

Name

# Single Again but Still a Parent

## by Sister Mauryeen O'Brien

“I was single until I was 25. Then I met Jim, dated him for two years, and married him,” Sue told me one day in my office. “I can’t remember the time that I thought of anything but marrying and raising a family, just like my mom and dad did.”

Sue was happily married to Jim for 10 years. They had two beautiful children. Then one day, while he was jogging, Jim had a heart attack and died before ever reaching the hospital. Sue, in an instant, was single – again. Only now she was also a parent.

Sue’s story was not the first that I had heard of an unexpected tragedy that left a spouse alone to parent children. Unfortunately, statistics bear out the fact that the traditional two-parent family is no longer the norm in our society. Twenty-three percent of the more than 65 million families in America are headed by a single adult who, because of circumstances of death or divorce, is left to raise children alone.
 **Going – and growing – alone**
So, how do you, as a single parent, not only survive the task of raising and nurturing children alone, but go beyond survival to growth, joy, and ultimately, peace? How do you manage to do alone a job that was meant to be handled and struggled through by two?

First of all, you are coming into this role of “single-again” hurt, vulnerable, stressed out, short on patience, long on confusion, lonely, tired, perhaps angry, and most probably depressed. Death can cause all of that, and the spouse who has been left or abandoned or widowed has to face the loss, no matter how or why it occurred, and journey through the grief before finding any strength. And, indeed, strength will be needed to face single parenting.

This is not an easy task, for we naturally shy away from mourning and struggle, from loneliness and change. But the struggle itself can cause growth. We see that so many times in nature. The flowers and trees that appear to have been buried and ravaged by the cold and harshness of winter eventually attain the heights of beauty and strength in the spring and summer because of what has gone on in them during this struggle to reach the sunlight.

There is growth in pain! How many of the widowed talk about that, and always in a spirit of awe. They can’t believe that the pain that once was an intricate part of every hour of every day has been the root cause of a newfound deep strength. “I’m a different person because of all I’ve been through,” Tom told me. “I can’t believe that a new me could come out of complete turmoil.” And Tom is right. Like the trees, sometimes we are stripped bare before we put on a new life.
 **Top quality**
Well, how do you go on with that new life, or half-new, or struggling-to-be new life as you continue to be attentive to others lives and responsibilities beyond yourself? How can you continue to be a good parent even though you find yourself single – again?

After you have acknowledged that you have suffered a loss, and that you need to mourn that loss and allow yourself to heal from what that loss caused in you, it’s time to take a positive look at what can go on in your life. Though single can mean “lonely,” it also can mean independent. Though single may cause you to work doubly hard to accomplish tasks meant to be shared by two, it also can mean that you put more emphasis on quality-time with your children.

Mary, widowed when her three sons were ages 5, 8 and 10, soon found that between working all day at her job, and working all night at cleaning, laundry, and cooking, time spent in the car driving her sons to school, sports, lessons and friends’ homes was precious, necessary, and fulfilling to them and to her.
 **Mr. Mom**Being a single parent can put you in situations you would never have chosen. You may be taking on roles that have never been yours or roles that you never thought you could handle. The single-parent father may have to learn to cook and clean, go to PTA meetings, and struggle with the child to do homework. The single-parent mother may have to become a plumber to the pipes, painter to the shutters, and catcher to the child ball player. The accomplishments of successfully stretching beyond your traditional roles can give you much strength. And in strength there is growth.

Adapt at adapting. As a single parent, you want to constantly remind yourself that even though single, you do know how to parent. Prior to death, parenting was going on in your family. Your skills are certainly there but because your partner is no longer in the house, you are changing the way you use those skills. Therefore, you want to emphasize adapting your skills.

You might hesitate to do this especially when it comes to disciplining your child. Single parents often feel guilty because their child has been deprived of a parent. They may equate disciplining with further depriving the child of something. And yet, not to discipline, not to teach or challenge or defend what is right, does deprive the child of the skills needed to become a responsible adult.

You need not feel guilty because you are the only parent to accept your responsibility to share wisdom, values and experiences - adult to child - so that you are the adult raising the child and not leaving the child to raise him or herself.

**All about love**

Certainly loss through death does shake the stability of family life. As the adult in a situation like that, you are understandably devastated. So, too, are the children, for their very foundation has been cut in half, leaving a gaping hole that very seldom gets filled. As a single parent, you are left with the job of re-cementing the foundation and re-establishing roots so that life can go on.

One of the greatest tools in this task is the love you have for your children. And when love needs to be expressed, over and over again. You want to tell the children that you love them. Tell them that the parent who died loved them. Let them know that they didn't cause the death. Express your love in concrete actions and give the children a sense that although someone is no longer with them, they are still loved.

Ideally, you will have experienced this kind of love to be able to give it to others. You can still give love, even though your own heart has been broken by the loss in your life. Your love as a parent is never severed because you have become single-again. If you are to remain happy, or become happy again, you must continue to do what parents do well, love and share, give and help, especially your children.

**Family unity**Good family health comes from the interaction, love, support, openness, understanding, tolerance, sharing and giving among its members - no matter how many there are. Two adults may make the parenting easier, but that doesn't necessarily make the family healthier. A single-parent family lives and loves, not from how it is structured. And the family who lives in peace and unity, where there is comfort, caring, trust and love, whether it be headed by two parents or a single parent, will not only survive the trials of family life, but grow because of them.