

Behind the Scenes – A Grief Deconstructed

By Maryanne Pope
(45-minute presentation)

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Introduction

Hello! Thank you so much for coming to the Health & Safety Summit today.

Background

I would like to start off my presentation by sharing a bit about who John and I were as individuals and about our relationship – because it certainly played a significant role in HOW I grieved his death.

By sharing with you my personal experience of coming to terms with a significant loss, I am hoping to demonstrate what was going on behind the scenes for me. Of course, everybody grieves very differently...but that's the whole point to this presentation. *We don't know* what may or may not be going on behind the scenes with someone - so hopefully my experience will illustrate a powerful example of this.

Because even if someone seems okay and says they're doing they are ok – they may not be okay at all.

So...John and I met way back in 1990, when we were 20. Like many good Albertans, we met when we were drunk in a bar ☺

And right from the start, John knew he wanted to become a police officer. But in those days it was pretty tough to get on the police service because they simply weren't hiring many people. In fact, it took John EIGHT years to get on with the Calgary Police Service. He applied to police services all over Canada and got rejection after rejection after rejection.

During this time, however, he worked on making himself a better applicant by furthering his education. First he got his criminology diploma and then he got his degree. He did all sorts of jobs, such as delivering bread for Westin's, to pay the bills and then was working at Corrections when he FINALLY got the call from the Calgary Police Service.

We were living in Abbotsford at that time – it was 1997 and we'd just got married – and I remember the day he got the call. The woman from the recruiting department left a message on our answering machine. And when John listened to the message, he was SO excited that he fell to the ground and rolled around on his back, kicking his feet in the air! Now John was

usually very calm, cool and collected so it was pretty funny to see him so excited. Plus he was a BIG Greek guy – 6 foot 3 and 200 pounds, so seeing him rolling around in his back on our living room floor was comical.

But his dream had come true. At long last, he was going to become a police officer.

And so...we moved back to our hometown of Calgary so he could start his new career. I was happy for *him* – but I was NOT happy to be going back to Calgary. I loved our little life in BC...we could do what we want, when we wanted and we didn't have all the pressure of family and friends.

But back we went...to start the next chapter of our lives – which lasted 4 years. We bought a house, got a dog and yeah, the pressure was on to start a family.

Which brings me to *my* dreams. What was *I* doing all those years that John was actively working towards his dream? Well, my dream had always been to become a writer. I talked about writing. I took courses on writing. I read about writing. I complained about not being able to write because I had work full time at a regular job. In other words, I did very little in the way of actual writing.

So...by the time Sept 2000 rolled around, John and I were both 32 years old. We'd been together as a couple for 12 years. We'd dated for 4, lived together for 4 and then were married for 4. So for better or worse, we knew each other pretty damn well.

And quite frankly, I think the poor guy was sick and tired of listening to me whine about not writing – and yet starting to rumble about having a baby.

And quite frankly, *he* was getting more and more grouchy. He was getting bitter and jaded about all that was wrong with the world. That's often what happens to new police officers...it takes time for them to get balance and perspective again.

So...when the invitation came for John and I to go to Disneyland to attend a wedding in Sept 2000, we both knew the time away together would be good.

And it was...we had a blast! We went to Vegas, the Grand Canyon, Disneyland...we had *fun*. We laughed and talked and to be honest, I had my old John back for ten days. We didn't talk about work or anything too serious. We just focused on having fun together. And we did.

But then the time came, of course, to head home again. And wouldn't you know it, but the very next day, my Mom called and asked if we could have Thanksgiving Dinner at our place for 15 people. Now, I should mention that my Mother and John did NOT like each other at the best of times. So needless to say, John was not impressed with this request. But instead of talking it out with me, which is what we usually would've done, he looked at me and said, "You just don't get it do you?"

And then, he gave me the silent treatment for *three* days!

Unbelievable! So there we were...rattling around in this big house, neither of us speaking to each other. It was really weird. Although we were back from California, neither of us had to go back to work until the end of the week.

