

A grayscale photograph of a woman's face and hand is overlaid on a vibrant field of multi-colored wildflowers. The woman's face is in the upper left, looking directly at the viewer with a somber expression. Her hand is raised, palm facing forward, in the center of the frame. The wildflowers, in shades of yellow, purple, and white, fill the bottom half of the image.

Lesbian **WIDOWS** Invisible Grief

Vicky Whipple

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This book is dedicated to MC
with gratitude for the time we shared.

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Preface

This book is based on a qualitative research study that I conducted as a participant-observer. Being a participant-observer means that I did this research and wrote this book as an insider. That is, I was a lesbian widow interviewing other lesbian widows. In qualitative research, objectivity is not the goal, and I most definitely was not able to be impartial about collecting widows' stories and writing this book. As a participant-observer, I was not emotionally removed from the topic, and I brought my own personal experience to the research.

Since I am a college professor, I went through appropriate channels at my university to obtain official sanction to conduct research using human subjects. All of the subsequent participants signed an informed consent form allowing me to use the information they sent me in this book, in journal articles, and in presentations at conferences. In this document I explained what I was doing and how I would use a pseudonym to protect their privacy if they wished. I also informed them of the risks involved, the primary one being that writing about the death of their partner would probably be emotionally stressful. But I also suggested that the benefits of participating would outweigh the risks. It could be cathartic for them as well as helpful to other lesbians who were widowed. Jane e-mailed me, saying, "Thank you for your work and the opportunity to possibly help others. You are right to say that the process of filling out the questionnaire is somewhat healing. Certainly it is thought-provoking."

I advertised in *Lesbian Connection* and other resources, asking for lesbian widows willing to complete a questionnaire or be interviewed about their experiences. Women contacted me mainly by e-mail, but also by telephone and letter. With the majority I engaged in at least one, and often several, interactions. Over the course of a year, I received responses from sixty-two women from all over the United States. In the end, twenty-four women, living in thirteen different states, followed through and completed a questionnaire.

One of the first women who contacted me happened to live only a couple of hours away from me, so I asked her if I could interview her

in person. She had already written out her answers but agreed to the interview. I thought that the more women I could interview in person or by phone, the better. I was surprised to find otherwise. After interviewing Maureen, I transcribed the tape and discovered that she had basically told me verbally what she had already written. Plus, the interview had taken a great deal of time since we kept going off on tangents. I also found myself emotionally drained by the encounter.

In addition to this experience of interviewing one widow in person, I found that when I offered the opportunity to be interviewed, the women who contacted me preferred to write their responses to the questionnaire or to make audiotapes of their answers. No one wanted to be interviewed in person, I think because they knew it would be too emotional for them. I had a graduate student assist me with transcribing some of the tapes sent to me, and she said that the women on the tapes kept stopping and crying. Although relying on written or taped responses created some problems, that is, not everyone answered every question, I believe each widow shared the essence of her experience and what she thought might be helpful to others.

I invited participants to answer five general questions in their own words. Based on Seidman's (1991) guidelines for phenomenological interviewing, I first asked them to tell me the story of their relationship so that I might have a sense of the context in which they had lived together. (Thus, the internal validity or consistency of the research was enhanced.) I asked them to tell me about the illness, if any, and death of their partner. I wanted to know about their own grief journey afterward, including what or who helped them and what or who was not helpful. I asked how long it had been since their partner had died and where they thought they were now emotionally in the grief recovery process. Finally, I wanted to know what they believed they had learned from this experience and what advice they might give to others in the same situation.

I deliberately chose to let participants answer each question with as much or as little information as they wished, believing that they would share what was most important to them. For example, I did not ask specifically about the ethnicity of these lesbian widows, and only one, born in a South American country, mentioned it. I have assumed that meant that everyone else was white. Regarding the ethnicity of deceased partners, one widow described her partner as "Tex-Mex" and another had a partner from South America. My assumption,

again, would be that the remainder were white. That assumption, however, may be incorrect.

