

BEFORE THE STORM

by Sue Peterson

Managing Director, Cornerstone Advisors in Bellevue, WA

*“A woman is like a tea bag —
you can’t tell how strong she is
until you put her in hot water.”*

— Eleanor Roosevelt



DO THE HARD WORK NOW TO HELP SMOOTH OVER THE FINANCIAL SHOCKS OF WIDOWHOOD.

None likes to think about the possibility of her husband passing away. Yet statistics tell us most women will end up single at the end of their lives. In fact, women are four times more likely than men to be widowed, and widows typically survive their husbands by 14 years. Taking the time to get your affairs in order while both spouses are alive and well will go a long way toward creating security

and confidence for the entire family. Like starting a new exercise program or making a decision to eat healthier, changing your financial habits can be a challenge. Start with some of the small steps suggested here instead of trying to tackle everything at once. Doing too much at once can be exhausting and make you feel like giving up.

First and foremost, wives need to be fully informed about the family’s financial situation. Finding this

uninteresting or unpleasant is not an excuse! Our biannual trips to the dentist or primary care physician are not particularly pleasant, but they are preventive measures that help us be fully informed about our health and give us the opportunity to address any emergent problems in a timely fashion. The same is true of financial awareness and planning.

I have seen new widows come to my office completely overwhelmed and fearful because they were not

involved in their family’s finances, and as a result are not familiar with their joint assets, liabilities and cash flows. Avoid this by communicating early and often with your spouse about your finances. We highly recommend both spouses complete a checklist to ensure both parties know about all bank accounts, pensions, loans, location of the safe deposit box, contacts for key advisors, and other relevant information. (We’ve included a link at the end of this

article to a good checklist.)

It’s also important to communicate login and passwords for all online accounts, which can save many hours of frustration down the road. Creating and sharing a password list is a good initial “small step” with a huge prospective benefit.

Several key documents must be in place to ensure the unexpected loss of a spouse doesn’t create unintended and unwanted outcomes. These documents include a will or

revocable trust, which provides tax planning and creditor protection for assets that pass to the survivor. If there are children of a previous marriage, this also ensures that the wishes of the spouse who died are carried out, increasing the potential for a positive relationship with stepchildren in future years. As a next small step, make an appointment with an estate planning attorney to draft estate documents or **Before the Storm:** *Continued on page 41*



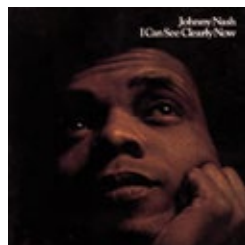
Blue (1993)

A woman loses her family in a car accident; her recovery goes not at all according to plan. She tries to shed the associations of her former existence by moving to a new neighborhood in Paris and starting over — but she can't truly get away from her life. Her late husband's unfinished business (he was a composer) is still hanging over her, and his other baggage returns in all-too-physical form. Much of this character's struggle to find herself plays out across the calm, meditative face of Juliette Binoche, who has perhaps never been better. This is a film of silence and reflection, and director Krzysztof Kieslowski is not interested in spelling out every single meaning here (this 1993 film is part of the filmmaker's slightly-connected trilogy called *Three Colors*; the other segments are *Red* and *White*). As somber as the film is, Roger Ebert might have been onto something in calling *Blue* an "anti-tragedy." We look into Binoche's contemplative face and are free to project our own feelings and thoughts there: sorrow, hope, disillusionment, renewal. That's a bold place for a movie to go, but it makes us into active, not passive, viewers — and perhaps it's an honest suggestion that recovery is never really achieved but an ongoing human process.

MUSIC REVIEWS

In music, you can find an outlet for almost any emotion. Heartbreak (check), addiction (check), depression (check), resurrection (check). This playlist's got it covered.

by Joe Rodriguez / Freelance music writer



"I Can See Clearly Now" (Single) — Johnny Nash, I Can See Clearly Now, 1972

Texas pop star/songwriter/producer Johnny Nash had already spent three years in Jamaica when he wrote this uplifting song. At the time, Nash was producing some of the first Bob Marley and the Wailers recordings. And, during one of these sessions, he laid down this track. We don't know what was happening in Nash's life that led him to pen the lyrics, but they seem to tell a story of a person struggling with the darkness of depression or addiction. When Nash sings about the sun finally coming out, bringing light and clarity, we share in the beautiful possibilities of what's next for him and for us.



"That's Why I'm Here" (Single) — Kenny Chesney, I Will Stand, 1997

Country music is filled with stories of hard drinking and tough luck, but they don't often touch on the theme of recovery and renewal. In this song, we hear from an alcoholic who has finally decided to take control and head down to the local AA meeting. There he discovers he is not alone in his recovery. Chesney's warm and reflective delivery of the lyrics lends believability to an old, familiar story. He offers us a stark glimpse of two very different pathways this life could take, and unlike many songs about addiction and alcoholism, this story has an ending of hope. For so many, addiction is a daily struggle. This song gives listeners hope and encouragement that it can be beaten with help from friends or even, as in this case, a roomful of complete strangers.