So because he wasn't speaking to me, I did an awful lot of thinking. And I began to wonder if what I wasn't "getting" had to do with my inability to say no to anyone, especially my Mother. Thanksgiving Dinner at our house wasn't convenient because both John and I were working most of that weekend. Why *was* I so quick to say yes to something I **didn't** want to do – and yet no to something that was supposedly important to me...such as my writing?

And then on the Thursday – September 28th – John looked at me and said, "Come on...let's go to the dog park."

"Oh...big of you," I thought to myself. "You're finally speaking to me."

So we go to the dog park and are walking our dog and he's still not saying much. So I turn to him and say, "I am so scared I am going to wake up 20 years from now and still not have finished writing a book."

And John stops walking, turns to me and says, "You're probably right about that...just as long as you know that will have been *your* choice."

My mouth dropped open. I thought we were supposed to be making up!

But then John does the weirdest thing. He starts *laughing*. He shakes his head and says, "Geez...I can be a real dink, eh?"

And I was like, "*Yeah.*"

And that was that. That was our last conversation. I drove him to work that night – he started back at 9pm – and just before he walked into the back door of the police station, he turned one last time to look at me before going inside and gave me this little wave. And that was it.

Then I went home and went to bed. My first shift back was the next morning at 7am. Now, in those days I also worked for the Calgary Police Service - as a civilian. I was a Report Processor so I wore this little headset and my job was to take incident reports from police officers over the phone and type them into the computer.

So before going to bed, I set my alarm for 5am to wake up an hour early and do some writing before going in to work. After my silent treatment and John's comment at the dog park, I figured I better smarten up and start making my writing a priority.

But when the alarm clock went off at 5am the next morning, what did I do? I reached over and pushed snooze. Ten minutes later, the alarm goes off and I push snooze again. Only this time, I'm not feeling so good. I'm pretty anxious. But still, I stay in bed until the last possible minute.

Then I drag myself out of bed, throw on some clothes, put a quick lunch together and drive downtown.

For some reason, I don't turn the radio on.

John's Death

True to form, I arrive at work – the downtown police station – right before 7am. But when I walk into Records, it's pretty quiet. I mean, its shift change, so things would normally be a bit louder.

So I'm walking towards my little cubicle and I run into my supervisor. And she says, "Maryanne, I can see you in my office, please?"

And my first thought is: "Oh shit! I screwed up on a report before leaving for holidays."

I go into my supervisor's office and she shuts the door behind me. Uh oh...I must have *really* screwed up!

She looks at me and says, "John's fallen."

But honestly, it kinda just goes in one ear and out the other. "Just a broken arm or leg," I think to myself.

Then she says I have to call his Inspector – and hands me the number.

And my next thought is: "Geez...I must have REALLY screwed up on a report because Inspectors don't call in incident reports."

So I sit down at her desk and am dialing the number when it hits me, "Wait a minute...I'm calling *John's* Inspector."

And when the Inspector answers the phone, his first question to me is: "Maryanne, are you with your supervisor?"

Uh huh.

"Are you sitting down?"

"Uh huh..."

"Maryanne...John fell and hit his head."

And it is in this moment that it feels like the air in the room is being sucked out. It is also the moment I began to realize that something *really* serious has happened to John.

The Inspector tells me he's coming to pick me up to take me to the hospital to see John.

So I hang up and my supervisor gently takes my arm and leads me through the still-way-too-quiet office to the back door of the police station. Because, of course, everyone in that room

would have known the moment John fell. They were way ahead of me in terms of knowing about the severity of John's injuries. Word of an "Officer Down" travels *very* fast in the police world.

So there I am standing in the back alley with my supervisor, waiting for John's Inspector to pick me up. I'm wearing my wool sweater with three lamb faces on the front. I've got my little lunch bag in one hand and my purse in the other....and I feel SO scared.

And I turn to my supervisor and I say, "We had a really good vacation."

And the look on her face spoke volumes. I think it took everything she had not to cry because she knew damn well the hell I was headed for. She manages a smile and says, "I'm *really* glad, Maryanne."

And then John's Inspector and his Sergeant, Rick, who is a good friend of John's, pull up in a police van, puts me in the back and takes me to the hospital.

