



*"When we are no longer able to change a situation,  
we are challenged to change ourselves."*

*-- Viktor Frankl*

# Connecting

June 2021

## *When One Door Closes . . .*

Death of a loved one delivers a variety of challenges and changes for those left to mourn them. There is no good time; and every death seems to come at "the worst possible time.... just as we were about to....". A father dying before his daughter's graduation or wedding day...a wife passes just months before a scheduled cruise on Holland-America, to celebrate a 50th Anniversary....an infant dies from SIDS, never seeing his first birthday party with the clown and ball tent. Plans do not always materialize as we hope they might and dreams don't always come true. Life has its kicks and starts, and we never know what will kick us in the back side, or hit our accelerator button to entice us to get moving again, despite the challenges of doing so much slower now that we are alone and lonely.

Grief is a part of life. A dedicated employee is handed a pink slip after decades of climbing the corporate ladder and now within touching distance of that final rung...or a house burns down, taking with it memories of generations past...or a terminal illness strikes; a family's future suddenly very dark and unpredictable. We grieve these life crises when they occur; and notice that unwelcome change accompanies that grief. Human beings like repetition and order to feel comfortable in our space. Sitting in the same church pew or in the first chair of Row 3 at Bingo makes us feel like we belong there...it is like returning to the safety of home. Moving to another spot is unthinkable...it might cancel your winning streak or some guy with big, broad shoulders



might block your view. No, things are good just as they are. Well, order, continuity and stability are not synonymous with death, grief, loss, or change. Life itself changes us. We grow up and mature. Travelling changes us; learning about different cultures, customs and rituals makes us a more inclusive and welcoming society. Relationships change us, some for the better; others leave scars and reminders of unhappy times. Death changes us too. Life-long plans are crossed off the calendar with a single stroke of a sharpie when someone dies. Event tickets returned, and names cancelled off utility bills and legal documents. One experiences a disrobing of sorts... you peel off your distinguishing title first, be it “daughter, spouse, mother, brother, sister... your connection to the deceased. Then you disengage yourself further as you fill out forms with your new status...

“single”, divorced or widowed”. You hate them all. You wish there was another box to check off like “decimated” because that is really how you feel. This recalibration is like losing one’s own identity....to become somebody we don’t know how to be-- and definitely don’t want to be! There is a learning curve to shopping and cooking for one, doing things alone, travelling with a group of strangers as opposed to the “couple ticket” you were accustomed to. By trying new things, though, we find that we do not have to remain constant to be accepted, purposeful or happy. Even water can be a liquid, then transformed to steam, or even to ice yet valuable in any one of its special properties. We, too, can change with circumstances and still remain relevant.

One death experience may end abruptly leaving us to write our own ending to the story much sooner than we wanted to. Another is like watching a movie in slow motion, where we can see what lies upon the horizon well in advance, but still can do nothing to stop the chain of events. Those caring for someone with a terminal illness know only too well the agony of anticipatory grief-



- having to sit idly by while things unfold as they will, all the while praying that the inevitable will not happen on their watch. Death comes in its own time; and our job is to acknowledge the chaos and turbulence it has created in our lives; and then to pull ourselves up from the fetal position, take a leap of faith-- venturing forward, without the hope, confidence or assurance that we wish we had to choose the right path. Should we go back to work early, or not at all? Change careers? Retire? Move? Sell the boat? Delay Marnie’s braces? The decisions are monumental when we are trying to decide what is needed for us to survive, and one day thrive, after a death.

Loss of a loved one leaves us with a horrific wound... as though we have had an amputation and lost a part of ourselves. Our nerve endings are exposed and raw and painful. There is always a phantom pain that radiates from our chest and other parts of our body that we cannot understand or control. After a long mourning period, one senses that the wound is no longer open for all to see. The emotional armour we put on after a loss is similar to scar tissue that covers





over the wound so that we will be protected from further injury. We never want to get close to anyone again or feel that kind of pain again. The thought of ever losing another human being that we love is unbearable; and we sometimes lock ourselves away, refusing to answer the door for weeks. We know that we are not ready to open it to greet the day, or welcome visitors, or let the light in, or provide an escape route for us to get out. It is too soon. It is too scary. It is too risky to be out and about, especially in such a vulnerable state. So we lock the door, barricading ourselves inside our shelter, and vow to stay isolated until we have some guarantee that things will be better from now on.