My former partner was only forty-six years old when she died, highly respected in her profession, well-loved by family and friends. The ages of the partners of the women who contacted me ranged from thirty to sixty-nine at the time of their deaths, the majority in their fifties when they died. I was fifty-two at the time of my partner's death. The ages of the other widows in this book ranged from twenty-nine to sixty-six years old, with the majority in their forties. Thus, part of what we share in this book is the pain of being widowed too young, and of having a lover who died in the prime of life. My speculation is that lesbians who were older (over seventy-five years of age) and whose partners died at an older age did not contact me because they had lived their lives in the closet. Even though they were guaranteed confidentiality, they were uncomfortable talking about their lives openly. But that is only guesswork on my part.

Of the twenty-four widows who shared their stories in this book, five experienced the sudden, unexpected death of their partner. One was shot; one died in a car accident; one had a massive heart attack; another a cerebral hemorrhage; and one died in her sleep. The remainder, like me, had a partner who died slowly of an illness or complications from surgery. Fourteen of the nineteen partners in the latter category died of some form of cancer.

In asking about their relationship, I identified the length of time each couple had spent together prior to the death of one partner. There was a range of five months to thirty-seven years. Yet it seemed to me that the amount of time that lesbian partners had spent together did not seem to make a difference in the amount of anguish that was experienced. Many survivors used a term such as *soul mate* to speak of their deceased life partner, indicating the depth of the connection they felt. One widow had been partnered for only five months but felt that she had lost the love of her life. Only eight of the twenty-four relationships, one-third, had lasted less than five years. Emily and I had been together nearly seven years, and the majority of women in this book had spent from six to twenty years together as a couple. Three relationships had lasted over thirty years: thirty-seven, thirty-two, and thirty-one years respectively. Thus the stories in this book involve women in long-term, deeply committed relationships.

The amount of time that had elapsed since the partner's death was also varied. I discouraged women who had been widowed less than a year from answering the questionnaire because their feelings were still so raw. But three women who had been widowed less than a year insisted on participating anyway. Three more wrote after having been widowed for less than two years. An additional eleven had been widowed from two to five years, and three more from six to ten years. There were four widows for whom there was a considerable time lapse: twelve, thirteen, fifteen, and seventeen years respectively. I had anticipated that the greater the amount of time since the death of the partner, the less emotional their answers to the questionnaire would sound. But I was wrong. Those whose partner had passed away more than ten years previously may have provided less detail about the circumstances of the partner's death, but I could still hear the pain of the experience in what they wrote.

An interesting discovery I made as I read these women's stories was that, like me, one-fourth of those who responded had experienced the death of another significant person in their life around the same time that their partner died. Some, like me, had lost a parent; one had a child who had died in the previous year; and another lost a sister. This double loss complicated our grief recovery (Worden, 2002). In my case, although I missed my mother, it was more than two years after Emily's death before I began truly mourning the loss of my mother.

Another remarkable finding was that half of the widows who contacted me or their deceased partners (forty-eight women altogether) had previously been married. One of the reasons that I felt I needed to include the stories of other widows in this book was that I had previously been married and had children and grandchildren. I thought my story would be different from those of other lesbians. I had not anticipated that so many other widows or their deceased partners would have been previously married.

I make no claim that the experiences shared in this book are representative of all lesbians. That is not the purpose of qualitative research, for one thing. Another consideration is that the lesbian community in general is quite diverse, as noted in [Chapter 15](#), "For Professionals." In addition, the majority of widows who contacted me responded to one of my ads in *Lesbian Connection*. A few heard about the ads from friends who received *Lesbian Connection*. One

woman responded to a solicitation on a professional LISTSERV mailing list, and one responded after personal contact at a Golden Threads festival. This is not a scientific random survey of participants and, therefore, represents only that segment of lesbian widows who received information about my project, decided to respond, and then followed through by signing the informed consent document and completing the questionnaire.

