

Living With Holiday Sorrow After A Death

Guidelines for the Bereaved and Their Supporters

During this season of conspicuously embellished celebration, a moment of purposeful contemplation could potentially inspire ways to fill the hollow cavity of loss.

Anyone who is not currently engulfed by searing pangs of separation due to a beloved companion's recent death may be disinclined to read this article. But, chances are, many folks can recall times of acute grief when feelings of emptiness intensified amid holiday happenings. As the supposedly jubilant season unfolds, how can we reach out, touch individuals on the sidelines who are suffering, and embrace them and their loss in a spirit of empathic camaraderie?

At first glance, it may seem easier and more comfortable to distract the emotionally afflicted through preoccupations that douse the embers of memory. Otherwise, the person might be dragged into a rabbit hole of desolation... and might even cry. But consider the possibility that such tears may be therapeutic. Consider also the possibility that one's own discomfort with death could squelch a willingness to tolerate freedom of mournful expressions among others.

Think about the value of getting together with individuals who are maneuvering their way through the morass of bereavement, about providing **companionship** at this time of the year when frenetic busyness often dictates lifestyles. The palpable, yet simple reality of physical (or maybe even electronic) presence can provide palliative consolation.

An invitation for liberation from stifled emotions and **unconditional acceptance of whatever feelings emerge** can lay the foundation for active listening.

Sensitivity to either that which is being said or to moments of silence can be key to connecting authentically and conveying understanding. Instead of attempting to configure appropriate reactions or responses, just listen. Give contrived holiday cheer a rest.

Encourage flexibility and receptivity to a bereaved individual's own inclinations. Perhaps others might think it best for that person to participate in social gatherings and events as distractions. But tuning in to one's internal grief meter can help steer toward a direction and degree of involvement according to one's comfort level.

Acknowledge a possible need to **modify or forgo practices and implementation of traditions this year.** Give oneself space and freedom from other's expectations as well as one's own. Avoid unfulfilling obligations and activities. Recognize that this season often intensifies the stress of loss, causing fatigue and hunger for rest.

Offers for **assistance with tasks** such as shopping, wrapping, decorating, cooking, and cleaning, etc. may be especially appreciated during this time when a "to do" list could seem overwhelming. A partner approach can diminish loneliness.

Acknowledge a reconfigured existence of the departed person through metaphysical ideation and symbolic associations. This may be a time when suggestions for connecting with lost loved ones would be appreciated. Creative channels could open the door to refreshingly rejuvenating horizons. Instead of tucking the deceased person away in a mental grave, invite him/her to be present. Allow memories to flow as freely as the wine.

Here are some suggestions:

Designate a tree of some sort as a remembrance feature... a traditional “Christmas tree” cut for household display... a tabletop replica... a paper version artfully constructed... etc.

Decorate it with ornaments reflective of the person’s life... a favorite color... activity enjoyed... relationship emblem... etc.

As a group memorial activity, ask kith and kin gathered together to provide symbolic ornaments of this nature, explaining their significance. Conduct a **ceremonial hanging of everyone’s contributions** on a tree, perhaps while the person’s favorite holiday music is playing in the background.

Launch an annual tradition of buying or constructing an ornament that relates meaningfully to the individual’s life.

At a gathering, distribute **“Remember When” cards**, either for a dedicated group activity or as conversation starters during a meal. These would likely be recapitulations of experiences with the decedent, referencing incidents, circumstances, or possibly distinctive quotations uttered by him/her.

Reminiscing in this manner is a way to invite that person back into the midst of holiday festivities, reviving associations and recollections of shared moments. If used during a meal, the remembrance cards (akin to place cards) could be individually arranged at all place settings.

To stimulate conversation (and probably laughter), each person would read aloud from the card at his setting and then iterate a flashback that he might recall or, if not, solicit input from others at the table.

The following entries illustrate this concept. Following a sunset memorial service in a college auditorium, a commemorative dinner was held in the private room of a restaurant, with guests at round tables accommodating six-eight per table. These notations on cards that effectively stimulated conversation and laughter throughout the meal exemplify the variety and breadth of possibilities that can be drawn from someone's life history:

Holiday and weekly Sunday dinners in Montclair and Linden homes
Aunt Nancy's fasnachts in her York, PA apartment above the art gallery
Summers at the Loon Lake cottage
Garbage truck that hurtled down the hill and landed in the front yard
 after its brakes failed, coming to a halt a few feet from house windows
Buffalo herds and coordinate paraphernalia at the Schodack farm
The formidable high school principal's office
Inaugural rides on the Garden State Parkway before it was officially
 opened
Summer visits to the Lake Memphromegag plumbing-less camp
Charlotte's first and only bike-riding attempt
The Seattle burlesque show
"Wigglesquirm" giving birth
Indoor chats with the next-door neighbors across the driveway,
 between respective houses' windows, while on bended knees
High school student who drove over the front lawn and got stuck on the
 nails planted by the police, penalized by planting sod to restore
 damaged grass, then becoming a landscaper as an adult
Travelogue slideshows
Sarasota scooter excursions across a major thoroughfare
"Get that cat out of here"
Exhausting boat row on Elk Lake in Michigan
Ritualistic counting of church money on the desk in the sunroom
Cherry bombs in the front bushes
The pig that fell off the haystack joke, ad nauseam
Sunday excursions to watch the planes at Newark Airport

Red and white polyester jacket

"Hold the onions, cheese, and mayonnaise"

70th reunion celebration at Bucknell University

Cousin pyramids at weddings, graduations, and other family events

Incidentally, ideas for such "Remember When" cards could be an enjoyable preplanning activity, either by an individual or a family group. Or gathering together to generate ideas, compose, and construct the cards may be a therapeutic activity for family and friends after a loved one has died.

Even without springboard prompts of this nature, someone can get the ball rolling by **telling stories or introducing specific recollections** that relate to the decedent. Others are apt to follow.

For a holiday meal, perhaps for some folks an **extra place setting** where the absent person used to sit would help bring thoughts of him/her into the present.

Or a single **memorial candle** would be an elemental and simple addition to the table.

Chances are, the deceased person relished certain **culinary dishes or recipes**. This could be an ideal time to serve them as a remembrance gesture.

Prior to partaking of a meal, begin with **a pre-chosen poem, quotation, verse, or prayer** in tribute to the absent loved one.

Amid seasonal festivities when assembled with life companions who similarly miss the revered person, **play holiday music he/she especially liked**. A playlist of favorites could be tapped annually for memorial relevance.

If the decedent enjoyed an **annual holiday program or performance**, instead of avoiding it, attend with someone else who likewise feels the sadness of that person's absence.

When family and friends are together for holiday occasions, consider incorporating **visits to places appreciated or enjoyed by the decedent**. For instance, a drive around town to see outdoor lights might evoke nostalgic appreciation. Or maybe this would be a time to **share reflective moments at a gravesite or location where cremated remains were scattered/buried**, possibly placing a wreath or symbol of the season there.

Grieving can feel isolating, especially during the holidays when festivity ostensibly abounds. But one's heartache does not have to be experienced in a vacuum. Remember that others may be feeling a sense of loss that parallels one's own, to varying degrees. When in the presence of folks for whom one's life companion was similarly cherished, acknowledge this communal reality together in some manner that is potentially meaningful and restorative for everyone. In spite of having died, the person who is visibly gone still lives within all who had experienced life with him/her.

Prepared by
Mary Ellen Markant
Signature Sunsets
ponderingleaves@gmail.com