



FROM EMPTINESS TO FULFILLMENT

WHEN LIFE FORCES A NEW PURPOSE

A Guidebook From One Who Has Been There

MARLYS JOHNSON LAWRY
SMART LIVING IN SMALL BITES

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Dear Reader	1
My Story	3
Your Story	11
Problems to Face	15
Steps to Take	29
Finding Hope	47
Finding Your Hope	49
When Memories Return	53
Before You Go	57
The Hope We've Found	61
Beginning Faith	63
Battered Faith	69
Building Faith	75
About the Author	81
Resources	83
About Grit and Grace Life	85

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The Grit and Grace Project®
For Strong Women and Those Who Want to Be.



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Dear Reader

I've been in a place of deep loss. Not only did cancer take my husband, but I also lost a strong sense of purpose working alongside him. When it all came crashing down around me, I remember looking at the shattered fragments on the ground—wondering how I could ever put them back into place.

Perhaps you once had a meaningful life. You partnered with your spouse, a family member, or a friend in making a difference in your small corner of the world. Or you were part of a team at work that was accomplishing good things.

And then you were let go from your job or from that nonprofit you loved. Or you lost your partner, your spouse, your friend, and life as you knew it would never be the same again.

Here's the good news: I made it through that season of loss and setbacks. I know how to gather the thousand broken shards and put some of them back into place. And then in time, the gaps were bridged with other opportunities and work and people I grew to love. And before too long, my life was rich and joyous and meaningful again.

It may be a different path than the first one you took, but speaking from experience, you can come to love your new purpose just as much as the

old purpose you didn't want to lose.

And I'd love to show you how.

Marlys

My Story

My best friend from high school, Cheryl, invited me to her annual family reunion. A weekend of tents and trailers spread out over Oregon's green grass. Baseball games, skit night, and camp coffee (this is where you dump a handful of coffee grounds into a cast iron pot, set it on a blackened grate over an open flame, and when it boils over, it's ready).

I was an immature teenager. Long, straight hair. Hand-beaded jewelry. Throwing a Frisbee in a halter top and short cut-offs. It was, after all, the 70s.

I had met most of Cheryl's family but didn't know she had a fourth brother. Gary was a mature young man in his mid-twenties. A computer operator employed at a mortgage company in Denver. Not a bead on him.

We talked late around the campfire each night. I was headed to Denmark and then Germany with Youth With A Mission. "If I write, will you write back?" he asked. Friendly letters flew non-stop between Colorado and Europe. Ink on thin blue airmail stationary. You may have heard of it?

A year later, I returned to northern California to see my family. And then boarded a plane to Denver. Gary and I had our first

official date: a fun meal at a dinner theater where the wait staff sang and danced among the tables before the play unfolded on stage.

Afterward, Gary drove me to his aunt and uncle's house, where I stayed before flying to Iowa to be a caregiver for my grandmother. He and I sat talking in the driveway and I could tell he was reluctant to let me go. He cleared his throat a couple times. There was something on his mind.

And then he took the plunge: "Will you marry me?"

"Are you serious?!" My jaw dropped.

"If you need more time to think about it ..." he trailed off.

In the slow-motion seconds between his proposal and my response, with breath held, I realized Gary was what I wanted in a husband. I wasn't shopping for one, but I had noted his respect for his parents. How he teased his nephews and held his 18-month-old niece. I knew firsthand his kindness, his dry wit, his exceptional listening skills.

And just like that, I had a fiancé before he was my boyfriend.

Several months later—as a young bride wearing my mother's elegant, retro wedding gown—I had no clue what I was getting into. But I was determined. And I walked on my father's arm beneath tall, fragrant evergreens on a northern California ranch toward my handsome groom, who was waiting nervously and equally determined.

We barely knew each other when we married, but through the years I grew to love Gary more because he was that kind of man. He walked out goodness. This is not to say he wasn't exasperating, or that I never frustrated him, or that we never exchanged cross words. (He was. I did. We may have exchanged a few.)

But that was a long time ago.

Coming out of my reverie, I found myself back in my current reality: at Hospice House sitting beside Gary's bed. It had been a few years since he was diagnosed with prostate cancer that had spread through his lymph system, but in the past year, cancer was now in his bladder, liver, and bones. Managing his medical needs became more than I could handle at home. The unraveling had begun.

Here is where we spent the final three days of his life surrounded by a compassionate team of doctors and nurses. Part of me unrealistically didn't want this time to end. Because when it ended, I would go home to a husbandless house, which I was dreading more than anything.

Gary had been breathing heavily throughout the day, eyes closed, not quite in a coma, but moving with agitation, as if he was trying to convey something important. It was early evening when he took one final, jagged breath, followed by absolute silence.

Our daughter, Summer, and I stayed by his side for several long minutes. Wife and daughter crying. Face-scrunched-up crying. I was grateful that cancer no longer had free rein in Gary's body, but I knew I would never lie

next to him again or carry on a fun-filled conversation, never again link my arm through his as we walked across a parking lot to a concert, a movie, a ballgame.

Not only did I lose my husband, but I lost the purpose we shared together. We had hosted marriage and young singles' retreats at my in-laws' ranch high in the hills of northern California.

We'd invested in the lives of teenagers, and later, young singles—weekly Bible studies in our home, camping in the summertime, and skiing in the winter.

We hosted Super Bowl, March Madness, Christmas, and New Years' parties for these same age groups. I couldn't begin to count how many dozens of homemade cookies and gallons of milk were guzzled through the years.

