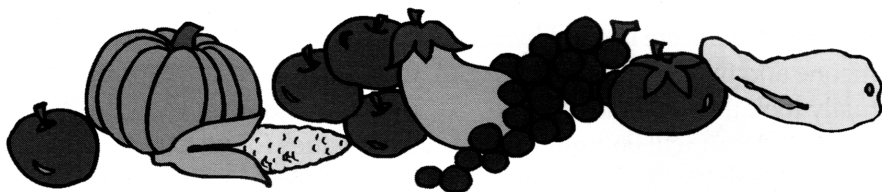


Good Grief, It's the Holidays

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When I had to co-officiate the funeral for my grandfather, I was a wreck. Aside from blubbering my way through one of the readings and a piece of the homily, I nearly fell into the grave prior to the interment. I hit that astro turf they place around the grave with all my nerves and new pair of slick leather wing tips. Zoom! The Abbot who had been officiating with me, grabbed me by the arm, breaking my fall and averting a scene. As he steadied me, pulling me up, he leaned into my ear. "One at a time please, Tom. It's not your turn."

I shared that memory at a local pastoral care workshop on death and dying. All of the clergy present were interested in the workshop because of the continual work with dying and grief they experience in their ministries. Recognizing the approach of the holidays can send shivers up many peoples' spines – not just clergy – as they anticipate having to celebrate amid the mending process of grief. Stories like this are central to everyone's experience of a loved one.

The holidays are a time we gather together as family, friends and a society as a whole. They are times we gain a sense of connection to the various communities we belong to. And, depending on the holiday and its meaning, they can be times of deep awe or gleeful abandon. Holidays always carry emotion. It is because they carry emotion that we connect deeply with the people around us who celebrate these festivities at any level.

Consequently, when they are absent, we miss them deeply around the holidays. It takes many years to be able to integrate the loss of a loved one into the holiday celebrations and all of life. That integration comes as we learn to live in the absence of our loved ones and still hold them present in our memories.

Another story that I told at the workshop was about my learning to celebrate my grandfather at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Pop-pop made the family eggnog at all of the major holidays. Several years in a row, he included me in the preparations. I was eighteen and nineteen when I was invited into the inner circle of family lore and allowed to co-celebrate the sacred Levitical task of making the nog. Of course, at that age, I had no eye to the future and did not care to write down the recipe.

All of you know where this is headed. Pop-pop died with the family recipe in his head and nowhere else. Over the past six years, I have memorialized Pop-pop at the holidays by spending time alone in my kitchen with all of the ingredients I can recall. I dive into his memorialized presence and pray I'll call forth some mystic recipe that will come close. I have not come close, but I drag the attempts to the grave site, raise my cup, have a drink and pour some out for Pop-pop and Mom-mom every year – sometimes twice a year. I share a few stories, chuckle at some memories and pray for a better batch next year. It's silly, but

it is my little integration. It's my little ritual.

What tends to get us the most in preparing for the holidays is the anticipation. Our fear tends to grow and mount as we anticipate having to face family, friends and traditional customs without our loved ones. Will we say and do the "right" things, or will we fall apart? (As if falling apart is not the right thing!) Will somebody say something that will make everyone upset? How will we get through? All of this builds and mounts and forces us into a corner from which we would just as soon forget the whole mess and hide out. "Why bother?"

Although the holidays will be different and some changes may occur (like a new eggnog recipe or a new turkey carver or cook), it is not the healthiest choice to forego them altogether. There are a few steps you can take to help gain back a little of the control you will need to integrate your loss. You don't want to squish the feelings, just provide a healthy space for them to happen within. You want to feel, but not be overwhelmed by the feeling.

Talking with friends and family about memories you have of your loved one will help. You can share stories that come from celebrating the holidays with them – the foods they liked or the special decorations they insisted on (or how they hated Thanksgiving.)

Share ways in which the holidays will be different without

them. Perhaps someone else will have to make the pumpkin pie or carve the turkey. You can decide this together. Maybe you can even invest this person with the new sacred task of doing this thing in memory of your loved one or in honor of them. "Sally, we would like you to be the one who bakes Mom's pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving. I think she would want it that way, and I know we'd be proud." Maybe you will have to go out for dinner since Mom always cooked it all and everyone feels it would be too much this first year to try it without her. Then plan to have a go at it next year.

You could give a special gift to someone, donate money to a worthy cause, plant a tree or send flowers in memory of your loved one. Many times, the holidays are filled with gift giving and presents. Including your loved one in this can help integrate the loss by celebrating his or her life.

Looking at pictures and videos is always a part of good healthy family development. It is a way of marking our days together and seeing how we have grown. Make sure to include some photos or footage of your loved one who died. Sure, people will cry a bit, but allowing ourselves to feel the loss will keep us from sublimating the loss and being eaten alive by the overwhelming attack of buried emotion.

Be gentle with yourself. Sit down and decide which of the tasks that are coming up for the holidays will be tough and which ones easy. Write out a list of the tasks you need to do: buy gifts, get a tree, candles, send cards, etc. Then, next to the task, list some of

the emotions that you feel while thinking about the task: sadness, joy, fear, warmth. This will help you identify the different ways you were connected to the person and will help give you a piece of control via self-awareness.

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Get plenty of rest. Eat healthy foods. Stay away from excessive use of alcohol (and other drugs). The wrong amount of any of these things is a form of trying to medicate yourself by obsessing on one thing (food, sleep, etc.) and avoid the feelings of loss. Spend a balance of time with people and alone, with large groups and small. Go for walks and exercise. Breathe deeply. Cry. Laugh.

Above all else, remember that it will be very different. It will be tough. You have lost someone you love. Take your time and don't load yourself with anywhere near the normal amount of work you would have done before. Even if you do not feel that you loved the person you lost, remember that we make connections and bonds based on

repetition as well as fondness. Spending forty years with someone you hate will still build thousands of memories that will get jostled and displaced when they die. Things will be different.

After each day or event is over, make sure to check on yourself and on each other. Think about the event and identify things you thought or felt or said. Then ask how you did with that and how you coped. Talk about this with others who know you or who have experienced the same loss. It might be a good idea to speak with a grief therapist or go to a grief/bereavement group. You could check with your family doctor or local hospital or church for referral information. Bringing these things to light will not remove the pain of loss, but it will give you some control over your reactions.

If you, or someone you love, is not eating or is sleeping all the time, skipping work or social events regularly or without notice, abusing alcohol or drugs, or threatening to do harm, these are serious and alarming problems. Grieving is not going well, and while grieving is very different for everyone, some people will come dangerously close to the edge. Contact a doctor, clergy or therapist if you suspect that these symptoms apply to you or someone you care about.

The purpose of "good grief" is to integrate loss into the rest of life and to find appropriate ways to change the life of the survivor that will honor both the absence and the memory of the absent loved one.

