

# 8/25/2024 Aging Well Seminar: Life after Losing a Loved One: Where do we go from here? (Final Edited)

Panelist: Louise Blevins, Nancy Kirk, Bob Goedjen, Laurel Smith (moderator), Michael Miller

A short intro from each of the panelists

- Laurel Smith has been with SFC since 1965 and she used to serve as Director of Seniors Ministries and Congregational Care from 1993 to 2002. Laurel is very familiar with widowhood. Laurel's mother became a widow when she was 4 years old. Laurel married three times - her second husband died from Parkinson's and Dementia, and her third husband died from cancer.
- Michael Miller lost his father during COVID in 2020.
- Nancy Kirk lost her grandmother when she was a senior in high school (Nancy was practically raised by her grandmother). Nancy's mom died at age 56 from brain tumor; Nancy's husband George died 6 months after a car accident. Nancy is currently caregiving to an aunt in Texas.
- Bob Goedjen lost his wife of 64 years from pancreatic cancer 4 years ago. She was in hospice care for 5 months. Many years ago, Bob lost a 4-year old daughter from leukemia.
- Louise Blevins lost her husband Jim to Parkinson's.

Q: What are the things that you wish you had know about losing someone close to you?

- Laurel: Self care is extremely important - you want to anticipate what to know and what to do to mitigate trauma. We all want facts and reality check. But when dealing with the self-care situation, there's a part of denial - same as people putting off healthcare directive or durable power of attorney. People generally don't do good in self-care.
- Louise: Husband Jim had a long term illness Parkinson's and cannot walk fast. Louise however felt entitled to walk at normal speed and she wish she had discovered this "shocking" self entitlement sooner. After husband passed away, Louise was totally caught off guard of "the years of the first" - first Thanksgiving, first Christmas, etc. Yet at the same time, adult children are looking to her for leadership in time of grief. Prayers work!!
- Michael: Mom passed away 5 years before dad. Wish to know the process of letting go, and better readiness with durable power of attorney, healthcare directive, etc. Wish he had known options when dealing with emergency situation, e.g. call [911](#) or not. "Something to think about and talk to family member about beforehand".
- Nancy: Husband George almost lost his eyesight from the car accident. In hindsight, Nancy felt that she was too focused on George's eyesight, and wished she had known more about brain condition, which ultimately led to Geroge's death. George was a psychiatric social worker. He voiced that any traumatic experience could have serious repercussions during the first year. Nancy wished she had read and recognized symptoms indicating George's condition was worsening and reported this to doctors.

Q: What kind of self care do you do now or wish you had done?

- Nancy: Six months after George passed, Nancy needed to get away. She booked a trip to Canada. She continues to travel for significant dates, their birthdays, anniversaries, etc. Aunt wanted to come visit right when Nancy lost George and she also pushed Nancy for a funeral service. Nancy wasn't ready at the time, so decided not to go along with Aunt's urgings. "Might get a lot of family pressure to do things a certain way. Follow your heart!"
- Louise: Louise was Jim's primary caregiver for a very long time. Over time, this had diminished Louise' role as a wife. To help, Louise brought in professional caregivers and this had helped a lot. Louise can again resume the role of a loving wife. After Jim passed away, Louise realized that years of caregiving had suppressed her own needs, as she ceased having a bucket list and she ceased thinking about the future all together. Every day was about getting through the day. "Wish I would have kept a bucket list alive!"
- Laurel: Laurel lost her 17-year old son to a sudden and unexpected death while jogging. For a long time, she lived in fear and was just waiting for terrible things to happen. She was afraid of losing anything that has an emotional connection - "what's going to be the next thing that happens"? From her counsellor: "Maybe the worst had happened". Need to tap into God and Faith to know that she is not alone and that she can cope.
- Michael: It's important to reframe what happened as a caregiver. As problem solver, a caregiver is expected to make things better. However, we often lose sight that we don't have full control. To self help, we need to draw back and realize things are not all in our control and it's okay. "Give yourself permission to let go."
- Bob: If you have the possibility of hiring a caregiver, it takes a network before finding such person to be part of your household. Do the advanced work; ask friends for referrals. Nancy chimed in and commented that she did exactly that advanced research for both her aunt and herself!

