

The last time Joanne Seaman saw her husband she nearly walked out the door without kissing him, but doubled back. It was a wintry Sunday in Indiana. Joanne was taking three of the couple's children from their home in Upland to Fort Wayne for their cousin's second birthday.

Rick, a Taylor University professor, was swamped with work. He stayed home to grade papers.

Rick often played a game of Sunday basketball at the Taylor gym. Joanne teased him, suggesting playfully that he was far too busy with paperwork to play ball.

She grabbed her keys and started to leave, but turned around. "I went back to kiss him and said, 'You never know what can happen. I love you.'"

She was thinking about her interstate drive with the kids.

"Never did I think anything would happen to Rick," Joanne says.

Hours later the phone rang during the party in Ft Wayne. Joanne's friend Kathy was on the line. Rick was in an ambulance en route to the hospital. He'd grabbed his chest and collapsed while playing basketball with their eldest son.

Joanne prayed fervently all the way from Ft. Wayne to Marion, her father at the wheel.

"I was begging God," Joanne remembers. "Please let him be alive when I get there"

Her heart sank when they pulled up and she saw their minister and several friends waiting for them outside in the cold.

"That's when I knew he was gone," Joanne says. "If he'd been alive, they'd have been inside."

Joanne says a part of her died along with her husband that frigid December night in 1998. In its place, something new has grown, though it has taken place in the darkness of pain.

Two and a half years earlier, it was sunshine and roses—624 roses.

Joanne was dreading her 40th birthday but Rick made the passage easier. Though they'd been married for 18 years, Rick gave her a gift as fresh as new romance, a dozen roses and a promise. She'd get a dozen more every week for the entire year.

They arrived in various color--pink, peach, yellow, white and red—right on schedule for the next 52 Fridays. Joanne cut off each bud as it withered, placing all 624 roses in a basket where they remain to this day, a decade later.

After Rick's death, she curled up beside the withered buds and wrote love letters to Rick in her journal —letters he'd never read, but words she had to write.

The pen seemed to carry itself across the page. Joanne wrote for 13 months, journaling about the mundane as well as her turning points.

Rick had been the center of her life. One instant he was alive and vibrant,

and the next he was gone. Where would all the unspoken words and unfulfilled dreams go? How does someone ever recover from loss that makes the heart truly ache?

Rick Seaman and Joanne Burke met in grade school, and felt from the start they were destined for one another. In their 1963 third grade photo they were all smiles, hands on the desk, looking straight into the camera—she in her checkered smocked dress and white headband—he in his bright red shirt, sitting behind her.

“Little Ricky” moved away from the area in the 4th grade, but Rick and Joanne reconnected years later in high school.

He was the talented, but humble athlete always asked to give the prayer before sporting events. She was the bright, well-adjusted cheerleader, attracted by his quiet faith and confidence.

Joanne credits Rick with leading her to a deeper, more personal faith in God after they started dating. She began going to church with his family their junior year of high school. They went to separate universities and married each other shortly after graduation.

Their friends called them the perfect couple. Rick worked his way from coaching to a successful career in business and investments, then switched careers, becoming a well-liked Taylor University business professor.

Rick and Joanne had four children—two girls and two boys-- and what Joanne once defined as “a blessed life.”

“I was married to a great guy, had a beautiful home, and wonderful kids who excelled. We were the all-American family,” she says.

“From the outside, I’m sure people looked at us and said, ‘Wow, they’ve got it all together.’ I think my idea of happiness was narrow-minded that way.”

“It was concentrated on good health and great kids,” Joanne adds. “I had this notion that good things generally happen to good people and that God was blessing us. And then that notion was shattered because our whole life was shattered.

In an instant, I had to redefine who I was and what I believed.”

Rick and Joanne were both 42 years old, married for 20 years, when Rick, seemingly fit and healthy, dropped dead from a heart attack.

Overnight, Joanne became a widow and single mother of four children, ranging in age from 12 to 18.

The small community of Upland and Rick’s friends and students from Taylor embraced the Seaman family.

But months after Rick’s death, when the casseroles stopped coming, there was a new “normal” for Joanne.

Depression, anger, and fear kicked in. Joanne knew life would never be the same. She would never be the same.

Grief began her metamorphosis.

