

The Hardest Work You Will Ever Do



Nubar Alexanian

Mary Cook works on the ground crew for an air taxi company in Gustavus, Alaska, a community of 450 surrounded by Glacier Bay National Park. She also handles the mail, tends the town's only coffee house and serves as a hospice volunteer.

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surrender.

Morning Edition, January 30, 2006 • The day my fiancé fell to his death, it started to snow, just like any November day, just like the bottom hadn't fallen out of my world when he freefell off the roof. His body, when I found it, was lightly covered with snow. It snowed almost every day for the next four months, while I sat on the couch and watched it pile up.

One morning, I shuffled downstairs and was startled to see a snowplow clearing my driveway and the bent back of a woman shoveling my walk. I dropped to my knees, crawled through the living room, and back upstairs so those good Samaritans would not see me. I was mortified. My first thought was, how would I ever repay them? I didn't have the strength to brush my hair let alone shovel someone's walk.

Before Jon's death, I took pride in the fact that I rarely asked for help or favors. I defined myself by my competence and independence. So who was I if I was no longer capable and busy? How could I respect myself if all I did was sit on the couch every day and watch the snow fall?

Learning how to receive the love and support that came my way wasn't easy. Friends cooked for me and I cried because I couldn't even help them set the table. "I'm not usually this lazy," I wailed. Finally, my friend Kathy sat down with me and said, "Mary, cooking for you is not a chore. I love you and I want to do it. It makes me feel good to be able to do something for you."

Over and over, I heard similar sentiments from the people who supported me during those dark days. One very wise man told me, "You are not doing nothing. Being fully open to your grief may be the hardest work you will ever do."

I am not the person I once was, but in many ways I have changed for the better. The fabric of my life is now woven with gratitude and humility. I have been surprised to learn that there is incredible freedom that comes from facing one's worst fear and walking away whole. I believe there is strength in