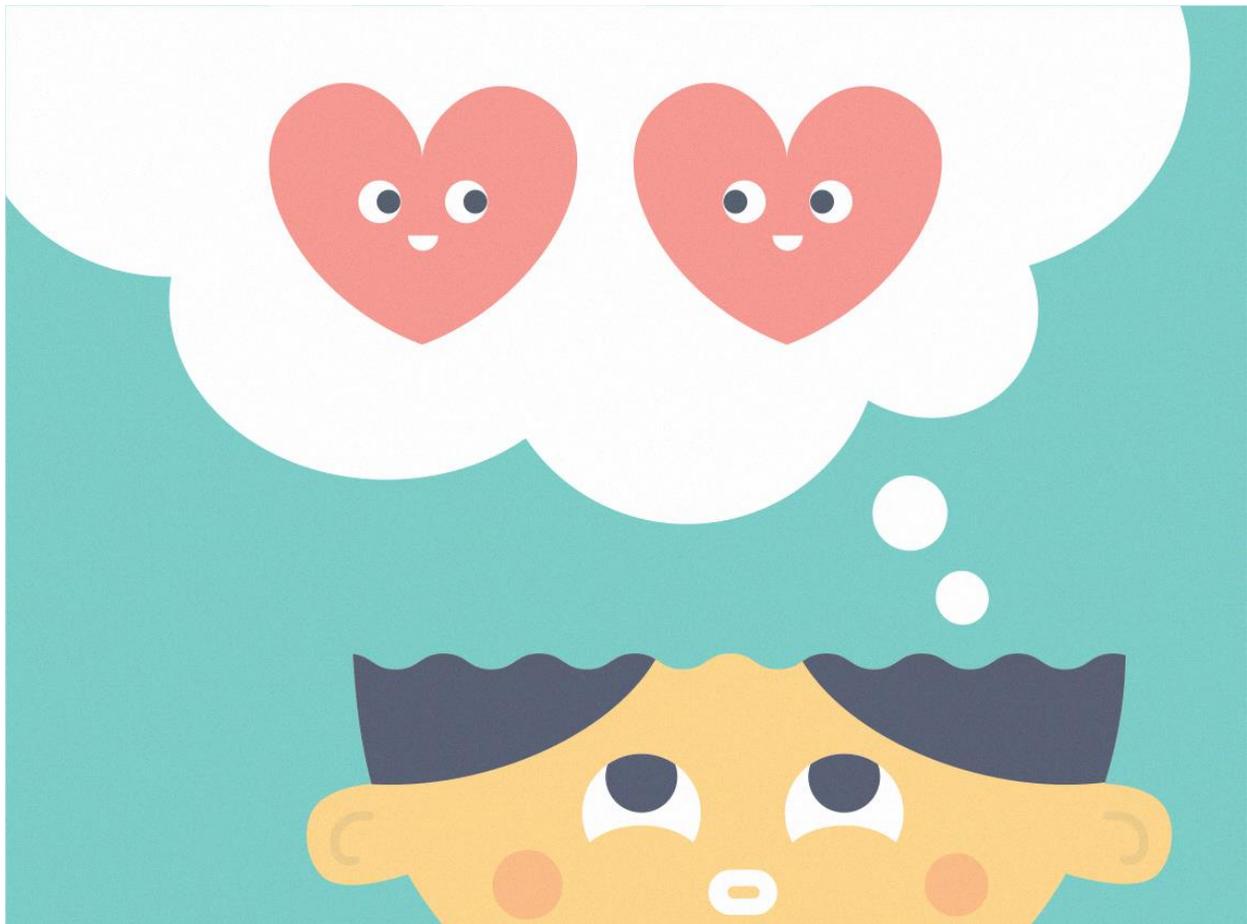


## The After Series: Till Death Do Us Part

By Suzanne Boles

*We spend so much of our waking lives avoiding death—in more ways than one. When it comes to talking about the inevitable, it isn't always easy. So the Orange Dot is aiming to shine a light on these stories, in hopes that it may help others. The After Series features essays from people around the world who've experienced loss and want to share what comes after.*



I was sitting in my friend's kitchen. Her husband was teasing her. He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, then kissed her cheek. She recoiled.

