



In working with widows and widowers Father Gerald Dunn soon realized that they needed a way to reenter social relationships.

"We were just sitting and talking one hour, and the next he was gone," one woman relates the abruptness of her widowhood. Another nursed her husband for 15 years while working to help her son through college and medical school. "I don't know how the Lord ever gave me the strength," she says. Still another woman received a phone call the day her husband was to have come from the hospital telling her that he had died. "What should have been the happiest day of our lives turned out to be no world at all."

All agree that widowhood, no matter how it happens, is one of the greatest challenges and hurts of life. "It's different in every case. You've no idea what it's like until it happens to you," one widow explains. "It's just an awful blow. Every fiber of your being aches."

Widows' advice to someone recently widowed is unanimous. "Don't do anything for at least a year," Lynn Caine, author of the new book, *Widow*, writes that no matter how in control of herself a widow feels, she's not. Grief must have its "crazy period." Lynn Caine asked a wealthy senator for half a million dollars during her first year of widowhood. Another widow told of writing \$300 worth of bad checks and then writing an angry letter to the bank president of his rudeness in bouncing them.

Money can be a major problem for a grieving widow. Lynn Caine writes that money in the bank can be the only partial substitute for a husband.

"If a man says that he loves his family and doesn't provide for them in the event of his death, then he doesn't love them," one widow emphasizes. But even adequate funds won't help if there is no legal will or if the wife has no understanding of her husband's finances.

Husbands can demonstrate their love for their wives by teaching them how to be widows, according to Lynn Caine. Thomas W. Klewin, author of "The Loneliest Men in America," which appeared in the October 1974 edition of the *Ligourian* magazine, says that widowers have a higher death rate than any comparable group of men and encourages wives to teach their husbands how to live without them. Wives need to learn about bills, insurance, auto repair, plumbing, income tax. Men should be able to do the laundry, iron, houseclean, cook, and care for children. One widow recommends a 50/50 sharing of all responsibilities throughout marriage as an effective way to prepare each other for the possibility of total responsibility. The changing roles of marriage partners will eventually eliminate the calamity of widows who do not even know how to write a check, an optimistic widow speculates.

The death of a spouse challenges a person with not only new, sometimes strange, responsibilities, but also with the problem of becoming a whole person again. "In marriage two become one. That can't be reversed so easily. In widowhood 2-1 equals 1/2."

In the crisis of widowhood everything in a person's past comes into play to help the person survive. Reading, sewing, painting, hiking, playing an instrument, any skill that a person has learned helps at a time of crisis. One woman even found herself remembering the Scout pledge to be cheerful and reciting grade school catechism.

Father Gerald Dunn of St. Theodore Church, organizer of the 14-year-old Catholic Widowed Parents Club, says that in times of stress people tend either to seek God or become embittered and turn their backs on God and the Church. Women traditionally find refuge in religion; men may go either way, according to Father Dunn.

Father Dunn recognized soon after forming the Catholic Widowed Parents Club that the lonely widows and widowers needed to be integrated back into a social life. The Widowed Parents Club has been instrumental in effecting this readjustment with its monthly meetings and social events. One widower says, "You just can't withdraw into a shell and feel sorry for yourself. You have to go out and see others. The club's parties really helped."

The widower adds, and widows generally agree, that widowhood is easier for a husband than for a wife. He has an outside life and security in his job. Women have often invested their whole lives in their husbands and homes. Without the center of their lives they have nothing. Men are also free to be more aggressive socially than women. "Everyone is always looking for an extra man," one woman laughs. Widows outnumber widowers by 5 to 1.

Many widows feel that they are second-class citizens



Widowerhood occurs less frequently than widowhood and men are rarely as emotionally prepared for the possibility as women are for widowhood.

in a couples' society. "I feel like a leper at those tables reserved just for people alone," one woman pleads.

Another recalls how upset her mother used to be when her father took the widows down the street to Mass. "That wasn't like my mother at all. Maybe widows threaten wives because they seem so helpless."

Father Dunn feels that widows and widowers with children become overly concerned with their children's welfare and too protective. He recommends that single parents not try to be both father and mother. There can be enough other parent figures in the child's life to compensate for the missing parent, Father says.

Widowhood leaves different marks on different people. No one escapes the crisis unchanged. "No. I'm not the same person I used to be. I don't enjoy life the way I did." But new strength and personal pride are common feelings for those building new lives. "I like my independence. I've learned to handle it."

New lives include remarriage for some. One year six couples from the Widowed Parents Club married. Father Dunn says that people who remarry are likely to be those who have small children or are completely alone. "There are always more problems in a second marriage," he says. Children from a former marriage can cause conflicts in the predominant husband-wife relationship. "Some of the remarriages I've seen are just ecstatic, though."

Any married person could someday be widowed. "You don't have to be sick to die," one woman remarks. Advice from the widowed goes like this:

"Make every day count. It's the little things you remember, like breakfast together. Take time to be together away from the kids. It's important."

"Just be glad you have each other."

"No matter what your marriage is like, it's better than being alone."



Daily routine continues and provides a certain support.



The challenge of widowhood can lead to bold undertakings.