

FINDING
your
CLOVER

AFTER
a
LOSS

BY J. DAWN ROUNTREE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PIPPA MCNAY

Finding Your Clover After A Loss

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Prologue

On June 23, 2000, my life changed forever. That was the day that my husband Ralph was diagnosed with kidney cancer. When our doctor said the dreaded word cancer, we both felt as if the wind had been knocked out of us. Even though many of my family members had died of cancer, cancer was a rarity in my husband Ralph's family, something we never thought would happen to him.

Surgery was scheduled for July 13. Since we had a few weeks until surgery, we decided to make a trip to Colorado, to retrace some of our favorite haunts in the mountains, to visit with friends, not knowing if he would live through the surgery when we returned to Kansas.

Fortunately, he did survive the surgery, and an enormous cancer and his left kidney were removed. But within a year, the cancer began to grow again, and a second surgery was not an option. Realizing how precious time was, we made a conscious decision to live each day as fully as possible. We spent time with family, made memories and photographs, and my husband lived to see two more grandchildren born.

The first five years after his diagnosis were fairly good, but August 2, 2005, he became bedfast when the cancer spread throughout his body. It was difficult to watch one of the most independent, full-of-life people I had ever known become totally dependent, but we were thankful for every day we had together.

Ralph died on February 28, 2006. On that day, my

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grief walk began in earnest. I felt as if three-fourths of me was gone, and my heart ached for him. I visited the cemetery almost every day—that was where I could feel closest to him even though I knew he was no longer there.

One spring day I took a walk around the cemetery and noticed the dates on the markers of several couples I had known before their passing. One thing stood out! I noticed that, for several of the couples, it was only a year or two from the time that one died until the other one died.

I wondered how much the loss of their spouse had impacted the second person who had died not long after the first. I wondered if the one who was left had grieved himself/herself to death?

That day was my turning point—my wakeup call. I did some self-talk and told myself, “You are only 64 years old, so you need to get on with it.” Even though I still felt like my heart was breaking, I realize I needed to do whatever I could to survive. I recognized that there must be some reason, some purpose for me to be alive.

Shortly after that cemetery walk, a friend suggested that I start writing my thoughts, and I did. I had small notebooks in the kitchen, by my bedside, and in the car. I found that writing helped ease the pain of my loss.

About a year after my husband’s death, I began leading a bereavement group for a hospice program, and each month I wrote an article related to grief for the group members. The idea for turning the articles into a book came to me when my present husband Tom and I drove to Alaska in 2009 with some of my sisters and their husbands.

That is when I wrote “The Story of Little Bear,” the first story in this book. When we saw that little black bear beside the road in his clover patch, his coat shining in the

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sun, it was obvious that Little Bear was content. He was happy. Springtime had come, and life was good. He had found his patch of clover!

By then my life had already changed drastically. A couple of years after Ralph died, I remarried. Even though my life was totally different, I had found contentment in my life with Tom. But I still had an urge to make something good come from my forty-four years with Ralph. I felt I could do this by passing along some of my stories to others who are grieving—thus my motivation for *Finding Your Clover after a Loss*.

Life can be good again after a loss. Even though you will be forever changed and life will be different, life can be good. If you move forward, you will never forget the one who died. I certainly have not.

So “Don’t Waste Your Sorrows,” as the title of a book by Paul Billheimer says. Your loved one would want you to be happy. Search for ways to rebuild your life and turn your loss into something good, your very own clover, whatever that might be.



Dedication

*This book is dedicated to the life and memory
of four special women.*

*To Debra Kay Pyle, Clay Center, Kansas, born
September 17, 1953, and died March 5, 2013.*

*She was my friend and my encourager,
as she was for so many.*

*To my beautiful Aunt Helene, born October 26,
1926, Santa Fe, Tennessee, and died June 16,
2013.*

*She always had encouraging words for all
her nieces and nephews.*

*To Mary Kuyper Youngblood, born Galena,
Missouri, January 18, 1941. She was my
dear friend for forty-eight years, from 1966 to
February 13, 2014, the day of her death. She was
a well-known columnist for a newspaper in the
Ozarks, an inspiration to many.*

*To my little sister Gay Celeste Corlew, Dover,
Tennessee, my special encourager.*

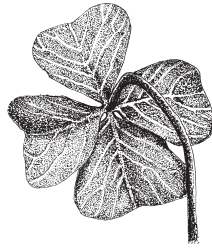
*I have been blessed with the presence of these
special ladies in my life.*

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No Road Map

Introduction



Finding Your Clover Patch

*A*s a very young child I remember sitting in patches of white clover blossoms with my older sister Joy in the spring-time. We picked the white blooms, leaving the stems long enough to tie around the clover blossoms. We strung the clovers into necklaces, bracelets, or rings. Then we proudly wore our new “jewelry,” feeling elegant and beautiful!

