

5 April 1980

Dear Harold:

This is to respond to and enlarge a bit on a couple of things you mentioned in your good letter of March 25.

My remark about not feeling altogether useless was an allusion to the way our society and culture unthinkingly rigs things so that both retired people and survivors who have lost a spouse wind up feeling that way, often without realizing it. It can be a potent factor in the subconscious even if one does realize it. One has to be very lucky, as I have been, to find something worth while in which to get interested and make one's self useful. I don't feel useless at all, and in some ways feel more effective in what I'm doing with HOM than I did most of the time with the AP. I work with some extremely talented people who are patient with me and have confidence in me. This means a great deal, and I'm keenly aware that such opportunity awaits few people in my position.

Since you've never retired (what an idea!) your awareness of the way our economic system discards the retired person is doubtless more general than specific, and I suppose one really has to go through the retirement syndrome to sense the full impact of the specifics. One knows it's ridiculous and a shotgun effect; still it can be very discouraging and even demoralizing. I know that in your career you have gone through at least twice what amounted to a kind of retirement, but your circumstances and age and vigor were far from those accompanying the usual retirement.

The other impact on the ego comes from being widowed. I was prepared for the sense of loss and loneliness because we had at least six months clear warning. What I wasn't prepared for was the sense of worthlessness and incompetence which descended. Now I know that like a lot of other very weird symptoms of being widowed, this is perfectly normal and something everyone has to go through. There's an interesting explanation for it which I found in a book we'd had around for 10 years or so but which I never had read, called *The Mirages of Marriage*. In it William L. Lederer (*The Ugly American, A Nation of Sheep*) wrote a popular version of some research done by a Palo Alto psychiatrist named Dr. Don Jackson. The Jackson-Lederer argument in general was that what really makes a marriage work is the extent to which a couple adjusts and compromises with each other to overcome mutual irritations and individual foibles. While this is perfectly obvious, they go on to discuss what happens when the marriage threatens to end in divorce or ends in death. They borrow a simple metaphor from systems analysis, namely that the whole of a system is far greater than the sum of its parts. A marriage is a system, and when an essential part of that system is destroyed or removed the remaining part ~~expands~~ becomes far less than merely half the former equation. Together and intact the system functioned far more effectively and with greater impact on everyone concerned than the two parts could have achieved separately. So if you remove one part of the system, the system collapses and with it the sense of importance of the part that is left behind. This explained a great deal to me, and I mentioned it to Wendy Foster, the very sharp gal who is one of the bereavement counselors at HOM. She asked me to explain it briefly at one of the bereavement meetings, and since then she and Bill Lamers have used it themselves in their detailed explorations of the grief syndrome at subsequent meetings.

The damage-to-the-system principle extends to larger families. Wendy cited some statistics recently which show that 70 per cent of the marriages losing a child to cancer (usually leukemia) end in divorce. The system is so wrecked by even the loss of a child under such painful circumstances that it stands only a 30 per cent chance of surviving.

Lamers lays down two constant principles throughout the grief syndrome: 1, the more intimate the relationship the greater the depth of grief; and 2, there are no shortcuts, everyone has to go through the various stages at one time or another or in one way or another. En route to recovery everyone must transit protest, despair, and detachment, experiencing everything from rage to black depression and a wide range of physical symptoms that can include everything from colitis to constipation. And as for behavior -- well, anything is possible. One widow told of how her response to her blackest moments was to change the hinges on her kitchen cabinets. Alcoholism, suicidal tendencies, total withdrawal -- all are common -- and normal. Once people hear that, they begin to perk up, and I've heard at least a dozen people breathe, "Well, I wasn't crazy after all."

You perceive fairly early the sort of thing people respond to and it becomes a challenge to help others as you have been helped. As I've said, nothing takes the place of personal interest and attention, and for me, at least, women are more responsive. I can think of at least six widows I've tried to help, partly because they were hurting like hell and partly because they were all very fine people. All but one have got themselves together, and that one, I feel (along with several others) simply prefers not to recover. We all get the idea she never has got along with anyone very well.