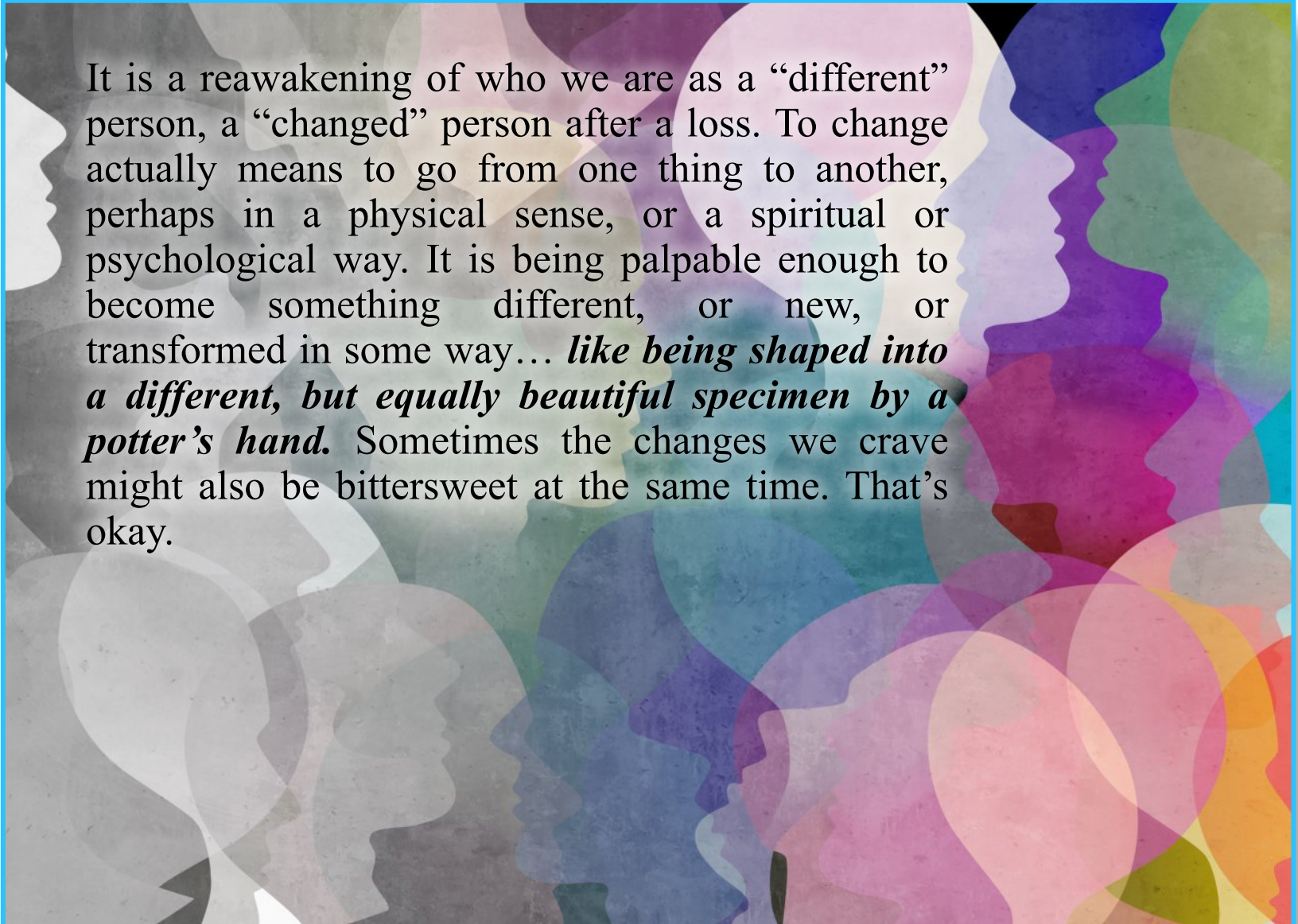
We want to change how we feel, yet we fear change at the same time. It reminds me of a famous painting called *The Light of the World* by an artist named William Holman Hunt. Those of a Christian faith may have seen the picture of Jesus standing and knocking on the outside of a door hoping to be allowed in. But the door in the picture has no handle and therefore can only be opened from the inside. This represents the stubborn, obstinate or closed mind. Others try to convince us of this:

“When one door closes, another often opens; but we often took so long and looked so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.”