Other times my siblings and I would sit in a clover patch, carefully, patiently searching for a four-leaf clover—that symbol of good luck. If we were fortunate enough to find one, we preserved our newly found treasure by pressing it in a book or Bible. (I have recently found that the leaves of four-leaf clovers stand for faith, hope, love, and luck.)

When we lived on the farm when I was a child, my dad grew patches of crimson clover. The deep-red blossoms created a beautiful site! In my later years as an adult, I remember seeing field after field of yellow clover in Nebraska, blooming in profusion, breathtaking sites in the sunlight, and a haven for busy bees gathering nectar for honey! So it is no wonder I was thrilled when I saw a little

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black bear munching yellow clover beside the highway in 2009. He had found his clover patch, and he was content!

After the death of my husband Ralph in 2006, it was difficult to believe that life could ever be good again. My dream of retiring with him was gone, and I was unsure where to turn or what to do. Then little by little, I became hopeful as my heart began to heal.

I would have never dreamed how much my life would change after Ralph's death. I had decided I would probably never remarry, but I married Tom. I never dreamed I would ever sell my place in the country called Thornberry Acres which I loved, but I did. I never thought I could be content living in town instead of the country, but I am. I also changed jobs and began writing. So my new "clover patch" was nothing like I would have imagined.

In nature there are many varieties of clovers—three-leafed, four-leafed, five-leafed, and clovers of many colors—red, lavender, white, yellow, and pink, just to name a few.

Just as different kinds of clover add beauty to fields and provide nectar for bees, life holds new opportunities just waiting to be discovered. I wish you faith, hope, love, and luck as you search for your own contentment, your own clover patch, as you make this world a better place for yourself and others as a result of your loss.

Acknowledgements

*i*t would be impossible to name all who have impacted my life, resulting in this book. I would not be writing about grief if my first husband of forty-four years, Ralph Timothy Thorn, had not died. He encouraged me to try things I would have never dreamed possible.

A special thank you to my present husband Tom who encourages me as I write. He is patient with my many hours at the computer and is a wonderful husband.

A thank you to my family—my children, my sisters and brother, and aunts and uncles.

Others I would like to thank include Kendra Worthen who allowed me to write for hospice; the hospital staff, my co-workers at Meadowlark Hospice, and the staff and readers of my hometown newspaper, the *Miltonvale Record*.

A special thanks to Lilly Hitsman for her invaluable editing skills and to Pippa McNay for her beautiful artwork. Lilly and Pippa, I believe our paths were supposed to cross!

Without the guidance and expertise of Judy Entz, consultant, and Jim Friesen, designer, at Mennonite Press, this book would not have been published—you guided me well!

Last, a special thank you to Mr. Sheldon Harnick, lyricist, for allowing me to use his beautiful words from “Sunrise, Sunset” in the final chapter of this book.



The Story of Little Bear

*d*uring our trip to Alaska in the summer of 2009, one of my goals was to see a bear—a black bear, brown bear, any kind of bear. While traveling through British Columbia, Canada, we did, to my delight, see a bear! The bear was not very large, but his black fur shone in the bright sunlight, literally glistening against a backdrop of spring-green grass intermingled with lush patches of yellow clover beside the highway.

What a sight! My husband Tom pulled the car over, joining others who had already stopped to soak in the view. Camera shutters were clicking. At first, the little black bear stood as he munched the green grass and clover. *Bite, bite, munch, munch. Bite, bite, munch, munch.*

After a bit, the little bear seemed to tire from standing up, and as we continued to watch, Little Bear sat down on his bottom. He continued to eat the juicy grass and clover, bobbing his head down to the ground for each new bite. *Bite, bite, munch, munch. Bite, bite, munch, munch.* Little Bear seemed oblivious to his large group of spectators—he was enjoying life!

