

Widowed, But Not Wounded

The Hustle & Flow
of 13 Resilient
Black Widowed
Women



SABRA ROBINSON et al
Foreword by Stafford Sutton, PhD

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Chapter 1

The Hustle and Flow of Dr. Beverly Wallace: A Black Widow's Journey Toward Living Life Anew

“After he died, what really happened is she watched the days bundle into thousands, watching every act become the history of others, every bed more narrow... .” This portion of the poem by Lucille Clifton was read at my husband’s memorial service. This piece of life-giving work published in “The Book of Light” gave me light and continues to do so on this journey called *life*. I didn’t know this African American woman poet. Perhaps, if truth be told, I didn’t know myself. Who I was and what I was supposed to do after my husband’s death, I did not know. And I did not know that life would forever be changed after the hurricane.

No, my husband Richard had not died in a hurricane. He did die, however, two days after a hurricane, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. I remember that season well, and I remember the various seasons of hurricanes and losses and new visions that occurred after my husband’s death.

Twelve years have passed, and the turbulence of his death and life continue to teach me life lessons. I have come to realize that it’s these interruptions in one’s life plans, in the “**FLOW**” of life, that one begins to realize more of who they are. Reactions and responses to the death of one’s husband are numerous. They change as with the seasons.

It is my hope that this piece will be shared with other women for their healing as they thrive as resilient black widows.

The Season of Death

Our colleague, Peter, stood up and read Lucille Clifton’s poem. It was at the fourth service memorializing and celebrating Richard’s life. Three prior services occurred in various parts of the country. But it was this one, in the chapel of the school in which Richard taught, that took me out. My brother walked me down the aisle when we processed for the service. Two days earlier

my brother argued with me as he perceived, that for Richard, I had not cried. I had cried, but it was in the quiet moments at night. It was when no one was around that I dealt with the loss of someone, who even after eleven years of marriage and now dead, I realized I did not fully know him. It was in that crowded chapel at the seminary where Richard taught, in a place full of Richard's students and colleagues, I finally shed my hidden tears in a very public way.

This service would be the last, almost a month after his death. My friend, Gwen, read the scripture. Richard's colleague from Pakistan, Charles, preached the sermon. Richard's, daughter, my stepdaughter, read a tribute to her father as if *she* was his true love and I wondered who I was.

I was no longer a wife. I was no longer a partner, not a faculty wife, nor a mother, (an identity I clung to but whose role had shifted because my children were now adults). I was no longer a stepmother as Richard's daughters proclaimed before the funeral; they had never wanted me to marry their father. I was not even a student (I had completed all of my coursework for my Ph.D. and was teaching in a new school in a new state). As I moved out of the house with real live bats (I do think it was a bat that scared Richard to death and caused him to have a heart attack at the age of 53), I was also moving out of a community that was questioning why I was not there when Richard died. I continued to question my identity. Who was I? What would be next for me in this season of my life?

A month prior I had moved to North Carolina and was pursuing my own hustle of teaching, and accepting a fellowship at a University in a state, which ten years later I would call home. I had been at the school less than a month when I got the call. I remember just before I went to my new office to try to call Richard once again, I had been in an auditorium with students making plans to respond to the Hurricane that tore through Louisiana and Mississippi. Before the hurricane, Richard and I had planned to meet in Atlanta to officiate his uncle's funeral. It was a week earlier that Uncle Kenneth had died. Three weeks prior, Richard's father had also died, and now I was to return to Minnesota because Richard had died, too. Not only did I have to prepare for his funeral and memorials, but I also had to prepare to live in the whirlwind of a new season I knew nothing of. I packed up the seminary-owned house in a month's time and returned to North Carolina to fulfill my commitment to teaching.

In North Carolina, I felt dead to myself. My daughter was not talking to me after feeling ashamed that I acted, “Brooklyn,” on her when I yelled at Richard’s first wife who entered our home to “protect” her daughters from me. My son, well, he was doing his own thing, and so here I was in a new city alone. There would be times when I returned from class and would immediately get into bed fully clothed. Who would care? Sleeping out of numbness, the aloneness unbearable, I was living and walking dead. And honestly, there were times when I simply wanted to end it all, even as I taught students in a class about dying and death.