-- Alexander Graham Bell

One must open the door and allow those opportunities or changes to come in before they are able to flourish or materialize. A co-worker may entice us into starting a new business venture. We may move to a new home. A new relationship may help us to step a little lighter knowing that somebody thinks we are pretty special. It may be a need for adventure... a social experiment of sorts, that has us searching for what is meaningful to us, what our purpose is, and how best to achieve the blueprint that we begin to create for ourselves and the legacy we wish to leave behind.





It is a reawakening of who we are as a “different” person, a “changed” person after a loss. To change actually means to go from one thing to another, perhaps in a physical sense, or a spiritual or psychological way. It is being palpable enough to become something different, or new, or transformed in some way... *like being shaped into a different, but equally beautiful specimen by a potter’s hand.* Sometimes the changes we crave might also be bittersweet at the same time. That’s okay.

For example, if and when you do decide to leave the family residence you shared with your spouse to now move to a condo or smaller place, there will be tears, many tears. Everything you touch will rip your heart open as you recall the day, the event, and the joy or heartache of each memory that took place in the house that you made your home. Sometimes you even remember the way their footsteps sounded on the hardwood as he/she made their way across the room. Everything that was broken or repaired by your loved one becomes a divine specimen. You may resurrect an old hammer from Ed’s tool kit and have framed on the wall, elevating that treasure by displaying it prominently. Suddenly it becomes a cherished art piece when it is given the grace and dignity it deserves.

CHANGE is often difficult when visited by guilt. If you want to try out a new diner one day, guilt may cause you to feel like you are trying to replace “our favourite hangout” or extinguish the memories of your loved one. If you can finally colour your hair now that your mom is no longer around to disapprove of your flaming red highlights, you may feel like throwing up when you first see yourself in the mirror. You love your new look, but know that mom would have hated you for “changing your beautiful, ebony locks that have been in the Bentley family for centuries.” No matter what we do as we go forward after a loss, we will subconsciously note how different things affect us now; and many will say that they don’t want anything else to change in their lives. The bereaved



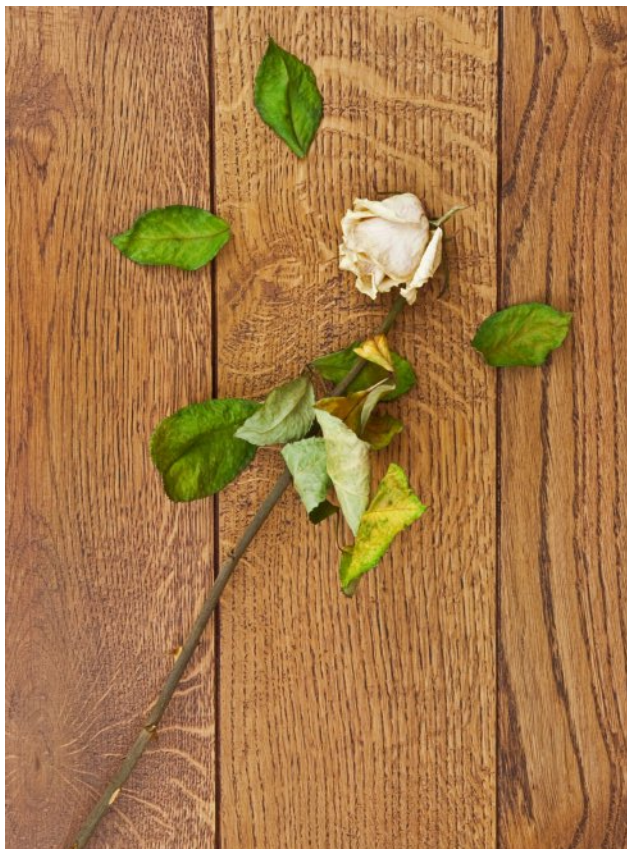
have already had more change than they can take. They feel like they are learning to eat again, with their non-dominant hand.... and making a holy mess of things. If a new friendship or relationship happens along, you may present yourself in a negative light, or be downright obstructionist in making sure that it goes nowhere. Those are the sorts of choices, good or bad, that you will have to make.