Although I did not begin to formally analyze the data (the participants' answers to my questionnaire) until all questionnaires were completed, by then I had already noticed, as I read their stories, that the patterns and themes emerging indicated many commonalities. This, plus my discovery that these themes were echoed in grief books, helped to affirm the external validity of this research (Seidman, 1991). I have organized the chapters to reflect themes that I noticed in our stories.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of this project, followed by Chapter 2, which opens with my personal story of shock at being told that Emily had a terminal illness. I then relate the stories of the five lesbians whose partner died unexpectedly and the shock they experienced when they were told that their partner had passed away. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 include the stories of the remaining nineteen widows whose partner died after a period of illness. Chapter 3 explores the sense of continued disbelief after a partner was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Chapter 4 shares the stories of five women who became involved with lesbians who already had a long-term illness, and Chapter 5 is devoted to describing the time that widows spent taking care of their partner before she died, including the emotional and physical exhaustion of being a caretaker.

In Chapter 6, you will find stories of what we experienced in the last moments of our lover's life, while in Chapter 7 we share the creative ways we designed funerals or memorial services. Chapter 8 describes how painful the first few months after our partner's death were for us. In Chapter 9, I recount where we found comfort and support, while Chapter 10 relates three areas that complicated our recovery: legal hassles, the lack of professional support services, and the lack of written materials specifically for lesbians. Chapter 11 gives an overview of our experiences within the first two years after our partner died, the time when the pain of our loss was most intense. Chapter 12 contains information about what it was like to find a new love and

the difficulties we faced in beginning a new relationship. In [Chapter 13](#), we share our perspectives on grief from the sixth month through the seventeenth year after a partner's death. [Chapter 14](#) includes advice to family and friends about what they can do to be supportive of us in our grief recovery process. [Chapter 15](#) is directed to professionals.

I and the twenty-four widows who graciously contributed their experience to this book hope that sharing our stories is a source of comfort and guidance to those who unfortunately join us on this pilgrimage of grief, as well as a resource of information for the families, friends, and professionals who support them.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation to the twenty-four widows who entrusted me with their stories and contributed to this book. Having experienced the pain of being widowed and finding no written resources specifically for lesbians, you agreed with me that a book needed to be written. Thank you for making that possible.

My deep gratitude goes to Carolyn and Diana. Not only were you part of my support system during and after Em's death, but also, from the moment I mentioned writing a book, you have been supportive and encouraging. Thank you also, Carolyn, for giving me early feedback as I began writing the book. My thanks too to Juanita for reading my first draft and giving me feedback.

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I am grateful to Reverend Linda and partner Toni for their unending support. I would also like to thank my HOWLs (Hilarious Older Wiser Lesbians) friends and my women's spirituality group. You helped me rebuild my life, and I appreciate your friendship. My gratitude, as well as that of many other lesbian widows in this book, goes to the Hospice Foundation of America. You were the one organization who recognized our pain and did what you could to support us. In particular, I want to thank my hospice volunteer, Sue Hardy, for listening to and befriending me during one of the darkest hours of my life.

I am so grateful for your love and support, Carole (pseudonym). You helped me discover that I could love again and have been unfailing in your encouragement as I have labored on this book. And last, but certainly not least, I want to thank Kathy Nedrow. We have known each other since first grade, and I could not ask for a better friend. Thank you.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

While the rest of the country celebrated the arrival of a new millennium on December 31, 1999, I was at home wondering if I was going to have to rush Emily to the emergency room of the hospital again. She had been complaining about stomach pain and difficulty eating for several months, but doctors could not figure out why. She was scheduled to be admitted into the hospital for some procedures after the holidays, but that New Year's Eve she was in so much pain that we cancelled our plans to get together with friends and hoped that we would soon have some answers.