Together, Gary and I taught marriage refresher courses, hosted a number of church small groups, and were trained to do pre-marital counseling to help ease the pastor's load in our church.

After Gary's diagnosis, we established a nonprofit with the mission of cancer survivor education and awareness. I wrote for grant funding and booked speaking engagements across the country—at university cancer centers, in college and high school classrooms, at medical conferences, rotary clubs, at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, MD. We shared tag-team style, with humor, what we were doing to live well with late-stage disease.

The rest of the author's story has been intentionally removed. To read more, the entire book is available on [Amazon](#).

Your Story

Every person's story is nuanced. Yet, we share a common hurt and need. Telling our own story—even if it's just for ourselves to read—is an important step toward hope and healing.

Perhaps you were on track toward what you thought was your purpose in life. You had meaningful work. And then you received news that you weren't expecting or things in your life changed, making it impossible to stay the course. And now you don't know if you can begin again—or maybe even how to begin again.

Where are you on the journey of losing your purpose and finding new purpose? What's your story? Write it down below.

Blank lined paper for writing.

Problems to Face

The season that included deep loss, a change of address, and a new routine was unsettling and scary. Living in the unknowns of life is not for the faint of heart!

In this next section, I explore five areas that needed adjustment while I moved forward on the journey of losing and regaining a purposeful life. As I outline my areas of struggle, I hope you'll take the time to reflect and write the thoughts that filter through your heart after reading my story.

It's been pretty cool to look back and mull over what I struggled with and compare it to where I am today. Speaking from experience, we can learn to accept loss of purpose. We can believe that something good can come from something we didn't want to happen. I trust you'll experience that same miracle.

I encourage you to reflect on what's unfolding inside your heart over your loss of purpose. Be honest and vulnerable with yourself. Oftentimes we women want to be known as strong, which can mean not admitting the emotions and challenges we struggle with. But it's just the opposite. Vulnerability and honesty take strength; they're Courage Makers.

After I describe each problem, capture any personal considerations you have that feel similar or different in the lines provided. In addition, record any emotions, reactions, questions, or circumstances you are facing that I didn't address.

Loss of Purpose

All the purposeful lay ministry opportunities Gary and I shared—the teens and college-aged young people we hosted in our home; the marriage refresher courses, pre-marital counseling, and weekly Bible studies we taught as a team; the retreats we led; and the speaking engagements across the country—it was all lost to me with my husband’s passing.

Death of a loved one and loss of shared goals were two very different but deep and painful “bereavements” that produced a sense of hopelessness in me. I missed filling our home with people of all ages—sharing laughter and good food. I missed the connections. I longed for the conversations we had with these people about God’s goodness and what he was doing in each of our lives. I wanted meaning and purpose that came from knowing our work and ministry mattered as God was using us to encourage, build up, and teach others.

And now it seemed so bleak—like I’d never have meaningful work again. Who was I without my husband, without our combined strength and wisdom? What was I supposed to give my time and energy to now? I couldn’t imagine stumbling into a new calling because it wouldn’t be the same as sharing in a partnership with my strong, wise husband, friend, and collaborator.

Did you have purpose that you loved, but a life change happened and that thing you loved is now lost to you? What emotions accompanied the life changes? Record your losses and your emotions here.

Detours

With my husband's passing, I couldn't afford to stay where we lived because there had been financial loss before his death. I loved this town at the base of the Cascade Mountains. It carried so many memories that we made along the nearby wilderness tracks and the in-town trails that followed the river. More importantly, it held so many caring and compassionate friends from our church, the cancer community, and my co-workers in the cancer center.

Turns out, the logistics of my new path directed me to Southern California, a place where I never wanted to live. I was born and reared in Northern California. The thought of the southern half of the state—with its much-reported traffic, smog, and gang activity—wasn't a place I wanted to relocate to. Especially after enjoying so many years of Oregon's beauty and slower pace of life.

Heading south felt like I was traveling in the wrong direction. I was overwhelmed. The detour brought a sense of uncertainty and insecurity. It was too much for me—alone and with no apparent purpose.

There are detours waiting to unfold on our life maps—detours into infertility, divorce, or caring for a spouse facing disease. Detours into loss of a child to estrangement, drugs, death. Detours we wouldn't have written into our stories, but now we need to learn to live with them.

We hope you enjoyed this sample. If you're interested in reading more of this book or seeing other books in the series, click on [Amazon](#) to get your copy today.

Your life was full of purpose... until suddenly it wasn't.

Your days once held meaning, direction, and a calling. Then everything changed—and now you wonder if life will ever feel the same again.

In *When You Lose Your Purpose*, Marlys Johnson Lawry shares how the death of her first husband brought an abrupt end to the life they built together. Left widowed and uncertain, she entered a season of loss, detours, and starting over.

Yet she discovered something unexpected: purpose doesn't disappear—it often waits on the other side of surrender.

Through her story, you'll learn to navigate uncertain seasons with faith—making space for new possibilities and embracing the unknown. If you've longed for someone who understands, you'll find that companion here.

Inside, you will:

- Read her story, one that may feel familiar
- Discover the problems faced and the steps to take
- Find courage through honesty, faith, and hope
- Reflect on your own journey with guided prompts
- Be reminded that you are not walking this path alone

Losing your purpose can feel like starting over. But sometimes the space left behind is where a new purpose begins.

Your story isn't over. Your next chapter is still waiting to unfold.

More than a book, it's a guide



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