Change is always hard, but we only need to look at our changing seasons in Canada to teach us that its all good. Fall seems to be a dismal time of year, when leaves are falling, and everything lush and green prepares for dormancy, yet the kaleidoscope of colours we see is stunning. Winter brings the most beautiful picturesque landscapes we could ever imagine and an opportunity to look inward, cocoon, and be alone with our memories. Spring is a time of rebirth for all that once appeared to have lost its life, and of course, we see summer as a time to bask in the sunlight and warmth after a cold winter. Maybe we just have to decide what type of person we want to be...and how that might affect how we see and encounter change in our own lives.



“The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.”

-- William Arthur Ward



It takes some time to realize that there are a few options open to the bereaved. One can make the decision to live their best life going forward, or one can choose to live their best life in the past, for as long as he/she can remember it. We have to consider, though, what we might be missing out on if we choose the latter. For example, one day you may find that you enjoy the company of an elderly neighbour, perhaps, when your own dad is no longer around to “shoot the breeze with”. Imagine the inter-generational friendships one can enjoy if we open our hearts and minds to those possibilities. So much living awaits us, but it is difficult to entertain that thought when you are in utter sorrow and despair. Life can be richer, less chaotic, and more meaningful for elderly folks who have lost a life partner if they have a companion or dear friends to share their time with. They know the fragility of life, no longer have the responsibilities and tasks of child-rearing as they once did, and they appreciate every second they have, and have learned over the years not to “sweat the small stuff”. More often than not, human beings tend to congregate together to have that social interaction with others. Living in apartments, seniors’ residences, or gated



subdivisions where a sense of family and community are key to their wellbeing and happiness. Only you can decide what shape your future will take after the initial shock of grief has dissipated a wee bit. And whatever door we choose to open next, it will be much easier to walk through it, if there is some curiosity and joyful anticipation in NOT knowing for sure what adventures may be on the other side of it. Everyone leans towards something that resonates with their soul; and it may be yoga, meditation, volunteer work, a passionate hobby, making new friends, travelling, social activism, or a million other things that might bring peace and purpose to your days. Being the neighbourhood “good fairy” has long been an easy and rewarding role for some. Putting a little box of tea in someone’s mailbox after a hospital stay, or planting an extra petunia in a pretty pot for a lonely fellow with only a tiny table and single chair might bring much joy. It is the little things that can fill another’s cup when they may need it the most, while returning a full heart and purpose to ourselves. So everyone wins!