Then Little Bear laid down in the grass, paws in front of him, tummy on the ground, and continued his breakfast of grass and clover from a closer vantage point. *Bite, bite, munch, munch.* He had found his clover, wonderful delicious clover. He still paid no attention to the specta-

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tors gawking at him. He was in his clover patch. Life was good—Little Bear was content.

After some minutes, we reluctantly left the sight to travel onward toward Alaska, our final destination on the trip. When we left, Little Bear was still flat-down in the clover patch, breaking off bites of breakfast with his teeth. *Bite, bite, munch, munch.*

The lesson from Little Bear hit me! He had found his place in the sun, and nothing seemed to be worrying him on that sunny morning. He truly had found a place of peace, of enjoyment, unmindful of the audience gazing at him. Life was simple, but good. *Abh, contentment.*

In our lives, we may find ourselves chasing an illusive dream as we travel toward our final destination. We may search for contentment and happiness in relationships, in jobs, and in the acquisition of things as we travel along the Road of Life. We may search for money, prestige, fortune or fame—search for something to fill the voids or holes in our lives.

Sometimes we forget about our Creator and the simple things in life that can bring us real contentment—a new friend, a walk on a cool day, or the smile of grandchild. Wild flowers growing by the road may take on a new wonder if you take the time to look at the delicacy of their design. How about the song of a mockingbird, holding hands with someone you love, spending time with family?

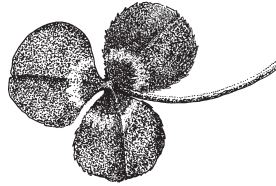
If you have experienced the loss of a loved one, the “hole” in your heart may seem like a cavern. You may long for the life that you used to have with the one you loved, and your heart may ache, almost physically. You may be challenged to find your own new patch of clover.

Your “clover patch” may be in a different location,

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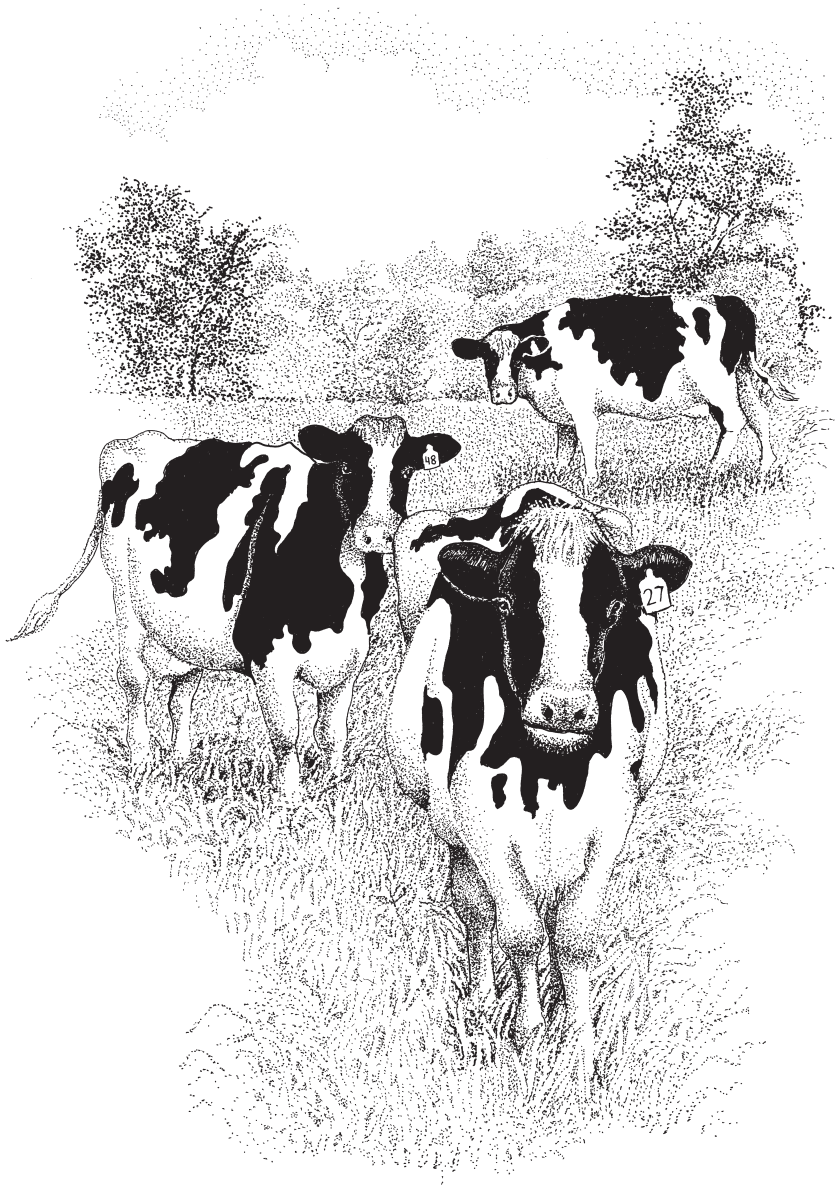
or you may find red clover in place of the yellow clover you used to have. Even though your clover patch may change, life must go on as you move on to a new and different contentment.

