



Thoughts for the Holidays: Finding Permission to Grieve*

By Doug Manning

Wherever you are in your grief journey you have probably found the grief comes in waves that seem to overcome your being. You may have figured out that some of these waves are fairly predictable and seem to almost be on some hidden schedule while others hit for no apparent reason without warning some people say they have been overwhelmed by sudden wave in a grocery store or in another public place. Most likely you have figured out that all of the special days in a year bring waves that start about 30 days before the event and builds until the day arrives- anniversaries of birth, marriage, death and even the holidays hit with a vengeance.

On the surface, it's hard to see how the holidays could possibly cause a problem- there are times of great happiness and to those who have never gone through grief, you look like someone who needs cheering up and a break from your sadness. To others, the holidays are family times and it always helps to be around family and friends. That never fails to bring cheer to a lonely heart, right? So your family and friends will probably be convinced that the holidays are just what you need! The holidays may bring great pressure upon you to join in with the enthusiasm so you can get away from your grief for a time of joy. They do not understand that the holidays themselves can create some added burdens and added sorrows.

The holidays come and the whole world wants to lay aside all else and have joy and celebrations and religious expression's and gifts and lights and candy and food and... you want to scream "Not yet, what about my loved one?" The rest of the world seems to be saying put away all of that and come celebrate with us- but you can't and you can't help but feel resentment or anger that they can.

Your family and friends want everything back to normal so the holidays can happen. You know there will never be such a thing as normal again. They want the holidays to go just like they always have, you know that the holidays as they were or "business as usual" deny the loss and trivialize the life of your loved one.

Grief is full-time work. It dominates every waking moment and demands your full attention. Where you are today is not where you will be tomorrow. Grief means you're living in survival mode, the only thing you can do is survive each day. The holidays demand focus that you cannot give, the holidays demand emotions you may not be able to give. The depression of your grief often exemplifies its presence, not just by blue feelings, but also by not feeling things at all. You may feel detached and emotionally dead going through the motions. The holidays demand an act that will drain you completely dry if you allow yourself to be forced into business as usual.

Give yourself permission to do what you can do. You should feel free to decide **what you can and want to do** for these holidays. It helps to make a plan in advance and then structure the plan by letting family and friends know exactly what you plan to do or not do. The structure should not rule you but it should be complete enough to cover most of the areas that you are concerned.

Give yourself permission to be where you need to be. There may not be any explanation as to why you are comfortable in some settings and not others. Decide on an environment where you will be able to relax. Certain people but not others does not mean you like them less or that they are doing anything wrong, it just means that right now you can find safety and peace in one spot and not another. Go to those spots and don't feel guilty about it.

Give yourself permission to change traditions. A good rule is if it hurts don't do it. If it is **so** painful that you cannot think about it without reacting, then leave it alone for this year.

Give yourself permission to find safe people to be around during the holidays. People who will accept you where you are and allow you to face all of your emotions and pain are your "safe" people. The emotions this season stirs up, this time that was once such great joy, but now is a reminder of great pain, can be confusing, stressful and tiresome. Surround yourself with people who you can let know that you need a moment away from or to leave the party or gathering. Who will let you cry if needed, sob even. Or understand if you cry one moment and laugh the next.

"You will not always hurt like this, these words are true. If they do not reach your heart today, do not reject them- keep them in your mind. One morning, not tomorrow perhaps, but the day after tomorrow, or the month after next... One morning the Dawn will wake you with the inconceivable surprise your grief will have lost one small moment of its force. Be ready for the time when you can feel for yourself that these words are true you, and that you will not always hurt like this."

-Sacha Wintersun



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