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Home Life

Nothing prepares you for the loss of a spouse

MARNEY RICH KEENAN 1 COMMENTS



As a psychiatrist, Dr. William Miles had long been accustomed to patients baring their souls and revealing their inner turmoil. But when the tables turned and tragedy knocked on his door, the 52-year-old director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at Beaumont Hospital said he was completely lost.

“Physician, heal thyself does not apply to psychiatry,” Miles said a tad ruefully as he sat in his windowed office on the ninth floor of Beaumont Hospital last week. Admittedly thin (he lost 50 pounds from the stress), he said he understood “the psychology of what I was going through. But I did not know how to process it.”

In June 2010, Miles lost his wife of 18 years. Dr. Michele Raible, a pathologist specializing in hematology, passed away from leukemia, the very disease that was her area of expertise. She was 53.

Both Kansas City natives, the husband-and-wife doctor team had been recruited from Chicago to join Oakland University William Beaumont School

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of Medicine in Rochester. Raible was hired as the founding associate dean for undergraduate medical education. Raible arrived in January 2009; Miles joined her the following May. "We were both thrilled to be here," he said. "To be on the ground floor of the founding of a medical school is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, a dream come true really."

But that dream would not materialize. In February of 2010, Raible and Miles stared at her white blood cell count numbers on the computer in Miles' office in disbelief. They were astronomically high. Diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, Raible completed months-long chemotherapy regimens. By spring, a bone marrow biopsy indicated she'd gone into full remission. The couple were "ecstatic."

But on June 18, a Friday night, Raible developed a high fever. She'd gone into septic shock. "It was that rapid. We ate pizza Friday night, and by Monday morning she was gone."

Being new to the area, Miles had no support system. "I was so lost," he said. In a fog, he attended a grief support group at A.J. Desmond and Sons Funeral Directors in Royal Oak. Now, Miles is a regular participant in the funeral home's annual presentation: "Coping With the Holidays." "That first holiday without Michele in particular was so scary I knew if I could help anyone face those first few holidays, I would."

Because each person's experience of loss is unique, Miles said: "I don't think anybody can truly understand what it's like to lose a spouse, especially in middle age, unless you've experienced it." When his father, who was widowed in 2007, said to him: "I know what you're going through." Miles had to correct him. "I said, 'No, you don't. You and Mom had 54 years together. You got to grow old together. You got to enjoy retirement together. This is different, Dad.' "

Miles and Raible were unusually close. Having no kids, they had the same work ethic and worked for the same institution. "So much of my adult life had been spent with Michele, I didn't know who I was," he said. "I had to rediscover myself. I'm a different person now. That is part of the grief. People have to understand that you will not be the same."

He said he learned there is no timeline for grief, no right way or wrong way to be in mourning. "I wasn't functioning even remotely normally again for 18 months." His best advice is to embrace the grief. "That means don't try to deny it and all of the emotions that go with it. The anger in particular. You're angry at the person who died. You're angry at God. I'm still working through it."

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He also learned not to ask why. A wise friend told him: "You are looking for an explanation to an event that has no explanation." Instead, he was told to look for meaning in his suffering. "Michele's death was senseless, but it didn't mean it had to be meaningless."

In February, Miles suffered another death in the family. Miles father, 87, who had survived prostate and colon cancer, developed acute myeloid leukemia. What's more, the hematologist who diagnosed Miles' father was a former student of Dr. Michele Raible. "And then he told me Michele was the reason he'd become a hematologist," Miles said. "I almost dropped the phone."

What to make of the many coincidences? "I'm a scientist," Miles said. "Scientists look for patterns. Patterns suggest a causality, and scientists investigate causalities. I'm not implying there is a physical causality. But is there a spiritual causality? Albert Einstein had a wonderful quote. He said: 'Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous.' I have a strong sense that there is meaning behind all this. And I am happily compelled to investigate it on a spiritual level."

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