Q: What did you find most helpful in adjusting to your new role?

- Nancy: Nancy knew that she needed therapy immediately. She needed someone "objective, neutral, professional, and trustworthy." Nancy later added that exercise with others became very important, and she joined a running group. "I need people in my life!!"
- Louise: Louise was married to a psychologist, so they really believed in the power of counseling. Today Louise is still seeing her couple counsellor Becky. As Jim's Parkinson's disease progressed, his way of communication changed and to Louise it sounded like her ex-husband's abusive language. Becky was really helpful in explaining and defusing the situation. Over time, Louise got into the habit of instantaneous prayer when Jim said something hurtful and God helped Louise become more compassionate.
- Michael: Caregiving for parents became a role reversal at different pace. "The situation created that and that's not who we are." Forgiveness is so powerful!

## Q: How to honor our loved ones?

- Laurel: "By doing what I do as long as I can do it!"
- Nancy: George was a comedian and he was a total extrovert. "By becoming more like him." Nancy became active in the community. She would ask people over for coffee and didn't expect reciprocation. Nancy told the story of George inviting a newly met German couple to their home. Many years later, when Nancy met a lady from NYC at an oil change, she asked the woman to come over for tea and they have been best friend ever since.
- Michael: "Through this (Care for Aging) group. Take on his hobby (gardening)."
- Someone from the audience: The person lost his wife of 67 years last September. They lost a child during pregnancy and they lost their second child when she was 14 years old due to a serious heart disease. As the person remembered, "we were childless and struggling. We went through many churches." The person honored his wife by hanging her portrait from the memorial service in the house, and speak to her whenever he passes the portrait.
- Someone from the audience - The person lost his dad when he was 11. Being in the house where he grew up in, dad loves to get together with friends. The person honors his dad by inviting his small group to play pool in the basement of the house. Carrying on social tradition.
- Louise: Parkinson's patients' voice will get softer and softer and movement slower. People talking to Jim will automatically switch to Louise, and when Louise noticed this, she made a commitment to turn back to Jim and wait patiently for him to respond, in order to make sure he doesn't become "invisible". When interacting with adult children, ask the question "how would Jim want it done?" Do things his way.
- Someone from the audience: The person lost her husband 5 years ago. He died on the 7th of the month. Do something special on that day!

## Q: Closing Thoughts

- Someone from the audience: The person gave an example of a spouse being terminally ill and being cared for in a facility. It's extremely exhausting as the person is always in first responder mode, and is hearing conflicting stories about detachment, for example, how much visit is too much? Is the person not allowing the spouse to detach if visiting too frequently? The person was told by the facility not to visit every weekend and not to FaceTime every night, but that doesn't feel this is right. Laurel, a panelist, responded: "Detachment doesn't mean neglect. Other people are well meaning but they don't walk in your shoes. You don't want to have regrets. Follow your heart and do what pleases you not others. Detachment means you don't have any premeditated expectation on how he would behave a certain way. Trust yourself and trust God. Get a helper to go with you."
- Louise: To Louise, it was a crisis of faith. The grief was suffocating. "I wanted to throw up from crying. How is Jim in heaven not crying or grieving? It's funny now, but it was a crisis of faith. It's okay now."
- Nancy: Nancy used to dread driving home to an empty house with no sound. She decided to turn on the radio or TV before leaving the house to have some sounds to come home to. But

she couldn't listen to the same music they shared, so she switched to country music and is loving it!! To cope, Nancy started keeping a diary and writing to George as if talking to him. "This helped a lot!"

- Peggy Beck: As coordinator of grief ministry, Peggy will be running a 4-week grief workshop (loss of any kind) in October (Sunday afternoons). More info and sign up at: <https://saratogafederated.org/grief-ministry/>.