And I remember thinking "When you start your day in the back of a police van, it's probably not going to be a good day."

It certainly wasn't.

During the drive there, I asked the officers what had happened and they said that John had fallen through a roof and hit his head.

So we get to the hospital and I am put in a room with some of John's teammates, including the partner John had been working with that night – a police woman by the name of Lil. I sat down beside her and she put her arm around me. And we all just sat there for a little while, staring at the ground, waiting for the doctor to come in and give us an update. But I looked up once and caught some of the officers looking at me...and I could tell they'd been crying. And do you know, it was in that room – with the anomaly of crying cops – that I realized that John wasn't going to make it.

The ER doctor came and give us an update: John had suffered a serious brain injury and they were trying to stabilize him.

Then a social worker came to take me to the ER to see John. And right before we got to the doors of the ER, I turned to him and said, "How's he doing?"

The social worker looked me in the eye and said, "Maryanne...he's in *really* rough shape."

I don't think there's *anything* that could have prepared me for what was on the other side of those ER doors. For when the doors opened, there John was: lying on his back on a stainless steel gurney. He was covered in white sheet and had all sorts of tubes sprouting out of his head and shoulders. I ran over to him and grabbed his hand.

"John!" I cried.

No response.

“I love you,” I said.

No response. My silent treatment had been reinstated.

And then the social worker gently took what was left of me out of that strangely quiet Emergency Room. For by that point, they had given up on trying to save John. His brain had been injured so badly that it was swelling too fast – and because it was encased in the skull, there was nowhere for it to swell to.

So they were working on stabilizing his body for the purpose of organ donation.

So before telling you what happened next in the hospital and then getting into my grieving process, I’m going to gently take you **out** of that ER and explain to you *how* John ended up there – and what wrong from an OH&S perspective.

So John and his partner that night, Lil, had responded to a break and enter complaint at a warehouse. It was an alarm call. So they arrive at the warehouse at about 5:00am and were greeted by the first employee of the day – who had called 9-11. When that employee had arrived at work, 2 things were wrong: 1) he saw a hole in the overhead bay window and 2) when he went to open the front door, the alarm was starting to go off.

So he put two and two together and called 9-11, thinking there was a break and enter in progress.

The K-9 unit was called and so was John’s Sergeant and other back-up from John’s team. When K-9 arrived, the officer, Darren Leggatt, looked around at the officers on scene – there were a few by this point – and pointed at John and said, “You, let’s go.”

Darren specifically chose John to go into the building with him because he knew John was the best person for the job. Darren had actually trained John in recruit class so he *knew* John knew how to clear buildings properly.

So John and Darren go inside the building and are searching for the intruder. Then they see a wooden ladder leading up to the mezzanine level. But since the dog can’t go up the ladder, John goes instead. So he gets to the top of the ladder and is standing on a landing – it is about 5 feet by 5 feet. And he’s got his flashlight out and is searching around. Behind him there is another small ladder and a whole bunch of filing boxes. And John takes a step from the safe surface he is standing on, over some low-lying wires, and right through a false ceiling.

He falls a mere 9 feet into the lunchroom below and, unbelievably, someone has left a chair in the middle of the lunchroom the day before. So his calves hit the back of the top of the chair, which projects his upper body downward at such an angle that the back of his head strikes the concrete floor with enough force to instantly cause a massive brain injury.

Although it is dark, the K-9 officer manages to see, out of the corner of his eye, John fall – and is able to quickly find him in the lunchroom. Darren immediately starts CPR and, amazingly, gets John breathing again. EMS is called, John's Sergeant and other teammates keep CPR going, and then he is taken to the hospital.

Now from an OH&S perspective, here's what went wrong:

1. There was no safety railing in place to warn him – or anyone else – of the danger. The area where John was standing was deemed a permanent workplace, so according to Alberta OH&S legislation, there should have been a safety railing in place.
2. There actually was a danger sign – hanging from the roof, a good 10 feet past where the actual danger was. Since John was searching an unfamiliar premise in the dark, there is no way he would have been able to see that sign.
3. There was no intruder in the building. It was a false alarm, caused by the wind going through the hole in the overhead bay window that the first employee of the day had seen.
4. Security personnel from the security company had actually attended the warehouse twice earlier in the night and determined that they were false alarms caused by the wind – but this was not communicated to the company that leased the warehouse, or the police.
5. The reason for the hole was that a different employee the day before had mistakenly driven a forklift into the window, breaking it. But this was not communicated to the first employee of the next day.