A year ago I got a call from HOM saying there was a survivor who needed a ride to one of these bereavement meetings. I picked her up, and she turned out to be a woman whose name we had known for some 30 years, a person whom we both admired because of her dogged willingness to work in political campaigns. We had first seen her as secretary treasurer to the county organization supporting the first Adlai Stevenson campaign (this was time of intensive grass roots activity among Democrats) and her name kept cropping up through subsequent campaigns -- Pat Brown, Clair Engle and so on, and before we knew it she was a national committeewoman. She was among four women here in Marin County whose industry literally kept the county organization, and later the state organization, moving. At that time she was a divorcee (neither of us ever met her) named Elizabeth Rudel Smith, and that was the name under which she filled the office of treasurer under JFK -- a well-earned reward for literally turning the California state convention around in 1960 when she found out they were still dreaming of Stevenson -- a not very promising candidate for a third try for president. Libby got on the horn and sold the leaders on JFK in a single day.

Shortly after she became Treasurer she met the man she'd been waiting for all her life, Albert W. Gatov. He was the son of Russian immigrants, ~~she~~ had grown up in Long Beach and had worked as a long-shoreman before getting into the shipping industry. He became president of the Pacific Maritime Association and as such negotiated the breakthrough contract with Harry Bridges which set a national pattern for waterfront peace in a sensible trade of good wages and civilized fringe benefits in return for gradual automation on the docks.

She and Gatov were married here in City Hall by a judge they both knew well while she was still working for JFK. I once met Gatov at the press conference where he and Bridges announced their landmark contract, and while I never saw him again I was much impressed with a man who had the wisdom to work with an honest man like Bridges and the skill to get a pride of West Coast shipowners to go along with the idea. Anyway, the Gatovs flourished, and when he died just a year after Jenifer it left Libby absolutely crushed. She was more down than anyone I had yet encountered, and it seemed obvious to me that anyone so intelligent and able simply HAD to be helped in any way possible.

So all I did was to tell her I knew how she felt and why, and to call me any time she needed to talk. When she didn't, I realized how shy she really is, and called her now and then, gradually getting across how impressed both Jenifer and I had been that she and the other three hard-working women had overcome their own shyness and worked as they did simply because they realized that this is the way to make the system function. So now and then she would actually call me, and sooner or later the conversation got around to food, and then Chinese food, and it developed that she loves Chinese food, so I gave her a copy of our favorite Chinese cook book and eventually began clueing her in on how it's produced. By now we have worked through what little repertoire I have and are on the dizzy edge of making our first dinner of ordinary American food together!

In the meantime trust and confidence in each other have been established. I like her as a person and respect her as a performer. She's a year older than Jenifer and although totally different in most respects she has the same affinity for the truth and the same determination to settle for nothing less. She still hurts very deeply, but increasingly is rising to the challenge of various family problems (she has two grown children of her own who have families, including grandchildren, and a couple of Al's children who also have children) and works hard at being a free-lance writer. She writes well, especially about people. She has connections, uses them judiciously and discreetly, and keeps a low profile. And she differs from most survivors in that the pattern of her friendships has not changed. The same three women with whom she worked so long in Democratic politics are still her closest friends. Two of them have husbands who are dying, one of cancer and the other of heart trouble.

You are right -- there is much companionship and understanding here. It has done us both much good, naturally and without strain. She is much more cheerful now, interested and involved. We both have someone to turn to, and she's a comfort.

So that's Libby, a person of brains and the conviction they're to be used. She despairs over Carter and thinks the GOP will turn to Ford. She comes from a family of machine tool manufacturers but just out of Smith she outraged them by taking a job as a welfare worker in New York State under ~~xxxxxxx~~ Gov. FDR. She learned then how poor people have to live, and has never forgotten. She was one of the founders of the local Planned Parenthood organization, and so on and so on. For a shy person, she has been very busy. And still is.

And honest. "It'll be the four of us," she once said, and it is.

Best,