

By Emily Boydston

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psalms 23:5-6*

My life changed drastically when my husband died. It seemed as if everything I had planned for no longer mattered. I had sought a master's degree in Business in order to increase my income to better care for my disabled husband. Since I work for a university, I was able to complete that degree without paying any tuition.

The degree was "free," but the content was not what I was interested in. Without the incentive of improving care for my husband, I found no opportunities that spoke to me. As I worked through some of my grief, I began to look at what I wanted and what I wanted for me.

Yes, I wanted to increase my income. Yes, I wanted a master's degree, but not in business. I knew I wanted a degree in English. I began my research on what I wanted from a university and that led me to Emporia State University. The university where I work does not offer a master's degree in English. ESU offered the degree I wanted, online, with the options that were important to me, at a reasonable cost.

For the first time in quite a while, I was excited and had something to look forward to.

The subject content was exciting. Online discussions were stimulating. The textbooks were very interesting. And the faculty – so kind, so knowledgeable, so friendly, so supportive.

The experience was exciting, but also challenging. And at times, my grief interfered with my ability to focus, be motivated, stay on deadline. Again, the faculty were kind and supportive.

And then the campus where I work was closed due to the coronavirus. Everyone who could, was instructed to work from home. That was complicated for me because one of the cost-saving measures I had taken just after my husband died was to cancel my internet service. After a week, I received a hotspot from work so I could use my laptop at home to complete some work. But the only way I could communicate with my instructors was e-mail on my phone. They were understanding, kind and supportive allowing me extra time for assignments.

Next, I was exposed to the virus and had to quarantine at home. I was extremely jealous of those persons who posted on Facebook all the projects they were completing while they were at home. Not me! Lack of focus, lack of motivation, grief and sadness took over and I got very little done, at home, at work, on assignments.

One of my co-workers says now, more than ever before, we need to grant each other mercy. I needed a lot of mercy. And I received it from my instructors.

The year 2020 was challenging in many ways. The political unrest and accusations; the shortages; the masks, the uncertainties, the new rules and regulations, the fears, the isolation. The isolation was particularly difficult for me because I was already lonely and missing my husband. Family and friends were kind and meant well, but somehow the conversations led to difficult or negative topics, including my grief. The discussion boards in my classes were an outlet for me to reach out and discuss with others, who did not know I was recently widowed, the topics we were studying, a subject other than coping with grief. And then, the additional comments made by the instructors in the discussion boards added a richness and depth to my learning. I really admired my instructors and loved the information they were providing. The studying and the discussion boards helped ease some of my grief and loneliness and I am grateful. The deadlines helped me work on my motivation. I would not have been able to stay on topic, study the assigned materials or complete some assignments by the deadlines if I had still been studying another major or without the support of my ESU instructors.

My instructors presented the ancient history of language and tedious MLA formatting in ways that kept me interested and motivated. They were creative and the materials they chose to include in the assignments were interesting and thought-provoking. They answered all my whining e-mails in a timely, professional, up-beat manner that helped me look forward, not back; at what I could do, not what I could not do; at what I was interested in, not what I tolerated; what my world, my mind, my future could be, not what I feared. Attending ESU has been life changing for me at a time that I needed it most, a time when I needed to look forward, in a way that is hopeful, in a way that is improving my life and my mind and my outlook.