A few days later, I was sitting in a hospital waiting room when the surgeon walked in to inform us that Emily had cancer, a deadly form of stomach cancer. Life expectancy? Less than a year. Words cannot describe what I felt in that moment: *This can't be happening; I must be dreaming. Somebody wake me up.* But this was the beginning of a ten-month nightmare of watching Em waste away and die.

This sense of shock, this feeling of living in a nightmare, was emphasized to me over and over by the other women who share their stories in this book. It was a central, defining moment in my life and theirs. In my situation, losing Em was the beginning of a series of life-changing experiences. One month after her death, I moved out of our home to a new location, and three weeks later my mother passed away unexpectedly. At that point I had been a professional counselor for sixteen years and a counselor educator for two. I had training in grief counseling and had worked with two lesbians who had lost their partners. One was still experiencing posttraumatic stress ten years after her lover was killed in a hate crime. The other had actually experienced the death of two partners, one in a tragic accident and one from cancer. But all that textbook learning and professional experience did not prepare me to face the pain of the death of two of the most important people in my life.

Shirley, one of the widows whose stories are included in this book, made a similar comment. She is a social worker in a nursing home.

Isn't it strange how we work with death and dying daily (I do anyway with the geriatric population) and yet when it pertains to our personal life, we are unable to know what to do or how to do it?

THE DECISION TO WRITE

I was fortunate to find support services through my local hospice to help me deal with my grief. I also read many books from their library but soon realized that no book about lesbian widows existed. I began to think about writing one myself. However, I felt that just sharing my personal story would not be enough to create a book that was meaningful to other lesbians who had been widowed, so I advertised for lesbian widows willing to complete a questionnaire or be interviewed about their experiences. When women responded, they wanted to know why I was looking for lesbian widows and what I was going to do with the information. They would express their sympathy when they heard that I had recently been widowed. Some offered me comfort and advice. For example, when I e-mailed Pat to apologize for not responding to her sooner, I explained that I had just gone through the first anniversary of Emily's death and that it had been a very difficult time for me. She e-mailed back:

I know that each passing anniversary of Emily's death will be different for you. Difficult but different. You will always miss her, but it does get easier on a day-to-day basis. Betty has been gone now for three years, and I regularly marvel at how drastically my life has changed.

Many widows also commented to me that it felt wonderful to talk to someone who really understood what they had gone through. Most had never met another lesbian who had been widowed. Every single one was excited about my writing a book. They too had discovered that there were hardly any resources available to lesbians on this subject. A few of them had even considered writing their own book but had found it emotionally too difficult to do. So they cheered me on, anxious to see the results.

BOOK PARTICIPANTS

I changed the names of all the women who participated in this project except for the five who gave me permission to use their real names: Beverly, Irene, Lois, Shirley, and Joy. For me personally, what I share about myself is true, but Emily (pseudonym) was not out when she was alive, except to a select group of lesbian friends, and I believe it would dishonor her memory to out her now. I have, therefore, disguised information about her. I have also given my current partner the pseudonym Carole to protect her privacy.

Any woman, straight or gay, who is widowed experiences a great deal of emotional pain from the loss, but lesbian widows are confronted with additional challenges that are not a part of the grief process of married widows. The lack of public recognition of our relationships, the lack of professional support services, and legal and financial difficulties because our relationships are not recognized as marriages are unique to us as lesbians. In my determination to write this book, I had not realized that I would end up making a case for gay marriage. However, the experiences of discrimination that we faced provide concrete examples of the injustices that happen when gays and lesbians are not allowed to legally marry.

In addition to legal and financial discrimination, none of us could see ourselves or our experiences in the pages of grief books. Either books had stories of married widows or they addressed the issues of gay men whose partners died of AIDS. Although the relationships of gay men, like lesbian relationships, tend to be invisible in our society, and there are, therefore, some commonalities between us, reading about AIDS deaths still did not speak to our specific issues. Heather shared her frustration in finding no grief book for lesbians:

I did not find much on this topic [lesbian widows] ten to twelve years ago when I looked. Once things started getting really bad with AIDS, I started seeing more, but of course most of it was focused on men.