I went to Brazil a month after Richard’s death. Richard and I were to present a paper there. Peter, our friend, was there in Brazil as well. He took me out one evening to have a meal and to see the city. The darkness of the place, supposedly a vibrant one, was all a blur to me as was the year I spent trying to make my life anew. It was a friend, Gary, who would later be very present in my next season, who told me to get up and do something for someone else. And so, I did. Nine months later, at the end of the school year, I left North Carolina and went to face the residuals of the storm called death (or was it life?). Even though I was offered a permeant job of teaching, I decided to leave.

My journey took me to Mississippi. My bishop called and asked if I would go. I had lived and worked on the Gulf Coast before, so it was familiar. My new hustle was to work with those victims and families and churches who had experienced loss due to Hurricane Katrina. For almost two years my new hustle was to comfort and care for victims who lost so much. I buried myself in that work, but there were lessons for me to learn such as not taking the time to face my loss, confront my fears and not living my truth. It was in the season of Richard’s death, risking leaving something, a job, that was certain, shifting the flow of my hustle that new learnings would also occur. I was encouraged to go to someplace familiar for a season for healing. I began to learn more about myself.

I went to grief counseling during this season. I had to take a good look at my marital relationship. I told my therapist that I married Richard because he was safe. But I really married out of fear; fear of being fully responsible for myself. I did want things to work out. Neither one of us had done the work of embracing who we were. Healing is a process I learned. It would take time. Unfortunately, because of the untimely death of my husband, his time ran out. I felt sad for him. But my time was not over. I had to come face to face with

me. There would have to be another season to go through before I would begin to understand this and do so. Another storm would occur. Another season of more intentional learning; a time I call, *The Season of an Illusion*.

The Season of an Illusion

He encouraged me to help someone else. He, however, did not tell me to help myself. He was an addiction, an excitement, and a fun person; he had been a constant ebb and flow of my life for almost thirty years.

Gary and I met when I was ending my first marriage. I was a walking zombie at that time and was even more afraid of living. I was afraid to speak up. I was afraid to take chances. I married my first husband because at the time it was the thing to do. But I was not happy. I did not have a voice. When I spoke, I was often silenced and discounted. It was not, however, how I wanted things to be, and I felt there was more to life. Gary entered my life. He was a married man at the time, but oh so charming, was he.

He bought me my first bouquet of flowers leaving them on my doorsteps. No man had ever done that for me. He took me dancing. No man had ever done that with me, and I was mesmerized by his charisma. But he was charming to other women as well. I thought that I was going to be the one who would settle with forgetting the words that he told me when I talked to him about my marriage – “don’t settle”.

Realizing that Gary was not one to settle down, I married Richard. It was safe. But the desire to live with abandonment was my passion. Then Richard died, and my relationship with Gary rekindled.

When I moved to Atlanta after my time in Mississippi, Gary was to move to Atlanta too. We were finally going to be together – so I thought. The addiction that he struggled with, however, took him in another direction. He entered rehab in another state, and I began my work of dealing with my own disease of co-dependency. Gary got better, but the illusion of ‘happily ever after’ would not be. My cards came crashing down when he told me he was to marry someone else.

“Watching every act become the history of others, every bed more narrow...”

The Clifton poem was telling my story. Yes, the bed became more narrow. The one who I had been in love with for more than thirty years, the one who I had hoped to marry and spend the rest of my life with, had decided that another woman of a lighter hue would become his wife. And I was left to grieve yet again.

I was to grieve the fact that I had loved someone who could not commit to a relationship with me. I grieved the illusion. But this was a different kind of grief; a different kind of loss because the person who I was grieving was yet still alive. My former professor, Pauline Boss, coined the term “Ambiguous Loss,” and for sure this fits the description. I would see Gary at conferences and hear about him through colleagues. He was present, but the relationship was not. It was a different kind of grief because he was the one with whom I felt I could truly just be myself. I grieved the loss of intimacy, and I felt the hole in my soul that was getting bigger and bigger.

