

Interview for “Shadow Living: Paintings of Grief” by Deborah Slappey Pitts

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Deborah Slappey Pitts, who is here to talk about her new book “Shadow Living: Paintings of Grief.”

Deborah Slappey Pitts is the author of “Booking Matters” and the award winning “I Feel Okay.” She is a native of Americus, Georgia, and today she travels the country as an inspirational speaker. Pitts is a member of the Church of Christ and is affiliated with the Christian Writer’s Institute, PMA, the Independent Publishers Association, and SPAN (Small Publishers Association of North America). Deborah has two sons, Clyde Daryl and Alex Keith, and resides in Columbus, Georgia, with her husband, Marshall Pitts.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Deborah. I’m glad to have the opportunity to talk to you about your new book on the important topic of grief. To begin, will you tell us about your personal grief experience and why you decided to write this book?

Deborah: I certainly will. I hadn’t planned on writing my story about my first year dealing with the pains of grief, but something inside of me was saying “you need to tell the whole story—your intimate account of grief so you can help others along the way.” That’s why I decided to go ahead and write “Shadow Living.” Other folks who had read “I Feel Okay” urged me to tell my story, and just as I had helped millions by providing information about the deadly amyloidosis disease, I could perhaps, help others by providing information about grief and grieving through my personal story.

Tyler: Since “Shadow Living” is a type of sequel to “I Feel Okay” will you tell us a little about that book? Does the reader need to read “I Feel Okay” before reading “Shadow Living”?

Deborah: I’ve been told that “I Feel Okay” is a love story as Clyde and I traveled across the United States hoping to find someone who would help him find a cure to the deadly disease. We did find a physician and a hospital—the Mayo Clinic and they did everything that they could do to save Clyde, but he died two weeks prior to receiving a life-saving heart transplant. No, the reader doesn’t have to read “I Feel Okay” first—they can read “Shadow Living,” and perhaps, if they want more specific details about Clyde and our journey, they can go back and read “I Feel Okay.”

Tyler: Your husband died of primary amyloidosis. Would you tell us a bit about what primary amyloidosis is? Did that type of death make his loss more difficult for you?

Deborah: Primary amyloidosis is a disease of the immune system that affects eight in a million people annually. As I told Irene while interviewing with her for “I Feel Okay,” primary amyloidosis forms in the bone marrow and is caused by the abnormal accumulation of protein fibrils in organ and body tissues. The proteins are small fragments of antibody molecules that are normally present

in the body, giving needed protection against infectious agents and bacteria in the body. However, in primary amyloidosis a defect occurs in the immune system where excessive amounts of antibody molecules are produced and deposited in the organs and tissues. As the molecules continue to enlarge in the organs or body tissues, they begin to interfere with normal body functions causing kidney failure, loss of sensation, heart failure, and even death. This is what happened to Clyde. Amyloidosis affects both men and women of every ethnic origin, but the majority of the cases have been diagnosed in men.

Tyler: Did you find being a widow at age forty-one extremely difficult? Do you think it would have been easier if your husband had lived into old age?

Deborah: I believe that becoming a widow at any age is extremely difficult, but perhaps even more so at a younger age. Rather would it have been easier for Clyde to struggle with the disease into old age—is a question I often ponder. I can only speculate that Clyde would have hated to be confined by a disease of this caliber—one that he didn't know at first how even to pronounce or spell.

Physicians know much more about the amyloid diseases now 12 years later. The disease can be managed, but it is extremely volatile. New medicines are being formulated to help combat the debilitating effects of the disease, but researchers still have a long way to go with this disease. I still receive emails from across the globe as patients and caregivers do their very best to stay ahead of the amyloidosis nuances, but at best, it's still a challenging ordeal.

Tyler: Deborah, in "Shadow Living," you talked about how grief can also affect a person's health. Will you tell us about your own experience with health issues?

Deborah: Researchers are on the forefront these days as they learn more about the stressing effects of grief. You hear all the time about older couples being married for fifty years—one dies and within a year or so the other spouse succumbs to death as well. Grief definitely has a tremendous impact on a person's health.