So the first employee of the day had every reason to believe there was someone in the building – and justifiably called 9-11.

I will leave it at that regarding the OH&S component of John's death – because this particular presentation is mainly about grief and mental health, so I will get into that next.

But I will just say that after John's death, several of his recruit classmates started the John Petropoulos Memorial Fund and asked me if I'd like to be part of it – once I was somewhat mentally and emotionally okay again 😊

I said yes – and we decided to tackle the issue that led to John's death: an unsafe workplace. So what the JPMF does is raise public awareness about why and how people can help make their workplaces – and the roads – safer for emergency responders.

Our bottom line is this: YOU may know the hazards of your workplace – but a police officer, firefighter or paramedic coming in to your place of work during an emergency - *won't* be familiar...so please make it as safe as possible for everyone.

Now, in your conference bags, you will find our workplace safety video and public service announcements – all on one brand spanking new little flash drive. I encourage you to take a look at those educational resources...and take a moment to put yourself in the boots of a first

responder. Take a look around your workplace and ask yourself: IS it safe for everyone? If not, make the change.

Maryanne's Grieving Process

So let's return a moment to the hospital on the day John fell. When the social worker took me out of the ER, after I saw John for the first time, he was moved to the ICU.

Thanks to the K-9 officer getting John breathing again, that meant that I was able to spend 17 hours with John while he was on life support, as his body was prepared for organ removal.

And let me tell you...that was absolutely the worst day of my life – and the last day of his. But in hindsight, I am SO grateful that I had that final day with John. It was a chance for us to say good-bye. Well...I was obviously doing all the talking. John was legally declared brain-dead by 11:00am – and I got to stay with him until midnight.

And then the time came to say goodbye and I had to leave him in the operating room – and go home to begin my new life as a 32-year old widow.

Now remember I mentioned how I had set my alarm to wake me up at 5:00am that morning – but then pushed snooze over and over again? Well, wouldn't you know it – but while I was pushing snooze, yet again, on my dream of writing, that was the exact same time that John was dying on a lunchroom floor.

If you believe in a wake-up call for the soul, *that* was a biggie.

But I got the message. Two weeks later, I started writing what would become my book, *A Widow's Awakening*. It took me 8 years to get it – and me – where it needed to be before it was published. But I did it...and well under 20 years 😊

I never returned to my job in Records. Financially, I didn't have to? Why?

Well, since John died in the line of duty, that meant that I was entitled to receive his paycheque for the *rest of my life*. So I get his regular wage for 21 years, which is when he would have retired, and then I switch over to his pension...until the day I die.

For a wanna-be writer, this was a dream come true. The catch, of course, is that it came on the same platter as John's life. And if you're thinking that perhaps I may have experienced a bit of survivor's guilt about this, you'd be right. And I suspect this is reflected in the fact that I have been so involved with the JPMF over the years AND that I took becoming a writer so seriously.

Now, I'm not going to get into the religious part of my journey because quite frankly, some of it is pretty wonky – but let's just say that after all the shock wore off and the anger and fear set in, I really started to get muddled up in the old melon! If you're interested in reading the details of my rather slow but spectacular mental breakdown, then you may find my book of interest.

What I DO want to mention in this presentation, though, is that the more confused and angry I felt on the inside, the more isolated I became from the very people who were trying to support me – and believe me, I was very fortunate to have an awful lot of incredible people helping me through my grief.

But here's the thing, I think when we experience such a sudden and significant loss, it often takes our minds quite awhile to accept our new reality – partly because we don't WANT to.

But at some point, we reach the very bottom...of the depression and the denial and the lies to ourselves. For some, this point may be suicidal thoughts.

