



Trinitarian magazine comes face to face with Trinitarians who embody Trinity's Vision, Values and Culture of Care & Connect.



A Widow's Might

Joan Swee's gentle demeanour and petite frame belie her mettle and might. In the 13 years since her husband died of cancer, she has triumphed over tragedy and trial, raised her two sons, reached out to widows like herself, *and* become a strategic leader in the marketplace.

A shocking discovery

It was like a roller-coaster ride, except there was no chance to get off. The turbulent ride began in 1992, when Joan's husband Henry was diagnosed with stomach cancer. The couple and their two sons were based in Hong Kong then, living the expatriate life. The news was all the more shocking because there had been no symptoms or warning signs. **In the span of one week, the cancer had spread from a golf-ball sized tumour to half the stomach.** His whole stomach was removed.

On the fourth day in intensive care, he developed a high fever, which meant infection had set in. The doctors said there was nothing they could do. But as pastors and friends prayed, the Lord visited him in the hospital room. Later, Henry described his experience: "I felt the hand of God, about five times the size of my hand, touching me and massaging me. After that, I felt my body lifted up and I felt cool waters being poured down my body. Like a marathon runner being refreshed by cool water."

After the divine visitation, Henry recovered speedily. He could even eat a whole bowl of noodles without choking. However, the couple was told that there were microscopic cells which at that time no scientific method or machines could detect. Henry knew that he would be, as he put it, "living on borrowed time given by the Lord".

Fifteen months later, there was a recurrence of cancer at the liver duct. Nothing could be done; it was inoperable. The couple was devastated. Joan recalls, "We spent a week taking long walks with the Lord on the beach and poured our hearts out to Him, asking for His miraculous healing and to extend our years together. Finally, we came to a point of surrender and said, "Your will be done."

Upon the advice of doctors, Joan and Henry returned to Singapore with their two sons, 'to be near family'. Henry was admitted into hospital for a liver puncture to drain the bile from the liver duct. A week later, while driving, Joan received a call from the hospital informing her that Henry had slipped into a coma. "As I cried out to the Lord to give me grace, I shoved a praise and worship cassette into the car cassette player. The first song was: 'Your grace is sufficient for me. Your strength is made perfect when I'm weak. All that I cling to, I lay at Your feet. Your grace is sufficient for me.' I had to stop the car by the side of the road as tears flooded my eyes and I couldn't see to drive."

The song would be the constant refrain at the back of her mind as the roller-coaster ride wore on for the next three weeks. "Everyday, I played that same cassette. The songs ministered to my spirit. **I truly felt carried by the Lord. He gave me strength and clarity of mind** for my numerous discussions with the surgeon, oncologist and neurologist."

A lonely journey

The end came on 19 July 1994. Joan had just left the hospital when the doctor called her to return immediately. As she made the U-turn, she felt a strong urge to pray aloud in the Spirit. She recalls,

"I continued to pray strong in the Spirit as I walked down the hospital corridors. The night doctor broke the news to me gently. I cried for a time and then asked to enter Henry's room. He looked peaceful and calm. I was assured they had done the best they could."

Henry's death changed everything for Joan and their sons, then aged six and eight. **The months following Henry's death were unbearable.** "For the first six months, my pillow was wet with tears every night as I tried to forget the nightmare, and erase the vivid memories of hospitals, blood tests results, conversations ... the final months, weeks and moments. Many times, no words could express how I felt. No human comfort could address the pain. I missed my darling husband so much. We were blissfully married for 13 years and were enjoying the best of our life as a couple. My husband had been a teenage buddy even before we courted. So it was a great loss: a dear friend, a confidante, a life partner, a soul-mate, a loving husband, a devoted father."



It was a lonely journey. "Even though I was surrounded by loving family, in-laws and close friends, none could really empathise with my pain of being widowed at such young age. I was surrounded by happily married couples – and I was happy for them that they were happy. They ought to be happy. But I was crying inside most of the time. I was missing Henry. It was a lonely experience, a lonely human journey, of walking with the Lord and crying out to Him, who alone understood."



It did not help that most church folk did not know how to comfort or empathise. “So often, as Christians, we don’t allow mourning. Most people expect widows to ‘get over it’ quickly.” **But the Bible does not say “Do not grieve.” It says, “Do not grieve as those without hope...”** Often Scripture verses were thrown at me: “All things work for good”, “Seek the Lord while He may be found”, and “His grace is sufficient for you”. They felt like hard bricks to a broken heart and spirit during that early stage of grief. Some people even suggested that I should quickly go back to serve and that God would heal me while I serve! In reality, I felt like a broken vessel, leaking all over and needing to be patched up by the Lord first, before I could serve again.”

