



United in the Journey

A Service of the Grief & Bereavement Department of
United Hospice
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Side Trips: Anniversaries & Holidays

Dear family and friends:

The world should stop when we are grieving. The halls should certainly not be decked with “boughs of holly” and “Have a Jolly Holly Christmas” is the last song we want to hear. The commercialization of the Christian Holidays and the Jewish calendar of holy days can make the falling of the leaves meet the falling of our spirits. We often find ourselves marking time until the noise is over, and we can wrap ourselves again in the comfortable solitude of our mourning.

But the holidays demand our attention. Our families have rituals and traditions that we must face. We change and rearrange, or we hold on and find a way to honor the memory of our loved one. Where do we celebrate, what does it mean to celebrate in the midst of mourning? How do we resolve the inevitable differences that were always there within the family, but now seem magnified through the lens of pain and loss?

We accept our limits, the limits of our ability to be present with the season, or with traditions, or even with some family members. We make room for each other to be different. Just as one person wants mashed potatoes and another family member demands sweet potatoes, we will have different needs during all holidays and anniversaries of our losses. Foods, shopping, gift-giving, faith rituals, and even parties have become integral to the season that can remind us we are loved, or remind us of our loneliness and loss. The confounding journey of grief includes experiencing the full range of our emotions. We will spiral through the feelings of the joy of having been with our loved one and the gaping hole often left when they die. At the holidays, we celebrate memories we want to cherish and struggle with the painful reminders of our losses. The ambiguities of grief surround us. We have to decide how to move through the season with the signs and songs that make sense to us. We can accept our limits and the limits of those we love. Lynn J. Lane, M.Div., LCSW, Executive Editor

Side Trips: Anniversaries & Holidays

by Mary Malcom, M.Div., BCC

Have you ever walked into a room and found yourself transported back to another time. This can happen as you approach anniversaries and holidays. We are calling these experiences “Side Trips.” I have met very few people who have been able to keep their bodies, minds or emotions from remembering their deep sense of loss or unique memories that surround these days.

I worked in a doctor’s office as a health and grief educator for a few years. Many people came to the doctor thinking they were having a heart attack. When it was established the patient really had “Broken Heart Syndrome,” according to the Johns Hopkins research, the doctor referred the patient to me. Chest pain are frightening. But the problem was the patients’ forgot, or were intentionally trying to avoid dealing with an anniversary or holiday that followed a significant death.

“Side Trips” into your past can be disconcerting, disorienting and confusing when you are already trying to hold things together. If you spend your time trying to block these memories and feelings out of your day, you may end up laying awake at night or dreaming about them. Why not take a proactive approach.?

Take out a calendar and mark all the holidays and anniversaries you know in advance. Plan for them intentionally. Set aside a place and time to remember the one who died. You may even want to write some of your memories down without judgment, just let them come to you. Honor these “Side Trips” by acknowledging their power to teach you about the depths of your grief and the kind of support you need.

Side Trips: Anniversaries & Holidays

Safe Travel Adventures:

Grief activities for kids and those who Love Them
By Mary L. Malcom, M. Div., Board Certified Chaplain

"I'm right here!"

Children need a place in traditions and rituals. Children will have many of the same emotions adults have when it comes to planning for special holidays and anniversaries. They may be excited because they anticipate seeing special family members or friends. Children may remember the last time they celebrated a special day and how they spent it with the one who died.

- * Talk about how you remember the holiday or anniversary
- * Talk about what each person liked most about celebrating this special day.
- * Ask each member of your family to help plan how you will celebrate together this year
- * Decide together how you will honor the one who died.

Families often tell us that by sharing what is most important to each person, from the youngest to the oldest, everyone feels heard and appreciated. If each person shares the part of the holiday or anniversary that means the most to them, it helps everyone identify what is important in family traditions. And everyone needs to agree on a way to honor the one who died. It can be as serious, funny, special or subtle as fits your family. The oldest to the youngest can participate in this exercise. Compromise sometimes brings meaning.



by Dan Davis, M. Div.

The Holidays and other days of special family remembrance can add stress to life. For an individual or family that is dealing with the recent loss (or sometimes not so recent loss) of a loved one, the emotional stress of the holiday can be overpowering. Many times the grieving person or well-meaning friends can create more stress by trying to make things "normal". Instead of thinking about what was normal, it is better to consider the important things to do to remember and honor the life of the one who has died.

Thus, when planning family gatherings it is important to listen. Listen for what is important to each family member as they speak of what is special and important to them. Try to listen, not just for what they desire, but pay attention, as best you can, to what they need. There may be conflict between individuals about what they feel is important and necessary. There may be adamant feelings expressed about not only what should be done, but also about things that should not be done. Remember everyone has suffered a loss. Families can make room for difference in loss as well as life.



The

Accidental Tourist:

Books & Music reviews that capture glimpses into the lives of people who are grieving

The following list represents movies that explore grief and bereavement in the context of the Christmas holiday.

In **The Family Stone**, Diane Keaton plays a mother who knows she is dying after a recurrence of breast cancer. Her children are returning home for the holidays, so she seizes her chance to "fix" each one in a way that can only lead to chaos. Slowly the truth of the terminal nature of her illness breaks loose. The film then captures family members reevaluating their lives, embracing the intensity of their

grief, and paving the way for closure with their mother.

Rather than ending with these powerful Christmas scenes, the story goes on to explore a glimpse into the family's first Christmas following the mother's death as they honor their memories of holiday traditions without their mother. A movie that deals with death and grief and its impact on the holiday season with such dignity and truth is rare.

