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## **The dynamic of widowhood: a study of one woman's experience**

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### **Abstract**

Many is the starry-eyed couple who have pledged their unending love for each other, sealed with those infamous words 'til death do us part', tossing the phrase liberally forth with no concept that death will indeed one day sever the bond between them, and facilitate in that remaining, one of the most momentous changes that they may ever have had to negotiate.

That Australian society is a progressively ageing one is an often acknowledged fact, with a predominance of women making very old age overwhelmingly a women's issue (Knapman 1996), with the eighty and over age group representing two women for every man (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1992, cited in Petersen 1994, p.84). Thus fades the stereotypical notion of a silvery-haired couple walking off into the autumnal sunset of their declining years together, enjoying mutual companionship on extended fishing trips and family picnics. This elusive ideal falls well short of the actual experience of a substantial number of Australian women, for whom isolation, aloneness and continual ageing - with their attendant pressures - make up for them their newfound status of widowhood, and all the implications that such a title incurs.

In an attempt to understand those stereotypes of the aged staunchly held by this society, and in order to understand their perpetuation in my own mind, I arranged to visit my eighty year old aunt, hoping through the filter of this one woman's experience to gain a new insight into this unique, extensively varied strata of the population.

It should have come as no great revelation to me that my aunt's life experience of the last thirty years has been not so much a gracious adapting to her ageing process, but a negotiating of her widowhood - the major issue in her life which wound its subliminal influence throughout her every word. Research of the current literature revealed insightful discourse on the somewhat caricatured state of being a widow - an exploration of which forms the basis of this paper.

Death of a spouse is one of the most profound losses experienced by humans (Anderson and Dimond 1995, p.308). It was through the discussion with my aunt that I came to understand the implications of this fact in her life, which struck at the very foundations of her existence. She had been my uncle's wife - the spouse of a well-esteemed Rotarian, who had unsuccessfully run for political office several times, and who had been her support socially and financially, while she remained out of the paid workforce, caring for their three daughters and pursuing voluntary charitable works. His untimely death from lung cancer in her fiftieth year plunged her into an early transition involving role and status change in which a widow moves from being married to single (Poncar 1989, p.6). With this change comes a redefinition of her role in the social network. As my

aunt had dealt with such a change at a younger age than the majority of widows, her ageing had not been simultaneous with this status change. As she spoke, however, of her son-in-law, it became apparent that after the second great loss of her life - the death of her thirty-seven year old daughter from breast cancer - she assumed this daughter's role in mothering her grandson and incorporating her son-in-law into her social circle, relying on him for practical needs and for fulfilling a support role in, for example, serving the drinks at dinner parties. Thus she built for herself a new status involving a male beneficiary of her energies, but set herself up for another major loss upon his moving to another city for career advancement.

Widowhood has been described as a process of replacing former roles and activities with new ones (Poncar 1989, p.9), such a process being less common in middle life and therefore a lonelier one than for elderly women (Arber and Ginn 1991, 162). So it was almost a natural consequence that my aunt would slide into the role of support for her son-in-law when he was coping with the loss of his spouse, a dynamic which she had dealt with twenty years before.

In her study of older widows' experience of living alone at home, Porter (1994, p.21) enumerated several distinct phenomenon upon which she postulated that they built a structure for coping with daily living. Reflecting on my aunt's revelations, I could witness these in her experience. The first, most patent strategy she has subconsciously deployed within her experience is that of making her aloneness into a state that is acceptable to her (p.21). I have observed how she has redefined her need for companionship by incorporating not only family but also a network of friends into selected areas of her day. Foundational to this is the liberty to go out - in daylight hours - and to interact and seek the fellowship she is denied at home. Thus of an evening it becomes acceptable to be alone in her familiar surroundings - listening to the radio, enjoying selected television programs or reading a meaty novel. Within the liberty to 'watch what I want' and to bypass the 'trash on TV' is an attempt to make the liberty of aloneness into a positive dynamic.

Crucial to my aunt's adaptation is the unstated notion that she can take care of things her own way, involving a making of her own decisions and considering her own needs first - a concept labelled by Porter (1994, p.21) as 'going my own way' and which women did so by ensuring they fulfilled the responsibilities basic to living alone. Intrinsic to this procedure is the balance between a solo coping with tasks and a level of asking those close and trusted for assistance. A quick review of my aunt's situation exposed how this delicately balanced status quo has been recently disturbed by her son-in-law's moving to Hobart. 'Who will call to change the light bulbs?' - a minor detail for a younger individual, but a major obstacle to independence for one who is climbing up on a chair to reach the offending socket, taking up with her that recalcitrant pelvis and those rebelliously arthritic changes. How fickle it would be for such a menial task to stand between this lady and her remaining in her own home.