During my first three years of grieving, I suffered from tremendous headaches, stomach pains, and even chest pains. I visited my cardiologist on several occasions, thinking I was experiencing a heart attack. I learned later that during the grieving process you manifest some of the identical pains of your loved one and you think that you're going to die as well. My heart throbbed in pain, but it was grievous pain—the pain of losing my husband to death.

Tyler: I understand the book also gives an update on amyloidosis. Is the disease better understood now? Is there anything special you would tell people dealing with losing a loved one to this disease to help them through the grief process?

Deborah: Yes, the researchers at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN and Boston Medical Hospital, Boston are continuing to be on the forefront with learning more about the disease and exposing it to the world. Now twelve years later, numerous research hospitals are currently doing research on the menacing disease. Some thirty-five different types of amyloidosis have been identified and that's a great thing.

I receive emails from Australia, the United Kingdom, and France. The communication about amyloidosis has become global. Even several episodes of the hit series “House” are talking about amyloidosis. So, the word is definitely spreading about amyloidosis and that makes me smile. And I know Clyde would have been gloriously happy about that.

Tyler: Deborah, please tell us a little bit about the stages of the grieving process described in the book?

Deborah: I pondered about the best way to tell my story. Would I journalize it or would it be best for me to talk about it as I experienced the stages of the grieving process. I chose to do the latter, describing how I felt as I learned to live as a widow during my first year.

There are many experts—psychologists and psychiatrists who talk about grieving—the various stages of grieving and how a person should be feeling. I chose to describe my experience using seven stages of the grieving process and I describe a stage or stages within each chapter. The seven stages that I identified are shock, denial, anger, bargaining, fear, depression, and acknowledgment. It should be noted that everyone will grieve differently and perhaps won’t follow all of the seven stages that I have identified in “Shadow Living...Paintings of Grief,” but these seven are typical. It doesn’t necessarily mean that a person will follow each phase in succession either.

I went back and forth several times with anger, denial, and even depression before I finally arrived at acknowledging the fact that my husband was gone from this earth and wasn’t coming back. I had to learn to appreciate the beautiful twenty-one years that we had together as man and wife and father of our children. I’m thankful to God for giving me a beautiful jewel of His to love and to cherish forever.

Tyler: Many other books have previously been written about the grieving process. What makes “Shadow Living” stand out from other books?

Deborah: When I’m talking about my book to newspaper, radio, and at book events I talk about how “Shadow Living” steps away from the crowd to become a “close-up” and personal dialogue between a suffering widow who has lost her loving husband to death. People feel my pain, at least that’s what they’ve told me in my reviews and face-to-face conversations.

One particular reviewer said that she felt as though she were in the room with me as I screamed out in pain and agony—wanting desperately to see my husband again. “Shadow Living” makes the grieving process real. It’s in your face. The reader feels what I feel. I found that the other books were lacking the personal touch. And I have reviewed many. “Shadow Living” is more than words—it’s about living and feeling and hurting and screaming, and finally the spirit being slowly calmed by my husband’s voice and even by listening to comforting words by our Creator. I believe that’s why “Shadow Living...Paintings of Grief” stands out among the rest of grief books. This is the difference.

Tyler: Deborah, of the books about grief I’ve read, many of them include activities for a person to do to overcome their grief? Were there any types of activities you found helpful, and do you include any in “Shadow Living”?

Deborah: I found several activities to be helpful and I share them with my readers in a flyer that I created entitled, “Thoughts on Grieving.” For example, one of the things that I found very helpful was to rearrange my bedroom. Someone had told me to try this and I just shrugged it off for a time, but when I did it, I felt better—more independent and with a renewed commitment that I could work through my grief with God’s help. I also suggest to griever to do something special for themselves, such as going shopping and buying something special just for them. Of course, you have to gauge your budget with this one, but it’s a good stress reliever.

I also discussed in my book about writing your thoughts in a journal. I’ve included this tip on my list of “Thoughts on Grieving.” I chose to write my husband a poem for our wedding anniversary and I drove to the cemetery and read it to him. This was a tremendous release of emotions for me as I told Clyde how I felt about our wedding anniversary and his physical absence. I also suggest to griever to eat good, nutritious meals; even take multivitamins and minerals if you are able. And without a doubt, I suggest to the griever to seek out a physician, especially if you begin to develop health issues.