My original plan in writing this book was to elaborate on how we recovered from losing a partner and created a new life without her so that future lesbian widows would have some guidelines and support. But every single participant wrote more about their relationship and the trauma of the death itself than about their recovery process.

Three-fourths of the pages containing their stories were focused on their relationship with and then the deaths of their partner. At first I was disappointed. I did not want this book to be just a collection of stories. I wanted it to have answers that would be helpful to others. But then I realized how the very fact that everyone focused more on sharing the life and death of their partner than on their own grief journey held a message in and of itself. We were traumatized by the death of our loved one. It is in telling our story that we recover; it is in sharing our experience that we help others to heal.

This book is not a comprehensive resource on grief. Other books, such as those listed in the bibliography, provide more in-depth explanations of grief and mourning. Rather, this book is a resource in which lesbians who are widowed can read about women like themselves, where they can see their own experience on the written page. In other words, the purpose of this book is to help end our invisibility. I kept a journal during Em's illness and in the years since her death, and I have been able to draw on that information for this book. In each chapter, I quote from my journal and the stories of the other twenty-four lesbian widows as much as possible.

WRITING FROM EXPERIENCE

Even though I had training in grief counseling, I knew that knowledge of grief was not the same as experiencing grief. I also knew that, in order to recover, I had to put aside my professional understanding and allow myself to feel pain. That was also how I worked with the experiences of the other lesbian widows included in this book. I considered our stories to be the truth of experts. After all, we were the ones who had lived through it. To write this book, I first outlined what I learned from the lesbian widows themselves. It was only later, as I was finalizing what to include in each chapter of this book, that I began to add commentary from other grief books.

Grief, we are told, "is a normal and natural reaction to loss of any kind" (James and Friedman, 1998, p. 3). Some authors differentiate between grief and mourning, but in this book I use the terms *grieving* and *mourning* interchangeably. American culture makes it difficult to mourn. Showing emotion in public is frowned upon, and we are expected to get over it as quickly as possible. Even mental health professionals do not necessarily understand grief. The classic model that was

taught for years was that a person could experience shock and intense grief for two weeks, and then take up to two more years to conclude the mourning process (Becvar, 2001). As you read our stories, you will see that grief never really ends; its pain only lessens over time.

I collected the stories of the twenty-four lesbian widows in this book during the second year after Emily's death. My own emotions were still pretty raw and I cried my way through reading each story sent to me, reliving my own painful experience. There were days when I could work on this project and be okay, and then other days when I wondered why in the world I had started this. It was just too painful. I know that the women who share their stories in this book had a similar experience. It was painful to remember, to write, to speak about their experiences, but they too felt a need to provide something for the lesbian community. Using my experience and that of the other widows, I then wrote this book during the third and fourth years after Emily died. I could tell that I had a little more emotional distance, but there were still times when it was difficult to work on it. In fact, as I was proofreading the final copy of this book, I had a series of dreams, nightmares really, that were very upsetting, but I did not understand what they were about. My current partner was the one who said, "Are you afraid of losing something or someone?" Bingo. In working on the book, I found myself fearing that something would happen to Carole and I would once again be widowed.

LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

To understand the significance of our loss, I think it is important to talk about the kind and quality of relationship that exists between two women. Two women in a relationship tend to experience a deep emotional connection. In the past, some therapists pathologized lesbian relationships for being too close, too enmeshed. That was because they were comparing lesbian relationships to heterosexual relationships. The quality of a relationship between two women tends to be more intense than that of a male-female relationship, not in a pathological way but in a way that is deeply satisfying to the women involved (Ossana, 2000). There is a sense of intimacy within lesbian relationships that is emotionally gratifying to both partners. One nationwide study indicated that 95 percent of lesbians who participated