If you take the time to look, you may find your clover patch right under your nose! Or you may have to search a little! It only costs a little time to pause, to enjoy life along the way—to take life in slowly—*bite, bite, munch, munch. Contentment!*



“Surely there is something in the unruffled calm of nature that overawes our little anxieties and doubts; the sight of the deep-blue sky and the clustering stars above seem to impart a quiet to the mind.”

—JONATHAN EDWARDS



Conversations with Cows

Number Twenty-Seven and Number Forty-Eight trotted toward me and reached the fence before the rest of the herd. I greeted them at the end of the pasture with “How are you, babies?” They were two very inquisitive Holsteins, black-and-white cows that lived on the other side of the fence in a pasture west of my acreage.

I had a routine. Some days after getting off work, I headed toward the Walking Path. Walking was my salvation—it helped me fight depression after the death of my husband the last day of February of that year. His death left a gaping hole in my heart. The house no longer held his laughter. There was no one to welcome me home; no one to talk to, no one to eat with. So I avoided the loneliness of the house by walking the path.

After winter lost its grip and warmer weather replaced the cold chill of winter, the spring grass emerged. For years my husband and I had kept a walking path cut around the pasture. But with the arrival of the spring grass, I also cut a new area at the west end of the pasture, an area large enough for an outdoor seat so I could watch the sun set. I then bought a glider seat and placed it in my newly-mowed space. I named my special place Peaceful Place—a name that described it well.

At Peaceful Place, I could enjoy the evening breeze and watch the sun go down. Some evenings the sunsets were

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glorious as the pinks, golds, and oranges painted the western sky! My husband had told me, “Remember me when you see the sunset,” and each time I saw a beautiful sunset, my thoughts were of him. How could I ever forget him?

Besides the sunset, there was something else special about Peaceful Place—the cows! There were close to twenty cows who were excited to see me. No matter how far from the fence they were, when they saw me walking the path, here they came—some faster than others, hurrying toward me. They inquisitively listened as I greeted them.

Each cow had a numbered ear tag, and I soon learned to watch for #27 and #48 which usually led the pack—they were the most curious! They came up close to the fence and dangled their heads over. Their big kind brown eyes watched me while I watched them. And I had my “conversations with cows.”

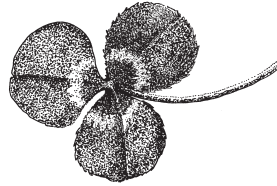
I appreciated those black-and-white Holsteins because they gave me a diversion from my loneliness. Friends and family still cared. They had attended the funeral, sent cards and memorials and still called from time to time. But they had returned to their normal routines—they had grieved and moved on. But I, like so many others experiencing a loss, was left to face each day without my husband, and the cows became my buddies.

It was up to me to figure out how to cope, how to grieve, and how to rebuild my life. But I would never have guessed that cows would have helped! I am sure they did not understand a single word I said, but they came. They were there!

As you walk your Path of Grief, hopefully you will find a friend or family member to accompany you on your path. And perhaps you will find your own Peaceful Place,

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wherever that may be. Even if your path is lonely, keep walking, one day at a time, one foot in front of the other. If you stumble, get back up, but keep walking. With the passage of time, each day will become a bit easier. Hang on, and just keep walking.



“Grief is not a sign of weakness, nor a lack of faith. It is the price of love.”

—Author unknown