I watched from afar and wondered if my joy would return. I hoped that he was happy but was also angry and felt that he let my other sisters and me down. Why did he love a white woman? What was wrong with us? Or to be truly honest once again, the questions were: What was wrong with me? Was I too demanding? Was I too much of a bulldog, as another male friend who rejected me once said? Was my body not a sight of pleasure? Was I simply too old? Would my bed always be a bed for me alone? But I was simply in a season of an illusion of what living fully could be. My co-dependence did not serve me well. Healing and wholeness were not yet realized because my life was based on what I wanted it to be and not what it was. And then the season changed again.

The Season of a Possibility

Ten years after my husband passed, a new season was upon me. This next season occurred so unexpectedly. *The Season of the Illusion* took a toll on me. I did not know, however, that there would be another season - *The Season of a Possibility*.

I was not actively looking for this new season. I was resolved to the idea that my time had passed. I didn't realize a new season was in the making. I also did not know that in the flow of my life, this would be a short-lived season. I surely did not know that even in this *Season of a Possibility*, I would experience even yet again the loss of another man who I dearly loved.

I met Nate when I was working on a project for my mother. He, in turn, was helping in the community. Nate was assisting seniors in getting ramps built for their homes. Nate had come to my mother's house to check it out, and I met him at the back door. I remember I had crumbs on my lips (perhaps symbolic in that I had settled into accepting the crumbs of life). He helped me identify the crumbs and suggested that I wipe them away.

Nate was working on another project and asked me for my help. We were to be partners in a venture in teaching others how to care for themselves holistically. The magazine which he felt was his life work was to be called *Revelation*, and he wanted it completed before his 60th birthday.

We began to talk with each other on a regular basis. Not only did I share my current journey with him – the death of my brother, the illness of my mother, and the disillusionment with Gary, but he began to share his life journey with me as well. On one of our outings for coffee, he asked that I promise not to leave him as he struggled with the ebb and flow of his own life situation. I told him I would not.

Nate would engage his work as an engineer as I engaged in mine and would call me just about every morning to say hello and to check on mom and me. My work would often take me out of town as he traveled across the state of North Carolina.

In June of this year, I had just returned from a business meeting for the second time in a month. (my hustle of teaching takes me away from time to time.) Two weeks before my return from the first trip I had not heard from Nate for a couple of days. When we did talk, I told him he could not disappear on me like that again. I told him I would tell him my reason when we talked in person.

I did not want to tell him that not hearing from him reminded me of the death of Richard, my husband. I did not want to tell him that it was two days after Richard's death when his body had been found in our home that I would be told that my husband had died. I did not tell Nate after his 60th birthday celebration, just four months prior when he was hospitalized with congestive

heart failure, that the occurrence frightened me. I did not tell Nate that I did not want him to disappear on me.

Nate and I did not have that conversation about my fears, but he promised me though that he would not do that again. Even now, I am writing this piece in a place where we first shared coffee, and I remember him telling me, “don’t disappear on me.” I, too, was going to hold him to this promise. Two weeks later I took another business trip. Upon my return, I again had not heard from Nate.

Well, Nate had died. Apparently, no one was able to reach me.

The day I found out that Nate had died I was obligated to care for another. I was to engage in a grief counseling session in my new practice (my new hustle) with a woman who a year prior had lost her own husband. That morning after I confirmed the news of Nate’s death, I stood in the shower and cried like I never cried before. Perhaps it was all the many losses that I had experienced in the past twelve years. Perhaps it was the realization that I did not get a chance to say goodbye once again. I cried over the loss of my friend who seemed to have disappeared on me. And I cried for me and all the dreams of the possibility of life anew. Whether the dreams would have been actualized, the mere possibility was now gone with Nate’s death.

That evening, I decided to care for myself and grieve. I rented a hotel room to be alone. Wondering if indeed I was like a Black Widow spider, I questioned: “Do all the men I love die because of me?” You see, when I was in college in my freshman year, a young man who liked me but I was afraid to engage him, drowned and died during our summer break. Richard, my husband, died of a heart attack; Andre’, the one who said I acted like a bulldog died of colon cancer; Gary, well his love died and then there was now Nate. Was I in fact destined to have the death of the men I love to be a part of my life journey? Being with me, is that why they died?