Inherent in this self-monitoring readjustment is what Porter (1994, p. 22) described as 'reducing my risks', wherein elderly women performing their daily tasks generally become increasingly concerned for their own safety, with the common result of bringing the world closer to home. Hence the rational behind my aunt's no longer going out a night 'unless your parents take me'. Likewise her needing to deny her penchant for wearing high heeled shoes - 'I just love them' - and surrendering them for sensible, flatter shoes. This may seem a very wise choice, but represents a big adaptation for a woman who has progressed through various eras of fashion clinging to her classic, elegant dress, offset by those flattering heels.

The widows in Porter's (1994) study were doing all that was necessary to 'keep themselves going' because of the overriding imperative to continue living in their cherished homes. There was observed a propensity to compare their own routines and abilities with those of other older women, particularly those who were no longer successful in this staying able. Criteria they subconsciously used included 'just sitting down' and 'minds [that] slip'. These concepts were echoed in my aunt's deliberate choice to keep active by cleaning her house herself - not like acquaintances who have someone to come in and help; and her devouring of cryptic crosswords - to keep her mind active. Foundational to all these noble goals is the hoping to see the 'future that I prefer' (p.23).

Widowhood presents its conscripts with a myriad of changes, involving more than just those of role and status adjustment, but every facet of the woman's life experience up until the point she is plunged into this state of being. These women find themselves having to learn to handle the tasks once done by husbands, with house and car maintenance plus managing of financial affairs all presenting themselves as daunting procedures (Anderson and Dimond 1995, p.311), for which they are often unprepared (Bowling 1982 cited in Poncar 1989, p.8). My uncle would have considered his role of husband to unequivocally include that of breadwinner, provider, administrator of finance and final arbiter following discussion - a noble stance but one which leaves a patent void upon the incumbent's demise. Thus my aunt, having plunged herself into my uncle's terminal care, entered mourning in a somewhat exhausted state and was then obliged to pick up the reins of her situation and learn how to steer. It was through just such a need that she would have instigated her coping strategies of taking care of things her own way and keeping herself going.

Included in this was the momentous decision to surrender the imposing old house on the hills of Trevallyn, with its adornments added by her husband's cabinet-making skills, surrounded by the exquisite prize-winning garden that he had cultivated. It was no light decision to pack up the grand furniture and memories of three daughters, and move to a small, modern house on the other side of town. I suspect that my aunt realised that her hope of reaching that goal of staying in her own home was infinitely more attainable in a revised setting. Enmeshed in this decision was the instant dismissal of any notion of living with family - a concept which would strike at those very foundations of that vital independence.

It was only as I have, as it were, come to know my aunt in a deeper way - or has it been a renegotiation of my relationship with her as adult to adult? - that I understand the monumental changes and choices that beset her upon her husband's untimely death. This widowhood, described by Robinson (1986, p.153) to be a developmental issue for older women, is more accurately reflected by Poncar (1989, p.7) as a dual grieving process - the simultaneous mourning of the one departed and of her role. Such a conjecture begs the question of whether this society recognises the double incumbent nature of the widow's loss, permitting her to fully negotiate the unfolding grieving process on both counts. Whereas for many their immediate response to a spouse's death is usually shock and disbelief (Anderson and Dimond 1995, p.309), I sense that my aunt, by virtue of the living death afforded by carcinoma, began her grieving journey during my uncle's transition from life to death. Opinion differs on the length of a grieving period, with Engel (cited in Poncar 1989, p.7) declaring a 'successful one to take between six and twelve months', whilst others argue that it may take some two or more years to regain interest in the outside world (Silverman cited in Poncar 1989, p.7). However, such time framing would, I suggest, serve to encapsulate a widow's expectation of her emotions and coping, and hinder a healthy outworking and consequent readjustment in the new role in which she is now cast.

Parkes (cited in Turner 1987) points out that the absence of a significant culture of mourning and of funeral rites has made the entire process of death and grieving in today's contemporary society highly problematic, uncertain and unsatisfactory. My personal recollection of my uncle's death is of his body being whisked away to a funeral parlour to be prepared for an impressive funeral at a large local church - a ceremony which my aunt did not attend because of feeling uncomfortable with such a form of burial rite and public mourning.

Thus was her support, confidant, friend and lover (Poncar 1989, p.6) plucked from her, leaving her as one who has lost their supportive crutch, and now must learn to walk unaided. This glimpse into the world of widowhood via the filter of my aunt's life has indeed exposed that state for the unique, individually-experienced phenomenon that it is.

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Following conversation with an elderly relative or acquaintance, isolate a prominent issue that arose out of your narrative account and analyse, incorporating relevant literature.