Christmas in August: Special Edition (1998): In this foreign language film, a dying man chooses to live his remaining days on his own terms - running his photo shop, telling only his immediate family of his terminal illness, and delighting in a chance relationship with a customer who brings joy to the end of his life without

knowing of his imminent death.

The Christmas Wife (1988): Jason Robards and Julie Harris offer powerful portrayals of a recent widower who answers an ad offering "social introductions" and the woman who agrees to share his first Christmas alone on the condition that no questions be asked.

It's a Wonderful Life (1946): This classic movie exploring the value and interconnectedness of life has touched wounded hearts for years.

Princess Sydney Christmas: Three Gold Coins (2005): This animated tale follows a young princess who decides to honor the memory of her grandfather by mirroring his generosity with others.



The Mourner's Bill of Rights

By Chris Feno, LCSW, Social Worker

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph. D., is a speaker and writer who has worked in the field of grief and bereavement for many years. His "Mourner's Bill of Rights" is considered a classic example of good self-care during anniversaries and holidays.

1. **You have the right to experience your own unique grief.** No one else will grieve in exactly the same way you do. So, when you turn to others for help, don't allow them to tell what you should or should not be feeling.
2. **You have the right to talk about your grief.** Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk as much as you want, as often as you want, about your grief.
3. **You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions.** Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt, and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey.
4. **You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.** Your feelings of loss and sadness may leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel ready to do.
5. **You have the right to experience "griefbursts."** Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening but is normal and natural. Find someone who lets you talk it out.
6. **You have the right to make use of ritual.** The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. More importantly, the funeral is a way for you to mourn. If others tell you the funeral or other healing rituals such as these are silly or unnecessary, don't listen.
7. **You have the right to embrace your spirituality.** If faith is a part of you life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God, find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.
8. **You have the right to search for meaning.** You may find yourself asking, "Why did he or she die? Why this way? Why now?" Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. And watch out for the clichéd responses some people may give you. Comments like, "It was God's will" or "Think of what you have to be thankful for" are not helpful and you do not have to accept them.
9. **You have the right to treasure your memories.** Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.
10. **You have the right to move toward you grief and heal.** Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.

This information comes from the 'free article' section of www.centerforloss.com, Dr. Wolfelt's website, an excellent site with articles, a bookstore and more information about training and education opportunities available through the Center for Loss and Transition.

Time does restore
to us our quiet joy
in the spiritual presence
of those we love,
so that we learn
to remember
without pain,
and to speak
without choking up
with tears.
But all our lives
we will be subject
to sudden small
reminders
which will bring
all the old loss back,
overwhelmingly.

Elisabeth Watson

Poetry Corner



Poetry from around the
world that touches close to
home

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My Travel Log: Personal Stories by MJ

Who would have known that the week after Christmas my family and I would be returning Christmas gifts with tags still on them. The salesperson at Macys was hit with the brunt of my grief when she asked a standard question about one of the returned items. "Is there something wrong with the slippers?" To which I abruptly replied, "The slippers are fine, but my father died so he won't be wearing them." This statement sent me into a flood of tears and left the person behind the counter tongue tied, looking bewildered, and wondering what to say. But there was nothing she could say, right or wrong.

Perhaps it was the suddenness of an untimely death; perhaps my image of what holiday spirits are supposed to be. In any case, my perceptions of Christmas 1992 have left an imprint on my heart and in my memory for the rest of my life. That Christmas my family and I had dinner at one of my aunts. My uncle had taken a family shot of all of us together. Who would have known it would have been the final capturing of what we call our immediate family portrait? For the years that followed I would look carefully at every component of that shot, trying to find a clue that would tell me my father's heart could not endure another holiday year.

I could have extended the "could have's, should have's " and wishes of knowing something in preparation for the reality that his heart was failing. The reality is heart attacks come when you least expect them, because truly; who would ever expect them at all. Death of a loved one is hard, there are no two ways about it. Death around the holidays is even harder. Friends and loved ones dance around ways to help the person in holiday grief and mean well with good intentions. The pain of such a loss is heightened by the myths of what holidays are supposed to be.

If I could offer anything to anyone at this time, it would be to :

- * be ever so gentle with yourself
- * let yourself off the hook with "I should" and "I could"
- * know that your pain is personal to you
- * allow yourself the freedom to go through your grief the best you know how.

Blessings to you. MJ



Travel Guide: Books, articles and websites with information about grief
by Artie Hendricks

This issue contains some websites you might want to "stop by" with helpful information about grief and the holidays.

Help for the Holidays: Ideas for the Bereaved
by Laura Slap-Shelton, Psy.D.

<http://griefandrenewal.com/article25.htm>

The Blues: Holiday or Anyday (contains great resources on many subjects including several articles on grief and the holidays.

www.journeyofhearts.org/jofh/grief/blues

Helping Yourself Heal During the Holiday Season
by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

www.centerforloss.com

Hospice Net has lots of articles for all ages
www.hospicenet.org/html/bereavement.html

*Getting through the holidays:
Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukah and Qwanza*
www.widownet.org/faqs/holidays.shtml

You can find the following issues of our newsletter on our website with new issues added every month:

Wounded and Healing
Despair and Hope
Guilt and Freedom
Loneliness and Connection
Weakness and Strength
Anxiety and Peace
Doubt and Faith
Anger and Resolution
Blame and Forgiveness
Denial and Acceptance

<http://www.united-hospice.com>