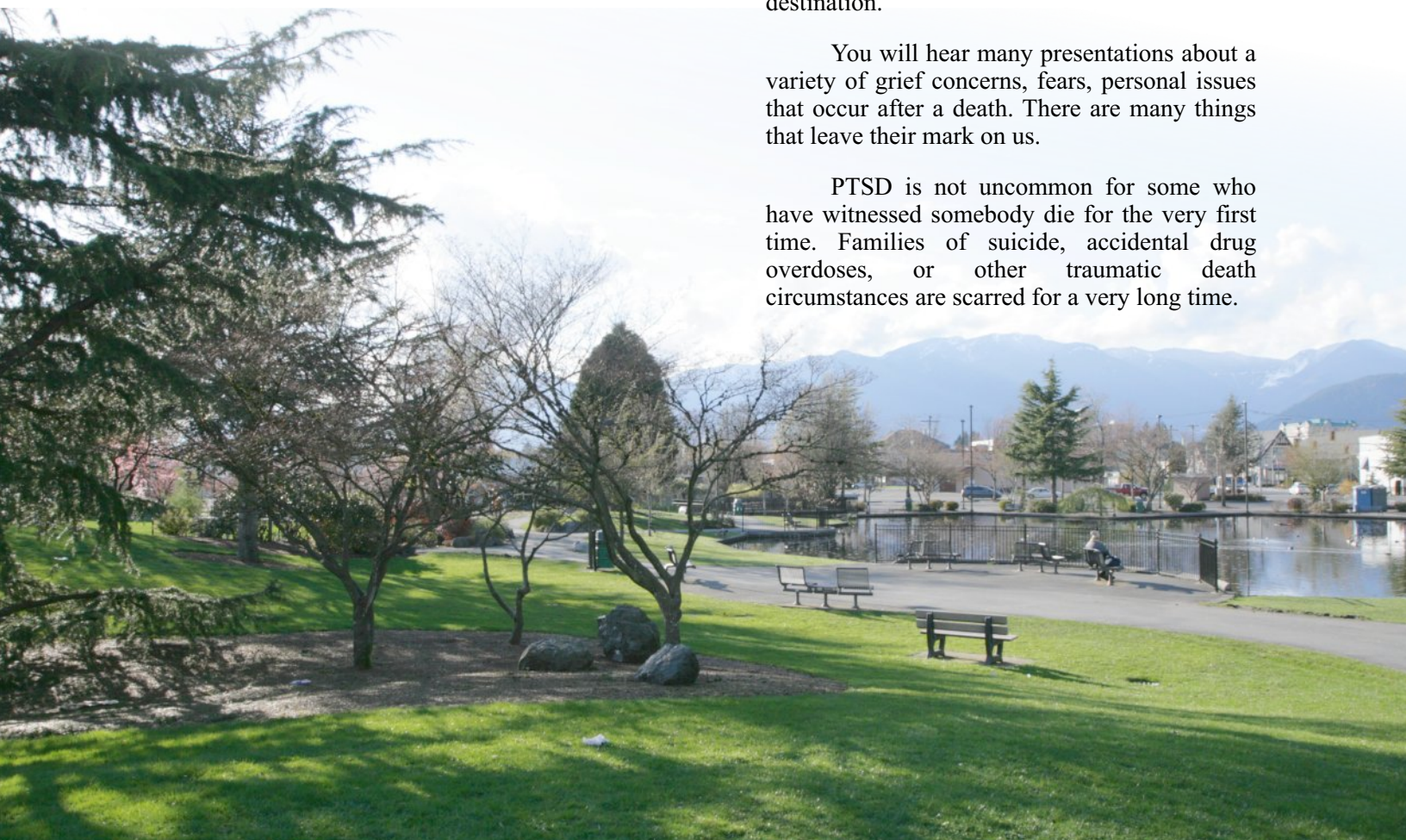
When you decide to open your mind to the possibility of Life after Loss, you will be apprehensive about what is on the other side of that.

That’s how you may feel when you come to a Links support meeting for the very first time. “Who will be there? Will they like me? Can I leave the room if I start to cry? Will there be any men there who are as upset as I am?” You need to know that confidentiality, compassion, inclusiveness, empathy, professionalism and friendship create a safe, welcoming environment for you to come and share your story, to celebrate the love you shared, to take home some innovative ways to cope with your grief, and most of all, to have a gentle place to come and park your grief periodically, so that you can feel your sadness lift once it is shared with others.

Nobody wants to venture outside of their comfort zone, particularly when they are deeply grieving, nor be asked to commit to premature “wellness” before they have properly and adequately grieved and mourned as they must. You should be allowed to captain your own grief canoe and only you know when the journey upstream requires more than one person rowing with you to get you safely to your destination.

You will hear many presentations about a variety of grief concerns, fears, personal issues that occur after a death. There are many things that leave their mark on us.

PTSD is not uncommon for some who have witnessed somebody die for the very first time. Families of suicide, accidental drug overdoses, or other traumatic death circumstances are scarred for a very long time.



Caregivers and loved ones of palliative and chronically ill patients struggle to find ways and means to fill the many hours in a day that were preoccupied with caring for the deceased when they were infirm or hospitalized. Some folks come with a specific need; some want nothing more than to be in the company of others who “might understand what I am going through”.

It is the mission of those around the table and their facilitator to try and make presentations general enough to provide everyone with something they can take home from the meeting, but focused enough to address specific issues that arise with different death scenarios.

So it is important not to throw your hands up in despair if you come to your first meeting and find that the topic of the evening did not specifically address your particular situation. Continuity and attendance are key in providing you with the best possible support and outcome... the more you attend, the more you learn, and the better you will begin to feel.

