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embrace

A Bereavement Newsletter | Holiday Issue



“Memory writes on every page of the calendar—holidays, birthdays, anniversaries. In the wake of death, those precious days bear a bittersweet twinge; a pang that the celebrations they mark will never be repeated with your loved one.”

Abbey Press
Carenotes

A Grief Story

It was a gift card. I wasn’t really surprised, since mom usually did the Christmas shopping. Dad wasn’t only struggling with gift giving; he wasn’t sure what to do with the entire holiday season. Like me, he wished he could just tear November and December out of the calendar. There were just too many holiday memories. Everything from turkeys to stockings were a reminder.

For most of my Christmas break, we avoided conversations about mom, but we couldn’t stop others. Invariably, we would run into someone who wanted to share a memory about “Meg.” We would listen and smile politely.

I stared at the gift card and finally just asked, “Dad, tell me about your first Christmas with mom.” I saw both sadness and light in his eyes as he remembered. We shed tears as he told the story and when he was done, I told about my earliest memory of Christmas.

We laughed and cried a number of times that first Christmas, and it certainly was not the same. But even in our grief, we were able to start making some new memories.

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Garland and Grief

Facing the holidays can be one of the most challenging experiences the bereaved must endure.

The media-crazy world is constantly reinforcing the notion that at the holiday season, families are blissfully united, sorrows and strife are forgotten, joy-by-the-moment is on order for the day, and there is “peace on earth, goodwill toward men.”

The holidays often look as if they are gift wrapped for everyone. For the bereaved, though, the only things that sparkle are their tears. Learning to handle the garland and the grief is learning to live with the grief, instead of being consumed by it.

We hope that the suggestions within this issue of Embrace will help with this task.

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Griever's Holiday Bill of Rights

- 1 You have a right to say **time out** any time you need to: time out to let up, blow off a little steam, step away from the holidays, have a “huddle” and start over.
- 2 You have a right to **tell it like it is**. When people ask, “How are you?” you have the right to tell them how you really feel, not just what they want to hear. (You also have the right to smile and say you are fine, because telling them how you really feel isn't worth your time—some people won't understand anyway.)
- 3 You have the right to some **bah humbug days**. You don't have to be “Jolly Old St. Nicholas” all the time. You are not a bad person just because you don't feel like singing Christmas carols all day.
- 4 You have the right to **do things differently**. There is no law that says you must always do Christmas the same way. You can do 10 cards instead of 100—or no cards at all! You can open presents at somebody else's house. You can do without a tree. You can have pizza instead of turkey! The list is endless...
- 5 You have the right to **be where you want to be**. Be at home or with the relatives. Be in any city, any state you choose! Nobody said you have to have snow to have Christmas, and there is no law that says you must stay home!
- 6 You have the right to **have some fun**! When you have a day that isn't so bad and you feel like doing something just for fun, then do it! Don't be afraid of what someone else might say if they see you laughing and having a good time. Laughter is every bit as important as tears!
- 7 You have the right to **change direction mid-stream**. Holiday grief is unpredictable. You may be all ready to go somewhere or do something and suddenly be overwhelmed. When that happens, it's okay to change your mind. There's plenty of time in life to be predictable. Exercise your right to change when you need to.
- 8 You have the right to **do things at different times**. Go to church at a different time. Open presents at a different time. Serve your meal at a different time. Give up and go to bed at a different time. Don't be a slave to the holiday clock.
- 9 You have the right to **rest, peace and solitude**. You don't need to be busy all the time. Take a nap whenever you need one. Take time to pray, meditate and recharge your spirit. It may do you much more good than eating another huge meal!
- 10 You have the right to **do it all differently again next year**. Just because you change things one year—you know, try something different—does not mean you have written it in stone. Next year you can always change it back or do it another new way.

Bruce Conley

New Holiday Rituals

You may have to decide if you will use the same traditions or create some new traditions, especially during your “first” holiday season. Here are some ideas of new traditions:

- > **Donate a poinsettia** at church
- > **Decorate the gravesite** or some visible location in honor of your loved one
- > **Light a memory candle** during the holidays; candles are a warm, gentle reminder of those we are honoring
- > **Give a special gift** in memory of your loved one
- > **Give yourself a special gift**, something you think your loved one might have gotten for you
- > **Take out photo albums** and remember holidays past
- > **Create a new photo album**, ornament or other holiday craft to share with the family that honors your loved one

Seasonal Sorrow

It comes and goes,
as the cold snow blows,
drifting aimlessly
until piling on my heart.
Anger, sadness,
pain and guilt,
all gifts I bring unwillingly
as the holidays impart.
I try to hide
my grieving heart
beneath gifts and decorations,
but eventually, they come apart.
The holiday season
comes on quick
and leaves just as fast.
Although seasons and grief depart,
they linger in the heart.

Michele Meleen

Spiritual Corner

The holidays, especially Christmas, are all about light. When you are grieving, you may not see the light—only the darkness. Know that it will get brighter and the light is there. Many Christian traditions light advent candles to remember that hope and light shine in the darkness. Jesus came to be light and hope for a dark world.

As Christians, we affirm the joy and hope that are at the heart of Christmas. Yet even Jesus's birth was marked by suffering and loss. Mary, after all, became pregnant before she was married, which likely caused both her and Joseph to endure the community's scorn. And Jesus himself, though he was God, became flesh and entered into a world of brokenness, making him subject to the full range of human emotions—including joy and peace, but also grief and utter abandonment on the cross.

For most people, the holiday season is a time for celebration. But for some, it is a very painful time; failing to recognize this can cause others to feel even more isolated in their grief.

“The holidays are days spent with loved ones—Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Mother's Day and Father's day are a few. They are days we miss our loved ones more.”

