

# longing for wholeness

**“Most of us are dragged toward wholeness. We do not understand the breakdown of what has gone before. We do not understand. We cling to the familiar, refuse to make the necessary sacrifices, and refuse to give up habitual lives, resist our growth. We do not understand rebirth, do not accept the initiation rites.”**

*Marion Woodman*

The blades of the Life Flight helicopter echoed loudly off the walls of the Sunrise Ski Lodge outside of Bend. I watched in silence as it disappeared from sight. My husband Dennis was inside it, having suffered a massive heart attack while we enjoying a day of family skiing.

My brother-in-law drove us down the mountain towards the hospital. I leaned my head against the car window and stared up at the blue-sky. *Ravens. Ravens everywhere. Ravens, sitting in the pine trees, their sooty black plumage silhouetted against the blue sky.* I knew what their presence meant.

When we arrived at the hospital there was a man waiting for me at the front door. “Your husband is dead,” he said. “They were not able to revive him. I’m sorry.”

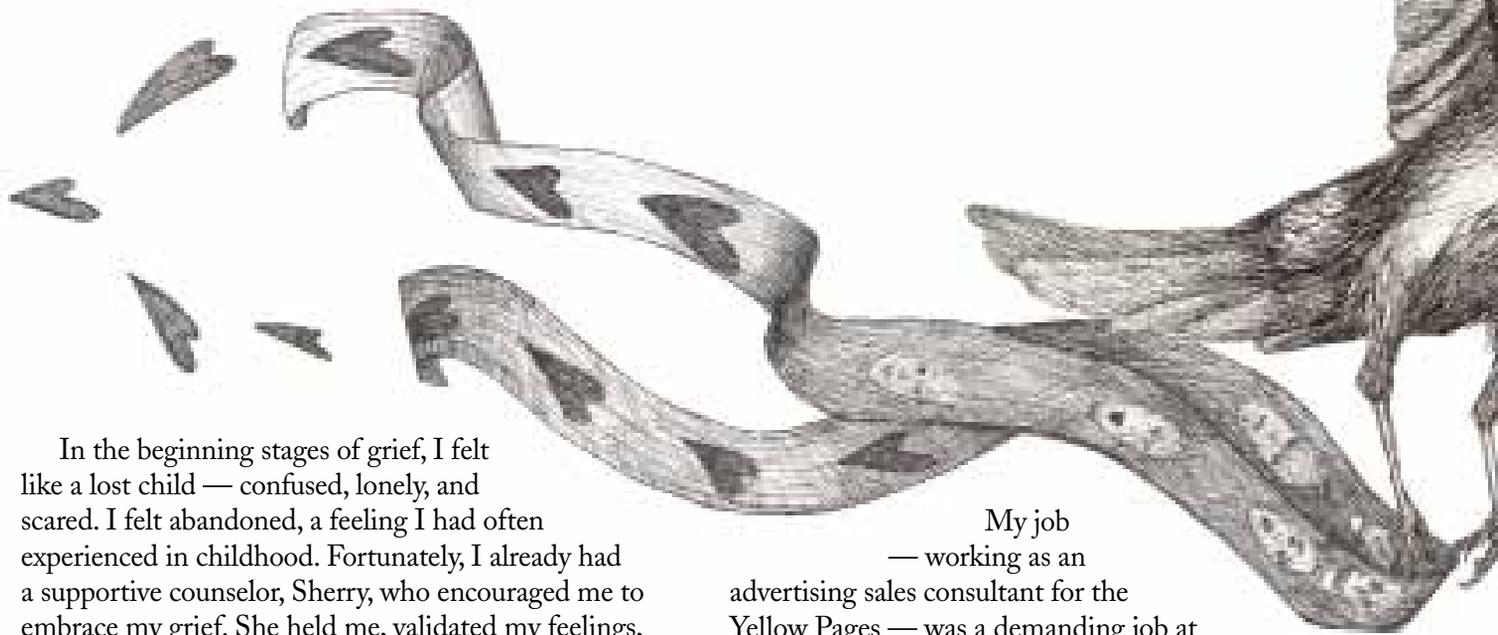
My head swirled. Just that morning we’d been skiing, enjoying the warmth of a beautiful sunny day, the perfect way to spend Christmas Eve. Now I was sitting in the hospital dialing up my in-laws to inform them that my husband was dead.

When we arrived back to my sister’s house the rest of the family had arrived. The smell of roasted turkey filled the air; Christmas Eve dinner was nearly done but no one knew how to proceed. “Do we go ahead with Christmas or what?” asked my sister meekly. The little ones still expected a Christmas, so they moved on, finding some small comfort in the rituals of the holiday. I sat numbly on the couch.

The hospital had sent me home with my husband’s clothes, his car keys and wallet, which I clutched in a brown paper bag. I compulsively thumbed through his wallet, searching through every credit card receipt as if it would give me a kind of clue how to go on. My seventeen-year-old son slept fitfully on the floor beside me.

It was four days before we returned home. When I got out of the car in front of our house, the impact of what had happened stunned me and I fell to the ground sobbing. Inside, reminders of our last morning together were everywhere: Dennis’ empty coffee cup on the counter, the newspaper on the table where he had left it. Everything was the same — and yet different. Feeling like Humpty Dumpty, I didn’t know how I’d ever put my life back together again.

*Ravens. Ravens everywhere.  
I saw ravens, sitting in the pine trees,  
their sooty black plumage silhouetted  
against the blue sky and I knew.*



In the beginning stages of grief, I felt like a lost child — confused, lonely, and scared. I felt abandoned, a feeling I had often experienced in childhood. Fortunately, I already had a supportive counselor, Sherry, who encouraged me to embrace my grief. She held me, validated my feelings, assured me I wasn't going crazy, and that I could trust myself. She was there during the next hurdle, too: when, six months after Dennis died, my son Matthew graduated from high school early and moved out on his own. She said he needed to take his own journey, and taught me how to support him without taking his power away.