Following the funeral, her immediate family members, her in-laws and her group of ‘teenage chums’ rallied around her and provided an emotionally safe zone where she could grieve. “I was very grateful for the loving practical and emotional support from immediate family and in-laws. They were not strangers to me. I could cry when I needed to. They spent time with my boys and just loved us back to emotional health.”

My daddy died and it’s all God’s fault

It was a major struggle for her to relocate to Singapore, to adjust to the Singapore education

system, and to manage the volatile emotions of her sons. Joan recalls, “The boys had never lived in Singapore before. It had always been a holiday place. Now it was a sad place – no more Papa to swim with, or ride the bicycle with. No more big-daddy hugs. My children were in emotional chaos and full of anger. **At times, in their anger, they even broke cups and plates.**”

Joan needed to manage her own emotions in order to “be there” for her sons. “Many times, I would drive to a secluded place where I would shout and cry out to God. I joined a gym where I would not bump into any familiar faces, and there I worked out all the negative energy about three or four times a week. I could go there without needing to say hello to anybody; no need for any small talk. Two months after the funeral, I requested a time-out period for myself and checked into a hotel with my Bible, some Christian praise tapes and some books. All these helped me to manage my own emotions so that I could be available to come alongside my boys and take all the emotions they vented out on me.”

Next was her search for books that would take her through the grief and help her to understand how the boys felt about losing their father. She remembers looking desperately for a book for the boys. “I walked into a Christian bookshop and found a book entitled, *My Daddy Died And It’s All God’s Fault*. How apt! The book became a healing balm for both the boys – to help them open up and talk. For me, one book helped very much – *Stick a Geranium in Your Hat and Be Happy*. I cried, and laughed, and cried some more.”

Later, she took a trip to Israel with some friends.

"I needed to know if God still loved me. I had so many unanswered questions. **Why did He take my Henry away from me? What will He have me live for?** I was glad for the intimate experiences with Jesus, as I stayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, in Caiaphas' dungeon, at Galilee and at Golgotha. I felt so loved by Jesus. I was healed again by His redeeming love. **I realised that nothing could separate me from the love of God. Nothing, not death. Not even Henry's death.**"

Trinitarians Care & Connect

Church-wise, Joan returned to the traditional church she had attended before their posting to Hong Kong. But her sons immediately felt the difference between the traditional church and their lively, Pentecostal church in Hong Kong. "My boys were used to the lively, interactive style of 'Children's Church' which they enjoyed in Hong Kong, and they became very bored with the Sunday School at our traditional church."

When two friends from Hong Kong came to Singapore for a visit, they wanted to visit Trinity. Joan had visited Trinity before, but this was the first time her sons experienced Trinity. "They loved it! And I was ministered to, from the start of the first worship song right to the altar call. We all agreed to attend Trinity for four consecutive weeks, pray and then decide if we should 'move church'. It was not an easy decision for me as our old church was where Henry and I had grown up: through the Sunday School, served in various capacities through our teen and young adult years, and gotten married. But for the

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sake of my children, and because of the need to 'move in the things of the Holy Spirit', we all moved." The spiritual nourishment was a healing balm to her. "The corporate praise and worship in Trinity, and the preaching of the Word, were always vibrant, edifying my soul."

Joan decided to join a carecell. It proved to be an excellent decision, as the relationships formed became instrumental in her healing process. "When I joined the carecell, I was ministered to on a very personal level. **The fellowship gave me the encouragement I needed. I was nurtured and grew stronger spiritually as I was being healed.**

I had prayer partners to help me ride the waves of solo-parenting my boys. I drew much encouragement from the group as there were mothers who could empathise with bringing up children. I later opened my home to host the carecell, and became a spiritual parent as well."

She also received care and concern from the pastors. "The pastors were always available when I needed them in times of emergencies. My district pastor, Pastor Johnathan Lee, was like a spiritual father to me and my boys. And I'm grateful to the DiscoveryLand pastors and teachers for being patient with my sons."

There were other Trinitarians who rallied around them. "I'm also thankful that Goh Jong Seng, his wife Jane and their children came around us during those early years of settling in Trinity. They too had been based in Hong Kong and we attended the same church there. When they 'found' us in Trinity, they just 'adopted' us!"

We Care!

One and a half years after Henry's death, God orchestrated the next step in Joan's recovery process, which would later become a ministry. "In January 1996, I was introduced to my first widow contact, Joyce Lye. She was like an oasis to me. At last, someone who has gone through the same emotional turmoil as me! None of my close friends and family members – as much as they loved me and cried with me – could understand my pain. The Lord heard my cries and He brought Joyce."



At that time, Joyce had a small group of widows who met informally for mutual encouragement. Realising that there were more widows out there who needed such support, Joyce and Joan started a formal support group that could reach out to more widows. They began simply by inviting whoever they knew was a widow. The first 'organized' support group met at Joan's apartment in May 1996. To their surprise, 40 widows and about a dozen children came. "All who came were equally shocked to realise that most of the widows were young like themselves. They realised they were not alone!" There was a resounding affirmation to start a

support group for widows. Through their friendship and later, a grief recovery weekend, Joan moved beyond the mourning process.

