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## *Living with Holes*



I did a lot of talking to myself in the days, weeks and months after Sandy died. It wasn't just that I was lonely, but I had to somehow reason my way through each day. I was the only one available who I could reason with. What time should I get up? Should I be getting up later or earlier? What will I eat? Better yet, where will I eat? Where should I live? My head was swimming with simple questions for which I had no answers. I was in unknown territory.

I read the books on grief people had given me. Rather, I devoured those books. I was

desperately searching for answers, especially answers that would end my struggle. Mostly what I found were clinical descriptions of things I already knew. But where was the answer that would make my life better, remove my misery and take away my grief? My search seemed hopeless.

I made many efforts to right my emotional ship that had been capsized. During one of those “self-discussions” I reasoned, “Since all my children and grandchildren live in Indiana, perhaps I should also be there.” I would soon be visiting my kids for Christmas, which would give me a chance to find a place to live. Moving was definitely an option for my future, but in the meantime I had to deal with the daily feeling of “holes” in my life.

As I prayed about this emptiness, I had a vision of a jigsaw puzzle made up of pink pieces and blue pieces. This puzzle was the life that Sandy and I had lived together and created together. It was a thirty-seven-year incomplete work in progress. I remembered how we struggled to fit the pieces together. As a young married couple we had no idea what we were doing. We just prayed that we could tolerate each other and that our love

for one another and our faith in God would be enough to allow us to discover what this puzzle might become.

In the beginning we even tried forcing the pieces together, each of us confident they would fit and each of us frustrated that they did not. When the puzzle pieces did not easily fit, this seemed to reflect our strong wills and the need for each of us to have our own way. Stressful as it was from day to day to keep our marriage strong, life became even more difficult with the arrival of children. There was never enough money, and the loss of our 2-year-old son Bradley almost exhausted our ability to continue working together. We just kept on, however, believing that our marriage, our family and all our tomorrows were part of a bigger picture. Along the way, we began to talk about our dreams for the future. We caught a glimpse of what those dreams might be, and started longing for them to become a reality. We dreamed about an opportunity for Sandy to do graduate studies and develop her caring skills and use them as a chaplain. In midlife she did return to school by enrolling in seminary and working on the dream. Even this step (a puzzle piece) put excitement into our

marriage. I agreed to support her in her new career as she had done for me over the many years I had spent as a pastor and missionary. The pieces began fitting together more easily. There was enthusiasm in our voices when we spoke of the possibilities for our tomorrows.

In the midst of all this excitement, Sandy and I were both diagnosed with cancer, and few months later she was gone. All the pink pieces from our life puzzle were removed in an instant. I found myself staring (in my mind) at the puzzle we had spent thirty-seven years creating. The puzzle we called “our life together,” our dream. Yet all I could see were the holes. I had thoughts of being in a dark cave and hearing a voice whispering over and over again, “It’s gone, it’s gone, it’s gone. Your dreams are gone.” I didn’t want to believe that everything we had hoped for and planned to achieve was gone. After all, it took us years of hard work and tears to get to the place where we could even form that vision, and give shape to our dream. I tried to explain this to a friend who asked me, “What is a hole?”

I thought for a moment about how I could describe what I was experiencing. This is what came to mind. For all of our years of

marriage I was the first one up in the morning. I was the morning person and Sandy was the night person. One of my first morning tasks was to make coffee. I fixed one cup of black coffee for me and a cup with cream for her. It was my ritual, a morning offering of love to my wife. As I went in to arouse her from her sleep, I would kiss her on the cheek and say, "Good morning honey." I would leave the cup of coffee on the nightstand by the bed or sometimes on the bathroom vanity, where she would find it while preparing to face the day.

One morning two weeks after Sandy died, I found myself making her a cup of coffee. I had finished stirring the cream and set the spoon on the counter. With the cup in my hand I felt a rush of wind strike me that brought me back to my new reality. I set the cup on the counter and began to weep, feeling my loss anew all over again. This, my friends, is a "hole."

In early December, about six weeks after Sandy died, I went to the mailbox to pick up the mail. When I came back to the apartment, I sat down at the dining table to read the mail. By this time I had already received lots of Christmas cards. They were piled on

the table in front of me where I had left them. It suddenly dawned on me, “Am I supposed to send out Christmas cards?” I had never done that before. It was Sandy’s joy to interact with our friends and family at Christmastime. She was thoughtful, and enjoyed such details of our life together. I gasped for air, unable to even talk to myself. What I had encountered was another “hole” in my life. I began to weep again, remembering the many times she had chatted to me about the people she sent cards or letters to.

It was my dear sweet 85-year-old mother who came to my rescue. She had been alone for thirteen years since my dad’s death. Mom was a kind of grief guru for me. She left her small apartment in western Tennessee to rescue her only son, who was drowning in sorrow. To complicate matters, I was still undergoing chemotherapy for the Burkitt lymphoma I was battling. I had no appetite, and spent much of my time throwing up whatever I had eaten. Mom’s mothering instincts kicked in. This was what she was born to do. So I let her take over.

After all these years living away from Mom, I had forgotten that we might need ground rules for living together. My mom,

who weighed all of 80 pounds, didn't seem like a drill instructor for my grief boot camp—but she was. When I said that I could not eat, she responded with, “Oh yes, you will!” On one occasion she brought me toast with peanut butter on a piece of paper towel. I objected by telling her that I had dishes we could use. Her response to me was, “I eat my toast on a paper towel and you can eat yours that way, too.” Mom was in charge.

The next afternoon, she sat beside me at the table, again coaxing me to eat. With a serious look on her face she said, “Son, there is something I have to tell you.” I was sure it had to do with my ashen face, or the 50 pounds I had lost, or my grief or at least my loneliness. But she caught me off guard. She said, “Son, you know that I live alone.” I answered, “Yes, Mom, I do.”

“Well,” she went on, “sometimes I leave the bathroom door open. I don't want you to look inside. I might be naked. And I look like a plucked chicken.”

Mom has since joined Dad in heavenly places, along with Sandy and our son Bradley. I am sure Mom is laughing as I retell this story.