In some African traditions, it is believed that a widow causes their husband’s death. The death of a husband before his wife is viewed as unnatural and presumed that the wife might have had a hand in his death. She is treated inhumanely in some parts of Africa with Widowhood Rites imposed inclusive of exclusion and confinement, poor dressing, compulsory prayers and more, all because it is believed the widow has the power to cause death.

I laugh as I think of this as I don’t have that kind of power. (Laughing at this thought would have been something that Nate would have done too, which

was Nate's way of being in the world as well as his take on life.) But during one's grief experiences, one thinks of all sorts of crazy things. One thinks they can master control of the calamity caused by the hurricanes and storms that come with living. Nate taught me in his living that one could not. You go with the flow. Life is to be lived.

Nate entered my life. His presence would change my outlook on life. Our intimacy was so powerful even though we had not even kissed. This *Season of Possibility* would be a rich experience that would have me looking at who I was and how I lived and how I loved.

After the night of my lament when I took the time to talk with the spirit of Nate and to cry for the loss of his physical presence and his early morning phone calls, after grieving over the loss of a life of possibilities, I got up. I made plans to say my goodbye to Nate. I attended the funeral and watched as they wheeled his lifeless body out of the church. My body quivered with pent-up emotions. I thought I was about to fall. But as his body laid strong in his death, my body too got strong in the recognition I could stand and be okay. Nate was not going to disappear on me. His spirit would forever be with me. It is in my memories of Nate, of loving and living every day, not being afraid of dying, (we talked about his death two weeks prior to him dying), the willingness to live and love fully (a covenant that Nate made to himself and me after his 60th birthday and health scare) that I can be alright. I did not go to the cemetery but left and returned home to prepare for a trip to New York. And I vowed as Nate vowed, to live.

The Season of Life Anew

"Inseparable." The song began to play on the radio. The lyrics of the song gave me peace as I drove and thought about Nate. I now smile when I hear that song, and I play it repeatedly to be reminded of his presence. I promised not to disappear on Nate, and I do feel he kept his word too. Nate is with me.

With my husband Richard, his presence continues to guide me, too. Remembering them both remind me to love and love intentionally. Their spirit reminds me not to be afraid and to live and live with integrity. Even in the *Season of Illusion*, with Gary, while he is still alive, that relationship taught me the lesson of owning the desire to be known, fully known, to be fully naked and honest with others, but more importantly, naked and honest with myself.

The Hustle & Flow of 13 Resilient Black Widowed Women

Lessons from death have taught me well. Life's lessons have taught me too, and I am grateful for these experiences. So, what have I learned? To tell the truth is risky but also necessary for one's growth. To tell the truth about oneself and to oneself is even more crucial. I planned and lived my life based on the life of another - my husband, my lover, my friend. That strategy did not work. I know more fully now that I am responsible for living my life. Another lesson that I learned is that there will be a time when out of a desire to be loved, we embrace an illusion. Life is too short to live in make-believe. Years go by so quickly, and long life itself is not promised.

Life's seasons teach one to breathe even when winds of death attempt to, and often, wreak havoc. One learns that seasons constantly changes. But after each death, there is a resurrection. A widow decides to die or live in each new season. It is an ongoing process of deciding if one wants to be whole. As in the words of the writer, Toni Cade Bambara, when she raises the question in her work, *The Salt Eaters*, "so you sure sweetheart, that you want to be well. Just so you're sure sweetheart, and want to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you're well."

So... I will visit Paris this coming Springtime and Brazil anew this coming summer. A few trips I do remember: a trip to Italy three years prior; parasailing over the Gulf of Mexico when I cannot even swim; zip lining over the trees of Utah when I was sorely afraid of heights; a visit to Switzerland and Ghana; taking a cruise and dancing on St. Maarten's beach, (now devastated because of the more recent Hurricane Irma). I'm rebuilding my life while living without fear. A Resilient Black Widow she becomes. "Widowed" but not devastated by her wounds. As in the words of Lucille Clifton's poem, deciding and determined to do so, I LIVE.