It was for me. And the scariest thing was – I didn't even see it coming. It was three months after John's death and by that point, I had manufactured in my little pea-brain all sorts of wacky religious explanations that would justify his death at 32. But in the end, reality always wins.

I reached my rock bottom on Jan 10th, 2001 – the day John's niece was born. Stupidly, I had agreed to be at the hospital for the child's birth. I still hadn't learned how to say no.

But guess what happened, when I held that new little baby in my arms? My truth hit me like a ton of bricks: John and I would never be parents. And even though I'd had 3 months to wrap my mind around that fact; Jan 10th is when my heart finally accepted it. And the fallout was ugly. But what did I do? I just smiled sweetly, congratulated the new parents and then went home and decided to take my own life. I needed out of the pain...I could NOT live with the hurt any longer.

And when people say "suicide is selfish," oh...let me tell you, when the suicidal thoughts show up, you don't give a shit about whether your actions are selfish or not. You have hit the bottom. You're done. How others may be impacted by my actions wasn't even on my radar at that point. I just had to get OUT of the hell, commonly known as grief.

I had been sitting by the fire, planning the logistics, and was about to head upstairs to take the bottle of Tylenol 3's when the phone rang. I didn't answer it. I was WAY past the point of wanting to be helped. Except that it was John's Sergeant, Rick, who was leaving the message.

Hmmmm...Rick had been so kind to me. He was cute. He was divorced. He cared.

And do you know, in that split second, I chose to live. Even though the guilt of just *thinking* about another guy was brutal – it was better than choosing to die. So in that moment, I made a transfer in my heart from John to Rick...and I chose to stay on this planet.

Then I went to bed, cried myself to sleep, woke up the next morning – and began the long, hard, arduous journey of getting myself emotionally and physically healthy again...and happy!

Rick and I never ended up together...we had a couple flings and remained friends over the years ☺ But that's not the point. The point is that although the thought of a new relationship with a

different guy gave me the hope I needed to survive the dark night of the soul, in the end, it was the promise to **myself** that saved me.

And that promise was this: I promised myself that I would NEVER, ever let myself get to that emotional and psychological breaking point again. Contemplating suicide *once* was once too many.

Never again. And *that's* what that night taught me.

Now...I want to reiterate that the reason I have shared with you such personal and candid details about my experience of coming to terms with John's death is to illustrate that if you are dealing with a colleague who has recently experienced a significant loss, you **just don't know** what they may be really thinking and feeling behind the scenes.

Because quite frankly, the reason I had difficulty sharing what I was thinking and feeling in those early months is because I was too bloody embarrassed! But that shame leads to isolation...and that's where people run into trouble. Not only do they begin to feel like they are going "crazy" but also that they are alone.

Grief can feel like a form of temporary insanity...because all that was normal before, no longer is. And let me tell you: that can be *really* scary – especially when everybody else around gets to move forward with their happy little lives.

Healthy vs Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms

So before I get to my take-away tips, I would just like to mention a few things that I did that WERE very conducive to getting me through the grieving process in one piece:

1. Lots of exercise...for me that entailed getting out for walks with my dogs.
2. Spending time with my dogs...that really helped me find joy again in the early days.
3. Finding someone – for me, it was my friend, Kristin – who I could tell ANYTHING to...she was a phenomenally good listener and I found being able to talk things out really helped.
4. Learning to say NO! There were so many things that I simply didn't feel up to doing and I finally learned that what little energy I *did* have, had to go towards getting myself healthy again.
5. Taking care of myself...eating properly, exercising regularly, getting enough rest, journaling and talking things out to friends and family, making my writing a priority and learning how to be quiet for a period of time every morning, to begin to sort out how best to move forward with my life.
6. For the most part I stayed clear of alcohol and drugs, other than sleeping pills in the early days. As tempting as those coping mechanisms are – they are not long term solutions. My Dad was an alcoholic, so in a weird way, that really helped me determine how NOT to cope!

Now to the take-away tips! Don't worry about jotting these 7 points down because I've got handouts for each of you, if you want them.