Time is a healer, but I would be delusional if I said that time will get rid of all your sorrow, forever. It will not... things will become easier over time, and you will discover which coping mechanisms work best for you, but you may always carry some of your sorrow with you representative of the love you shared.... and that is the scar that even time cannot erase.

In fact, it becomes like a badge of honour confirming that you once deeply loved someone, and were so loved in return that saying good-bye was the hardest thing you have ever done. That is the type of relationship that everyone craves to have at least once in a lifetime.

“No matter how much suffering you went through, you never want to let go of those memories.”

-- Haruki Murakami







Going forward with life after loss is like learning to spend more time looking through the windshield rather than the rear-view mirror. We all want to see what lies behind us, but it is more important to look ahead and make the right choices as we journey forward. With increased vaccinations and lifting of restrictions, there will be ample opportunities for you to seek help again within a group setting, in person. I hope that you will find the strength and the confidence to re-establish the relationships you made prior to the shutdowns at Links. For newcomers, it is my wish that you will be patient, trusting the process and those chosen to companion you through your own grief journey.

You all know that grief can be messy, turbulent, unpredictable, and gut-wrenchingly painful. But it is necessary to pave the way to wellbeing until we can find appropriate ways to honour our loved ones with love and pride, instead of unrelenting sadness.

And so we often feel the need to keep those memories alive in some special way. This memorialization can be repeated as often as you like on anniversaries and any special days that you feel warrant the inclusion of your loved one in a special way...like a dedicated cake table at a wedding to honour the bride's dad, or a memorial mass for the deceased on their birthday, or a scholarship honouring the "most improved student" at your son's school.

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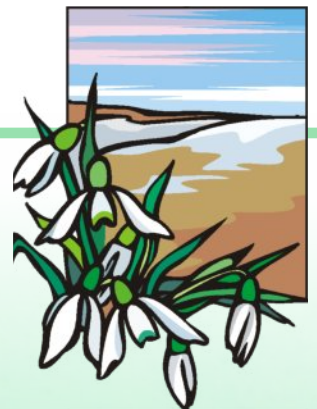
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*I came alone;  
I left connected.*

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We all experience constant change in our lives, and I am no exception.

After so many years of serving as a Board member and doing double-duty as facilitator for the Links support group, the time has come for me to step aside making way for fresh ideas and new faces who can usher you into the post-Covid decade. What began as a commitment to “help Carolyn for a year or two” evolved into much more; and somehow my “best before” expiry dates kept magically renewing year after year! So...many of you know my “dearly beloved” has taken over many domestic duties since he quit working, but I realize I can not let things go on any longer. His unbridled passion, commitment and curiosity with Pinterest’s housekeeping hints for purging and re-organizing are in dire need of a firm, wagging finger. I have only a small window of opportunity left to re-establish some basic boundaries and to reiterate Carol’s Rules & Regulations for what “used to be” my kitchen, garden, pantry, or lady’s side of the garage.....before.... (in the words of Comedian, Russell Peters) “SOMEBODY’S GONNA GET A HURT REAL BAD!” (Insert smile here!)

I wish that silly story was the “real reason” for deciding to finally “retire”. (I still can’t say that word out-loud!) However, serious issues require serious commitments; and I know that you will understand my desire to now be on the “home front” as several family members struggle with health issues, facing numerous surgeries and the like. As the saying goes, “once a mother, always a mother!” still holds true, so I know you will understand. Decisions are only difficult until you make them; then one realizes that when there are good reasons for doing something, we can be at peace in knowing it is the right thing-- at the right time.

Navigating our SABF grief train with so many wonderful passengers has been an honour and a privilege; and even though we met under the saddest of circumstances, we emerged “connected” in ways that forever cement relationships. I cherish all the friendships made at SABF and will recall fondly the love and support that highlighted our time together. Every single person has touched my heart in a special way; and I thank you for trusting me to hold your stories sacred. We have laughed and cried together; so it seems fitting that retirement, too, should have bittersweet moments of both joy and sadness. In the simple, but eloquent words of Dr. Seuss, I have chosen his little quote for my own “moving forward” mantra....

***“Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened”.***

I do.... and I will!

Warmest Wishes Always,

Carol Dickson