Today, as Honorary Secretary and a volunteer counsellor with Wicare, she walks with widows through their recovery process and helps them navigate through the bewildering maze of bereavement. The challenges that widowhood brings on are many and multi-pronged, including loss of income, the need to re-enter the workforce at middle age, and 'solo-parenting'. It is also tough for widows to find half-day or part-time jobs which provide a reasonable income and yet allow her to be home for the children.

Besides ministering to fellow widows in Wicare, Joan also ministers in Trinity's Divine Exchange and Wholeness (DEW) Ministry, where she prays with people who want to be set free from emotional and spiritual bondages, and to walk in the full liberty and joy that Christ purchased on the cross for them. **"I believe the Lord has called me to 'heal the brokenhearted' and bring hope to those who are downtrodden.** It is both an awesome and humbling experience to watch the Lord bring wholeness and freedom to those who come to DEW."

Mention how amazing it is for her to have triumphed over tragedy, and she says, "I learned from my pastor in Hong Kong that when tragedies happen to us, it's fine for us to ask 'Why?' But after a while, we must stop asking 'Why?' because if we don't, we will fall into a dark hole of despair. We must learn to ask 'What?' instead – What is the Lord's purpose? What does the Lord want me to do? What is the Lord speaking to me about? He told us this

from his own experience, after his 16-year-old grandson was shot in the head. I have also learned that bad things do happen to good people... even to Christians! But again, these things are temporal compared to our eternity with Christ. Having an eternity perspective helped me stand firm in my faith. And when I journey with God, I am not alone. Jesus said in John 16:33: 'These things have I spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.'

Her advice to those in grief? "Never run away from God. Never stop reading His word. Never stop praying. Never stop being in fellowship with Christians. And when the season of grieving is over, start serving."

Moving on, Making a Difference

For six years after Henry's death, Joan chose to stay home to help her sons adjust to schooling and living in Singapore, and to help stabilise them emotionally. She counts it her greatest challenge to date. "Bringing up two growing boys on my own was my greatest challenge. It was a journey of trusting the Father, that He loved my sons more than I did. I was assured that as long as I continued to pray for them, the Lord would intervene and raise them up."

When her sons were 12 and 14 and more settled, she was ready to return to work. But prospective employers did not bother to even reply or send regrets. It was confidence-wrecking for Joan, who had worked for a multi-national company prior to



moving to Hong Kong. Finally, a breakthrough came when a Christian brother invited her to join his training consultancy.

Today, Joan is a successful corporate consultant, trainer and life coach. She was recently accredited as a workshop facilitator for work-life strategies. She is also a retainer consultant with a company which rolls out key development and leadership tracks for their global offices. The latest to come knocking on her door is a UK-based consultancy which has invited her to be an External Consultant for their leadership and performance management training for their Singapore clients.

"It gives me a great sense of purpose to be able to bring godly values into the marketplace through workshops encouraging excellence, teamwork and positive work ethics. I value people, and I value relationships. So it's easy to facilitate workshops with full conviction and passion."

Joan says the strategic leader in her took shape at Trinity. "All those sermons on being 'significant for God' and 'fulfilling God's destiny and purpose'

were instrumental in shaping my mind, soul and spirit. **What's most exciting is that the Vision and Values of Trinity resonate with me. When there's agreement, there are results, and much personal blessing.**"

Having been cared for during the fragile years of grief, she has since connected with many others and brought them into the Trinity Family. Among these are the mother of her son's classmate, her neighbour, her son's godparents, a girlfriend and a cousin.

She also speaks into the lives of people she meets in the workplace. "There have been occasions when clients and some participants ask to speak to me over some personal issues. These have been opportunities to offer a listening ear or an appropriate word of encouragement."

Whether she is listening to widows, praying for someone in DEW ministry, facilitating a corporate training workshop, or caring and connecting with someone who needs God, there is a common thread that runs through her multiple roles. **Joan carries a Passionate Heartbeat for God and His agenda of touching lives.** And come January 2008, she will embark on a two-year part-time Master

of Social Science in Professional Counselling. "I want to equip myself to serve God's purposes of touching lives," she says of her latest endeavour.

As her sons are 19 and 21 today, the toughest patch of Joan's journey is well behind her. Like their mum, they too have overcome their fiery trial, found wholeness in the Lord and are actively serving Him today. Looking at Joan's youthful demeanour and the sparkle in her eyes, one would never guess that she was once engulfed in the tunnel of grief. Her mourning has been turned into joy. The tagline on the back of her business card says it all – "Moving On, Making A Difference!"