Not too much later, I got some kind of intense flu. I was so sick and run down, I was hallucinating. I had to decide whether I was going to live or die; all the stress and trauma had taken its toll and my body was no longer willing to carry all the years of shame and grief that I had accumulated over my lifetime.

Sherry talked me into joining a co-dependency group that she and her husband were offering, where I learned about the impact of family dynamics and how to reclaim some of the power I had lost in childhood. I experienced my wounded inner child, and learned how to support her. She saw a spark in me and nurtured it back to life, at same time pushed me to do the difficult work of individuation and discovering my own journey.

My job  
— working as an  
advertising sales consultant for the  
Yellow Pages — was a demanding job at  
the best of times. Within a year after Dennis'  
death, Sherry recommended that I give up my job, saying  
that I was like a cup that was overflowing and I needed  
to let go of something in order to make space for new  
energy in my life. So I gave up my seven-year career, and,  
coincidentally, my work with her.

Dennis had left me with some financial resources and security — he had life insurance — so theoretically I was free to pursue my dreams and visions. But that freedom came at a cost of my previous identity structures and roles that I had inhabited for so long. I was no longer a wife, mother (of a minor child) or employee, and now I found myself separated from my therapist as well. At first, I felt guilty, and then angry and confused: my grief no longer consumed me but even the role of “widow” no longer seemed to fit. I felt both terrified and excited about the possibilities before me. As a single mother (I'd given birth to my son Matthew only two months after graduating from high school) I had never been without a job, or lived alone. A new life was calling — would I answer?



I put all of my household goods into storage and traveled to the British Isles to explore my ancestry. I began my explorations at the Findhorn Foundation, a spiritual community in Scotland, where I met many kindred spirits. Every day we met for groups, explored the dances of antiquity, and worked in the gardens. The facilitators introduced us to the nature spirits of the gardens. As a child, I had grown up with a deep love for nature and I connected easily to their philosophy. I'd never completely lost touch with the magic of the fairies.

The voice of the Goddess seemed to be present everywhere I went; from Findhorn I traveled to the Island of Iona off the coast of Scotland to attend a workshop entitled *Birthing the Undivided Self*. While rain and wind battered the windows of our little cottage we learned that birth and death always overlap — to let something new into our lives, we had to let something go — just as Sherry had said.

A couple of weeks later I met my friend Anne in London and we traveled together; we parted in Ireland and I went to stay with the old couple who owned the land where my grandmother had grown up. They treated me like family; we passed the days and nights in front of the peat fire listening tell stories about how life had been on Corn Hill before so many had left the country. My host had been a child when my grandmother had immigrated to America and remembered how he would eat the bread my great grandmother placed on her windowsill to cool.

After that visit, I returned to Iona to begin a month of writing in solitude. Jane, one of the grand dames of the Island, rented me a cottage. It sat in a field overlooking the sea surrounded by a white picket fence. But the solitude was difficult; I got so homesick that she invited me to stay in the cottage next to hers and we shared tea on a regular basis. Like me, she had recently lost her husband and had an adult son who no longer lived at home. These shared circumstances helped us form a genuine bond.

Jane shared with me that she didn't feel she really grieved after her husband died; he'd had cancer and his death after that long, painful illness was a relief. But, she confided, after his death she felt compelled to take a bucket of water and soap out to the barn and, for several days, scrubbed the floor on her hands and knees.

During my time on Iona, it had become clear to me that in the next phase of my life I was supposed to help others through major life transitions. I felt that, having been healed, I needed to help others make their peace with loss and move into new life. So I took my leave of Scotland, and returned to the United States.

But returning to the U.S. reminded me that I still didn't have roots. I was alone again and new feelings of grief resurfaced. I decided to live in Bend, the town where Dennis had died. I still had family there and knew a few other people in town as well. I knew finding a job would help me to meet others, so I began teaching classes through the local community college and decided to get a masters degree in Transpersonal Psychology. The next three years were an exciting three-year period of personal and spiritual growth.

During this time I became romantically involved with a wise and loving man who had been through his own Dark Night of the Soul. Together we struggled to open our hearts to each other; we finally married in 1996, and designed and created an emotional growth and leadership school for young adults in transition. My time in the psychic wilderness had paid off and I was able to be present to others in ways I would haven't even understood before.

Each year, I continue to deepen my understanding of the Goddess. Now a student in Marion Woodman's Leadership Training, I am learning how to embrace the wisdom of the Sophia by opening to the metaphors of the body, dreams, and shadow.

I find that I am still gathering and pulling back parts of myself. My creativity continues to grow, along with my love for humanity as it searches for God/dess. I know now that teaching others about the life-death-rebirth process of the Goddess Kali is my life's purpose. I believe that this deep transformational work is what all of us must do to transform the planet.

It's now been eighteen years since my first husband's death. I feel as if I have lived a whole other life since then, one which wouldn't have been possible had I not been not forced on to this other track. Now, I feel whole; the deep longing, loneliness, and dissatisfaction I once felt is gone. I feel embraced and held by life and I know that I am held and directed by the Goddess. Through death — and life — I have been initiated into Her service. ☺



**COLLEEN RUSSELL** is an expert in guiding women through life transitions. She is currently completing her third year of *BodySoul Rhythms Leadership Training* with Marion Woodman. For more information and to receive her free ezine visit: [www.quest4wholeness.com](http://www.quest4wholeness.com).