“My loss and grief have changed me. I’ve come to embrace and absorb it. Some people wanted the old Joanne back, but she’s not coming back,” Joanne says.

The “old” Joanne was a whirlwind of motion. Joanne says she looks back on her life then with the perspective she has now, and wonders about her priorities.

“ I was just so busy all the time. I was always running—kids, errands, things to do. Ironically, the people who get under my skin the most now are the people who are like I used to be,” she says.

She and Rick had one year-- the year before his death-- to spend more time as a family. Rick received tenure at Taylor and took a half sabbatical, cutting way back on his teaching load. Joanne quit her job, and, together, they became regulars at their children’s sporting events.

“You look back and think, ‘Oh, isn’t that a coincidence that we had all that free time together.’ Our oldest son was involved in several sports, and his Dad spent so much time with him. The timing wasn’t coincidental. I know God allowed us that time together,” Joanne says.

She now makes balance a priority. The chores are endless as a single mother, but Joanne knows when and how to call it quits for the day.

“I am most content in quiet moments. I can let things ‘go’ more easily now. I can sit with my daughter Kayla’s head on my lap watching a TV movie on a Sunday afternoon and just be perfectly happy, and to me that is much more important than decorating the house.

Joanne says that she’s more assertive now than she was before Rick’s death. She says what she thinks instead of holding her tongue.

“Rick was bigger than life. He was fun, charismatic, the life of the party. I never realized how much of my identity was wrapped up in being Rick’s wife. After his death, I had to discover for the first time who I really was.”

“I like myself so much better now. It’s just that I wish I could be who I am now—know what I know—and still have Rick.”

Some of Joanne’s character-building has evolved through the growth that came from enduring the sting of criticism.

After Rick’ death, Joanne buried herself in books that encouraged her to walk through her pain and grief. She says she was surrounded by a supportive network of friends and family who helped with the children and the house.

But she was stunned by the reaction of some in her small town.

“It got back to me that some people said I wasn’t attending to my children because I was too caught up in my own grief,” Joanne recalls.

“I think even on my deepest, darkest days, my kids would always say I’ve been there for them.”

She was also criticized for “waiting too long,” more than a year, to go through Rick’s clothes and personal items.

“I wasn’t ready!” Joanne says, “And when I was finally ready, I had tears, but I also had wonderful memories. No one should ever tell another person how to grieve. There’s no schedule. I’ve never met a single person who experienced grief exactly the way I did.”

Joanne says being on the receiving end of judgment has made her rethink her own biases.

“It was done by people who had no idea what was in my heart. It made me keenly aware that everybody has a story; things in their lives that contribute to who they are and the choices they make. I don’t know their story or what causes them to

behave the way they do. Who am I to make a determination? I want to give to other people what I want for myself—to not judge.”

Joanne says her faith, along with her character, have grown and matured through the loss.

“I remember thinking before Rick died that my faith was wonderful, beautiful, and pleasant. It was a luxury. It was icing on the cake. But I already had the cake. After Rick died, my faith was a necessity. It was my mere existence. It wasn’t the icing; it was at the innermost core of who I was. Without it, I don’t know how I would have survived.”

There are days when the grief returns. Joanne feels it coming like lead. She gets tense, and the feeling builds right along with her to-do list until she can let go-- let the tears flow.

“Often it has to do with expectations I put on myself, menial things. The walk needs shoveling, the toilet is running, or one of my kids cars needs tires. There’s no Rick, and I’m just so tired of doing all this by myself. I still have those moments. But I don’t have them as often, and I don’t go as far down. I think those bouts of pity, heartache and loss are fewer because I have that sense that God is with me”

The sense that Rick is with her comes and goes. Joanne says his legacy is their children, who are now young adults, launching their own lives. One is married, another is engaged. Between college and work, just one of the four still lives at home with Joanne.

Two days a week, Joanne drives to Indianapolis, where she is back in school pursuing an advanced degree in American Sign Language interpreting, a lifelong passion.

She wonders what the future will bring, but lives like the driver of a car who can see only as far as the headlights permit, trusting she’ll make the entire journey that way.

Joanne knows the only certainty in life is the moment she has right now.

Six-hundred twenty four rosebuds in a basket remind her she is loved and cherished.

And for today, for the moment—that’s enough.