

# Learning how to cope with widowhood

By KATIE KERWIN

"I'm not out to convince anybody," protests author Lynn Caine. "I have no message — I have a story."

Several chapters of her life are already in print: "Widow," her first book, tells of coping with the death of her husband of 17 years. "Lifelines," published last month, discusses the lines of survival that enable women to overcome loneliness, fear and anxiety.

"I lost my husband and I found myself. Of course, that's a lousy way to do this," she says. "I could never have predicted this. It's like a novel."

Ms. Caine's stories are not to be confused with fairy tales. Her talk last week at Troy's Somerset Inn, hosted by the Sisterhood of Temple Emanuel, was called "Giving Up the Myth."

The "happily-ever-after" myth is the first to go. Her own up-and-down life is a case history.

In the midst of a happy marriage and motherhood and a publishing career, her young lawyer husband developed cancer, dying a painful, lingering death. Financially and emotionally unprepared for widowhood, she wallowed in despair for a long time, she says.

"From widowhood, I had to learn coping skills. I was literally drowning in a sea of troubles."

By the time "Widow" was published in 1974, Ms. Caine had overcome her grief, become financially independent and was in the midst of a whirl of TV appearances, interviews and guest talks.

Happy ending time at last? Unfortunately not, Ms. Caine recalls. It all began to get out of hand. Depression, anxiety and the stress of handling a successful career and raising two children nearly became too much for her.

"LIFELINES" is the story of putting her life back together yet again. This time, she gives much of the credit to the women whose support and comfort helped her back on her feet.

"Change is so very hard for us. My life is about change — very dramatic change," she says. The myth of permanence is another destructive fallacy, suggesting that in life there are bargains to ensure that nothing will ever change, Ms. Caine adds.

"It contributes to a sense of failure. If it doesn't work out that way, you think you have done something wrong. It also prevents us from appreciating the challenge of change."

"Life is ironic. It can change with the ringing of a telephone, as mine did." She refers to a call in 1970, during a National Book Awards ceremony, from

her husband's physician. "He was calling to say Martin had inoperable cancer and was going to die."

"THE MYTH THAT is most prevalent is Sleeping Beauty," Ms. Caine asserts. She describes it as the notion "that we were passive, waiting — waiting to be rescued." It starts with the idea that mother can make anything come out right. Then if that doesn't work — as is often the case, she notes — Prince Charming will appear to fix everything up.

"It's very hard to accept that you're the only one who can make your life work."

The Snow-White myth encourages females to be "a man's woman, who'd rather hang around with men than women," she says, drawing the analogy with Snow White's dwarf companions. Girls are taught to look upon other girls as competition, she maintains.

"Never trust another woman" is an axiom that keeps many women from close, helpful relationships with their friends, Ms. Caine says. Young women are also taught to keep in their emotions, she continues.

"What I learned from my mother and not to be a martyr — not to complain and not to assert what my needs are,"

she says. "We were raised not to talk about ourselves. Don't air your dirty linen in public," they said. Women are not really comfortable about expressing emotion."

It's even harder for widows to display their grief, she adds. "I felt I had to be brave, be the way Jackie Kennedy was — or appeared to be. It's difficult to admit — let alone talk about — the irrational emotions that follow the death of a loved one, she said."

It wasn't until she appeared on Barbara Walters' talk show, that Ms. Caine let down the stoic front. She admitted then that she felt angry at her husband for dying and leaving her alone.

"It makes you a monster," she says of her admission of anger. "How can you be angry at a guy who died?"

The revelation brings guilt because the widow knows her husband didn't want to die. "But nobody tells you that your feelings aren't rational."

But getting such feelings off one's chest is usually the healthiest step, she says. Protesting that she is no prophet or miracle-worker, Ms. Caine says all she gives women is an opportunity and the encouragement to let their feelings out.

"I THINK EVERYONE is dying,

bursting to talk," she says. "Everyone is keeping so much in."

"It's easy to identify with. My experiences aren't unique, although I used to think they were," she says. "We're all women in transition." Everyone is learning as they go, she adds.

"Nobody knows the rules. Nobody tells you how to play — they don't know the game. The old rules don't apply."

The changing role, attitudes and education of women emerging in the book on which she is now working, a book about her 14-year-old daughter, Buffy, Ms. Caine says.

"It's about my daughter and how I feel about my daughter," she explains. "It's about how we've had to be friends."

Ms. Caine's own trials and thriving career inevitably play a role in her daughter's growth. "This is a hard way to live." She'd rather raise her children in a traditional, two-parent home, she says. "But you have to play the hand that's dealt you," she adds.

"It's rotten for a little girl not having a father." But the single-parent situation isn't all bad for Buffy, Ms. Caine says. "We have a lot of talking time." There are opportunities for "munching out" together, and lots of cuddling, confiding and "silly times," she says.

SHE DOESN'T apologize for the busy career that often takes her out of town for several days at a time. Buffy is torn between pride at having a mother on tour and on television and the wish to have her mom home more, Ms. Caine says.

"It's a no-win thing. You can't please anybody, so you might as well please yourself."

The prospect of seeing her personal life aired on bookstore shelves around the country doesn't bother her daughter, she says.

"She thinks it's just wonderful," Ms. Caine explains. "I'm not going to exploit my kid. I'm not going to put in anything she does not approve of."

Buffy attends school with the children of many "public" people — kids accustomed to being in the public eye, Ms. Caine says. So her daughter isn't concerned about reaction from her schoolmates.

"To Buffy, being like everyone else is being quoted in the New York Times."

This book, like her others, will be more a chronicle of personal experience than a how-to self-help handbook.

Ms. Caine is fond of quoting Charlie Brown — "He's my favorite philosopher" — who said: "In the book of life, the answers are not in the back."

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