I said it without thinking: "Don't do that! At least you have someone who wants to hold you and kiss you." He smiled. She looked shocked.

I knew where those words came from. I was grieving, but they were an honest reaction built on hours, weeks and months of reflection about my life. I was thinking about the words, “*To love and cherish, in sickness and health, till death do us part.*”

The first time I said those vows, they tumbled off my tongue, mimicked on request without any real sense of what those commitments meant. I was young, just out of university, and we were sure we were in love. Less than five years later, we parted. The next time I said them, I was almost 30. My biological clock was ticking loudly. I didn’t care if I was married. I’d done it before. You can have children without that piece of paper. This was his second marriage too, but Bob was an old-fashioned guy. If we were going to have a child, those vows had to be said again.

This time I already had a better sense of the true meaning of those words, especially “*in sickness and health.*” Bob had a long-term illness. Before we married, we had already been to medical specialists pleading for help. I held his hand after a major surgery (that turned into half a dozen more after we made our vows). This was our life, and I accepted it. But what about the rest of those vows: respect, love and cherishing one another?

Despite the stars in our eyes, eventually you come to a time when you feel a need to change that person to make them “more compatible” with your concept of right and wrong. The question is, how much change is really necessary? What can you live with and what irks you so much you feel like you can’t stand it anymore? Is it worth fighting over, or can it be overlooked? If you think about it, there’s a sense of irony about our societal norms. We aren’t perfect until we’re part of a couple. Two people, from totally different backgrounds, upbringings and life experiences should live *happily ever after*. The reality is that marriage is hard work and requires restraint: learning to hold your tongue and turn your head before you roll your eyes to the back of your head. When we first embarked on our life as a married couple, I cringed as we packed and moved Bob’s polyester green suit from his apartment into our first home. Turned out he hated the green. It was his ex-wife’s choice. We packed every green piece of clothing into green garbage bags and sent them to Goodwill.

Then there were the cowboy boots. I’m not a fan so I gently nudged him in the mall to try on some running shoes. Before long the cowboy boots went the same way as the green suit. For my part, I had to work on being less anal about cleaning, especially after our daughter was born. Fingerprints on windows are the mark of a growing toddler. The kitchen floor will never be clean after meals of spilled cereal and spaghetti. My daughter and I baked together getting flour all over our hands and faces, the room resonating with high-pitched squeals.

Bob had two children from his previous marriage who lived with us on alternate weekends. I loved them but there were some disagreements that ended in compromise. Those small compromises moved us toward a stronger state of coupledness. Sure, there were some angry words, but my mother always told me “never go to bed mad at each other” and we heeded her wise advice. Soon it was time for our daughter to leave home. Like all empty nesters to-be, we wondered *will we still have a connection?* And like most

empty nesters, we were pleasantly surprised at how well we came together and enjoyed each other's company. We had let go of which end of the toothpaste I squeezed (his pet peeve) years before, but we still never enjoyed the same TV shows or movies. Despite the differences, we both began opening ourselves up to each other's preferences and we could feel our couple bond getting stronger. Words became less important. After 30 years, you really can finish each other's sentences and you do know what the other person is thinking. We had reached the point of contentment.

Then, in what seemed like a moment, everything changed. On March 11, 2013, Bob's illness, that had been in remission for 10 years, returned with a vengeance. There were complications. He closed his eyes for the last time June 8, 2013 and life, as I knew it, ended. No couple. No us. As I looked at the couple in their kitchen, and he pulled her towards him, and she recoiled, I remembered doing the same thing. If I could do it all over again I would change that one thing. I would embrace his embrace knowing just how lucky I truly was to have what I had.