Finally, I suggest to griever to reach out and help others who are in need as they journey through their stages of grief. I’ve listed some of my thoughts on grieving and there are several others that I believe will be very helpful.

Tyler: Deborah, I have heard grief therapists talk about how grief relates to all losses in our lives, not just death. Do you think your book would help people undergoing losses such as divorces, financial losses, or job losses?

Deborah: Yes, “Shadow Living” is touching souls around the U.S. and perhaps globally now since its release in September 2007. I had a reviewer state that “Shadow Living” is not only an excellent source of information and comfort to those who have lost a loved one, but also to others who are going through a divorce or other terrible experience in their lives. Believe me, if I could learn to live again after my husband’s death others can learn to go on after a divorce or any financial loss. You still have your health, and if you are a religious person, you still have your loving Father and Jesus Christ. And that’s a beautiful thing. It’s priceless!

Tyler: Tell us a little bit about your inspirational speaking on grief and amyloidosis. Did you find it difficult to share your story in such a personal and public way?

Deborah: When I’m invited to an event whether face-to-face or via teleconference my goal is to tell my story of loss and survival and then to walk them through the stages of the grieving process. Through my own experiences others learn that they too can move on to experience a beautiful life again. It might not be exactly what you would have wanted it to be (without your loved one) but life is still beautiful and we honor our loved ones by learning to live again and to reach for the stars in our hearts and appreciate the sun’s warming rays against our skin.

Through talking about my experiences with others, I have learned to heal and to appreciate my experiences in knowing that God knows best, beyond my pitiful comprehension. I’ve learned to heal by helping others, and so I encourage my audience and readers to reach out and help someone else in need. In the end, that’s why we’re here—to love and to help each other.

Tyler: Do you feel people's understanding of grief has changed in recent years because of all the books and attention to grief. Has the grieving process changed or do you see it as changing?

Deborah: I believe that discussions about grief and grieving are finally coming out of the closet. Most people prefer not to talk about their pain; however, I chose to discuss my personal bout with grief because I felt my experience would help people in the same situation or any other crises in their lives. My personal writing about grieving was two fold—to help me better understand my grieving process and to share my thoughts in an attempt to help others.

With individual and group therapies more readily available in recent years, many people are beginning to reach out for a helping hand and that's a good thing. Recently, I participated in an online book talk and spoke about grief and grieving quite extensively. Many discussed openly their losses and it was very inspirational to hear so many people finally beginning to talk about their grief after many years. I'm thankful that I have played some part in opening this dialogue. It needs to stay open. Grief is out of the closet.

Tyler: Deborah, what does your future hold for you? Do you have plans to write any more books or are there other ways you want to express your message of overcoming grief?

Deborah: If you would have told me that I would be the author of two books, describing my family's pain and agony of death and learning to live again some twelve years ago, I would have said that you were dreaming. But the reality is sober. I am learning every day to live and appreciate the beauty of God's green earth and His blessings for all. Once I had written "I Feel Okay," I thought that my job was done, but I was grossly mistaken. I am now writing my third book—a nonfiction work of short stories about growing up with my brothers and sisters in the late 50s and 60s. I am having a ball writing the stories and recounting the special moments that shaped our values, our hopes, our lives. It will be released in late 2008.

Also, I continue to speak with groups about grief and grieving and share my personal story and thoughts on grieving—providing tips on the griever's journey. I speak one-on-one with people and try to make myself available when they just want to talk and need someone to listen. I also participate in panel discussions and have plans in 2008 to be a participant at a hospice event. I also speak about grief and grieving on radio and television.

This is a continuous process and I want to do whatever I can to help others on their journey to find solace once again in their lives.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Deborah. Before we go, will you let our readers know your website address and what additional information they may find there?

Deborah: My website address is dslappeypitts.com, my email is Innisfree54@yahoo.com, and myspace page is myspace.com/deborahslappeypitts. I definitely would welcome your comments and thoughts. My books can be purchased at all booksellers.

I appreciate your wonderful support as I continue my journey to help others in distress and to make a positive difference in a person's life. Please enjoy the holidays with family and friends and learn to live again. Thank you so much and grace and peace to all of you. Deborah Slappey Pitts