Here are 7 suggestions for supporting colleagues who have recently experienced a significant loss in their lives and are grieving:

1. **Don't try and say the "right" thing** – there usually is no right thing. Just be sincere and let the person know you care. If you are going to stay the standard, "I'm so sorry for your loss," then put your heart and soul into saying it...and look the person in the eye.
2. **Sometimes the less you say, the better** – because you likely don't know what is going on "behind the scenes" of their grieving process i.e. what they are *really* thinking and feeling. Staying clear of religious comments is usually a good idea. Telling a Mom that "It's God's plan" that their child just died of cancer may not go over particularly well.
3. **Consider asking the person how they are doing – or what they need** – and then shutting up and really listening to what their answer is 😊
4. **Ask the person if it is okay if you mention the loved one who has passed away** – or the event that has occurred. Sometimes we are so worried about "not wanting to upset" someone that we deliberately avoid mentioning the person who has passed away (or whatever has caused the grief). But this can have the opposite effect: by *not* mentioning the deceased person's name, it can downplay the significance of someone's loss.
5. **Send or give the person a card expressing your condolences, compassion and concern.** Even just a simple card with the handwritten note "I'm thinking of you," can mean a lot.
6. **Supporting someone else in their grief is NOT about you.** If someone you work with has just lost their spouse in a car crash, telling them that you understand what they are going through because your 90-year old Grandpa died when you were 7, is not helpful. Oddly enough, this sort of comment happens far more often than one would hope 😞
7. **Consider asking them to go for a "Walk & Talk."** If the person is open to going for a walk (either on a break from work or outside of work), this can be a great opportunity for them to open up and perhaps be more candid about what they are experiencing. There is something about being out of doors, physically moving and not having to look directly at someone when speaking that may help the person speak more freely – which can be a tremendous gift.

A Tale of Two Airlines Story

Now, since everyone here works in the tourism or hospitality industry, I would like to finish with a story called "The Tale of Two Airlines." Because when it comes to dealing with people who are

going through some sort of grieving process, of course it's not just colleagues you work with – it could also be your **customers**.

So this little story illustrates how 2 very different employees from 2 different airlines dealt with me right after my Mom died suddenly a few years ago. I live in BC and she had just had hip replacement surgery in Calgary. So I was booked to go home on a Tuesday to help with her post-op care and my flight was booked – on points. But she died on the Monday of post-surgery complications so I had to change my flight. So, I called the airline and told them what happened and a) they expressed zero compassion in the fact that my Mom had literally JUST died and b) they told me they could do absolutely nothing to help me change my flight, so that I could get to Calgary a day earlier – because it was booked on points. Too bad for me.

Astounded and shaken, I hung up the phone and called their competitor – who I usually fly with. I explained what had happened and not only did they immediately get me on their next flight to Calgary, they also gave me a vastly reduced rate because it was a death in the family.

And then, get this: the next day when I got on the plane, I was still very much in shock. And I remember sitting in my seat, stunned that my Mom was gone. And then the next thing I knew, an airline attendant appeared beside me. She kneeled down in the aisle, took my hand and looked me in the eye. “How are you doing?” she asked. I’m trying not to burst into tears and I say, “I’m okay, I guess.”

She squeezes my hand and says, “Your name is flagged and it says that your Mom just passed away. I am so sorry. I lost my Mom last year and I just wanted to let you know that I’m thinking of you.”

Wow...what a difference from the way the first airline treated me.

And there you have it...the tale of two airlines. And from a customer service perspective, I think you can probably guess who I choose to fly with 99% of the time.

Thank you & Threads of Life

Thank you so much for listening to my presentation and I will be at the table if you would like to stop by and chat. I have copies of my books, some Life After Loss Daily Quote Cards that you might find of interest, more JPMF flash drives, as well as some information on another charity that I work closely with: Threads of Life.

I just want to mention that Threads of Life is a national charity that offers support to Canadians who have been impacted by a workplace fatality, serious injury or life-threatening disease. They have a variety of programs and services, including a volunteer family guide program. It is a really important organization for you to be aware of, so I encourage you to pop by the table and pick up a brochure.

Thank you ☺