"Higher Ground Hurricane Relief Benefit Concert" (Album) — Various Artists, 2005

Hurricane Katrina made landfall in August 2005, bringing so much devastation and destruction that many didn't think New Orleans would survive. In the weeks following, news reports detailed the horror suffered by trapped survivors, and our collective heart wept. Of the many benefit concerts and performances to help in the aid and recovery, one truly captured the soul of New Orleans and paid tribute to the great traditions of jazz, zydeco and gospel that come from this great city. Higher Ground was the brainchild of Wynton Marsalis, a New Orleans native who owes much of his career to his upbringing there. "This Joy," a soulful and energetic celebration of gospel music by Shirley Caesar, sings of hope, recovery and healing. The haunting saxophone in New Orleans native Terence Blanchard's "Over There" is a poignant and truly reflective instrumental. The great Diana Krall sings a sultry rendition of "Basin Street Blues," and we are even given some amazing zydeco courtesy of the great Buckwheat Zydeco with "I'm Gonna Love You Anyway." There really is not a bad track on this album, and all proceeds continue to help in the recovery of the city of New Orleans, still ongoing almost a decade later.

update an existing plan if it's more than five to 10 years old.

For business owners, it is critical to have a succession plan so that this asset, which may provide for future living expenses, continues to be viable. This may include key man insurance so that the business can buy out the deceased's interest and a shareholder's agreement and/or buy/sell agreement that outlines the terms of the buy-out. Consider establishing a home equity line of credit to use for cash reserves. If the transition of the business takes an extended time, this is an inexpensive way to resolve this potential problem.

New widows may have limited access to funds until probate is open. Having an existing checking account in your own name or one titled as Joint Tenants with Right of Survivorship (JTWRoS) can greatly limit this financial stress. The balance should be in line with expected living expenses for one to two months. Add this to your "to-do" list after you have recorded your spouse's login and password information and updated your estate plan.

Many women worry about replacing their husband's income were he to pass away prior to retirement. For many, making sure their spouse has sufficient life insurance can eliminate this risk and concern. For example, if a couple spends a husband's \$100,000 after-tax salary every year as part of their lifestyle, and he is 55 years old with an expected retirement age of 65, they might consider obtaining a \$1 million term policy on his life

(\$100,000/year x 10 years) that they hold until he retires. If there are minor children, this amount could be increased as necessary to account for the future cost of college expenses. If you don't have a life insurance agent already, ask two or three friends who they use and make an appointment with at least one of those individuals within the next three months.

Married couples should also ensure that the beneficiary designations for company retirement plans, annuities, deferred compensation and life insurance name the surviving spouse as the primary beneficiary and not the estate. Particularly with a 401(k) or Individual Retirement Account (IRA), this ensures the surviving spouse will have the opportunity to complete a spousal rollover of those accounts into an IRA of his or her own, which can be used most tax-effectively for retirement. Your spouse will have to update his or her own company plan beneficiary form, but you can do your own through your HR department or directly with the 401(k) provider or IRA custodian.

Adjusting to widowhood is a difficult transition even under the best of circumstances. Tackling each of these recommendations over the next three to six months, one step at a time, can help make sure that financial issues don't add to the burden of a challenging time. ♦

Source: Download Cornerstone Advisors "Checklist for Life" to help you begin the process at tinyurl.com/wise-checklist.

are not required to employ writing as a strategy in the healing process. Writing our way through recovery is available to all of us — no prior writing experience necessary.

Here are some ideas to get you started writing about your own experiences:

Make a timeline of your life. Take a piece of paper and turn it horizontally. Divide the page into decades and draw onto the page a timeline of your life that includes dots marking important events and turning points. Pick one of these turning points and set the timer for 10 minutes, then write without stopping or editing.

Write about times you've trusted yourself and when you doubted yourself. Take another piece of paper and divide it vertically this time. At the top of the left-hand column, write the words "Trusted." And at the top of the right-hand column, write the words "Doubted." Next, brain-

storm a list of events and decisions for each column. Then pick one and write about it for 10 minutes.

Make a list of personal and professional risks you have taken over your lifetime. Again, pick one idea from the list and write about it. The stories of our risks are often very interesting and inspirational and can help us to appreciate our strengths.

In memoir, our narrator becomes the hero of our own journey, and we can't help but appreciate the obstacles we've overcome and the skills we've gained in facing various life challenges.

Don't Get Tripped Up on These Common Stumbling Blocks:

Don't focus on the quality of the writing. Who cares if the writing is "good enough"? Focus on your own pleasure of writing forgotten memories and the relief of writing down thoughts you've been carrying in your head for too long.

Just focus on your own version of events. Some writers get blocked thinking about how others might take offense at their opinions or may possess a different understanding of shared events. Remember that you have a right to your version — just as they have a right to theirs.

Ignore that voice in your head that says, "Who cares?" and "So what?" Recording your perceptions and stories helps you relieve grief and gain perspective on your experiences. The answer to the question, "Who cares?" is "I do!"

The beauty of writing as a means of recovering from life's losses is that it's always available to us — no appointments necessary. Sometimes, simply jotting down a note on a piece of scratch paper is enough to make us feel just a little bit better. ♦