps that made my recovery more rewarding and complete.

Perhaps, if you find yourself in a situation similar to mine, my experiences, as I have narrated here, might help you to find acceptance and peace. I wish you well as you find your own path and begin your journey toward hope.
Acknowledgements

I want to thank all of the people who made my recovery from depression possible; people who, without intruding or using a heavy hand, and always with the best intentions, persevered through the years to help me succeed.

At the risk of omitting some relevant names I would like to especially thank and single out my counselor, Darryl Bartolotti; my daughter and advisor, Carla Pera; my sister-in-law, Jean Angers; my niece, Vivian McIntosh; my nephew, Francisco Cuadros; my niece, Isabel Cuadros Ferré, my dear friends George and Gilda Forrester, Jeanni Nonamaker, Richard and Judy Steppins, and all of the other relatives and friends who stood by me while I was in the dark tunnel of depression. Each one has played a crucial role in my recovery, and I can honestly say that I would not be here today if not for them.
Bibliography


Abbey Press

A listing of the titles of the Elf Books and other related Care Notes by the same publisher, Abbey Press, St. Meinrad, IN 47577. www.onecaringplace.com

The Elf-help books are 4"w by 6" h; the Care notes are 5"w by 7" h, and 7 pages. The Elf-help booklets were written by various authors, but the illustrations are by the same artist, R.W. Alley.

I selected all of these booklets and Care Notes by their titles at the time when I was looking for something to help me overcome the descending steps to depression and desperation. They all helped, some more than others, especially the ones in the second therapy period, that were more directed at actions, rather than generalities, or platitudes that were well intentioned but lacked specific steps or directions. And as I mentioned before, Grief Therapy was the most useful.

From the first depression period

Elf-help for Overcoming Depression
Self-esteem Therapy

From the second depression period

Elf-help Books

Grief Therapy
Acceptance Therapy
One-day-at-a-time Therapy
When You're Feeling Spiritually Empty
On the Anniversary of Your Loss
Grieving at Christmastime
Healing Thoughts for Troubled Hearts
Making Sense out of Suffering Therapy
Thirty Days of Grief Prayers
Care Notes

Losing Your Wife
Finding Your Way After the Death of a Spouse
Why We Need to Tell the Story of the One We Lost
What Everyone Should Know About the First Year of Grief
On the First Anniversary of Your Loss
Depression – What Everyone Should Know
What’s Really “Normal” When You’re Grieving?
Taking the Time You Need to Grieve Your Loss
Time Alone – An Essential Part of Grieving
Handling Grief as a Man
When You didn’t Get to Say Good-Bye
Cherishing Your Memories of a Loved One
Using Good Memories to Help Heal Your Grief
Walking with God Through Grief and Loss
When You Fear a Loved One Is at Risk for Suicide
Intense Grief Emotions – What Can You Do?
What to Say to Someone Who is Grieving
What Grieving Does to the Body
Getting Through the Holidays When You’ve Lost a Loved One
First Christmas After a Loved One Dies
Making a Plan for the Toughest Times After a Loss
Lifelong Grieving – Why It’s Okay

This is a long list, but each booklet and Care Note is a kernel of wisdom, and in the aggregate, they contributed to my progression to acceptance.
The author and his wife, Mabel, after their wedding in 1956.