



The Empty Chair at Christmas

A Father Dead

I cannot speak to my children about their father –
He is lost to them and to me.
There is an empty space where a father should be.
There is an empty space where a husband should be.
There is a sea of grief between me and my children
And I cannot speak of their father.
Perhaps they think that I have forgotten him
After all these years.
It is just that I cannot speak of him
Because of all these tears.

Marjorie Pizer

Grief is a strange beast that we learn to live with. We don't get 'over it' as if it were a surmountable obstacle. We can become more comfortable with our discomfort but there is no finite time for grief as there is no finite time for love. Grief is often a private affair that others cannot share or perhaps even understand. Grief can spring out of drawers and cupboards, off shelves, from photographs, wafts to our nostrils upon a perfume, is precipitated by music, clutches at our heart, hollows out our insides and plummets us to the depths. It is indeed a strange beast to know and understand, to embrace, digest and assimilate.

Anniversaries, birthdays, special occasions and Christmas evoke powerful reminders of grief. We grieve again at the birth of a child, a marriage, a celebration when we mourn the absence of a loved-one no longer physically present in our lives; that *that* person is not there to celebrate, commiserate, acknowledge, share or witness the event.

Many people don't understand the sheer physicality of grief. The chemical consequences of our emotions can create a powerful visceral reaction. Our heart can indeed feel like it's breaking and many people describe a sense of feeling 'amputated' - as if a part of them has been severed.

Another little known or understood aspect of this is that it is not uncommon for people to have the physical symptoms that their departed loved-one experienced during an illness or trauma. Respiratory illnesses, headaches or migraines, aching bones or physical pain in the same body area that our loved-one experienced their discomfort is often the cause of people having all sorts of tests to find a diagnosis or gain relief. It is always worthy of deeper exploration when a physical symptom is present to see whether an anniversary, birthday or other special occasion may be contributing to the experience.

A client of mine experienced a migraine on the 13th day of every month that would last for several incapacitating days. It transpired that her husbands' cerebral haemorrhage that precipitated his death several weeks later occurred on the same date. Once she was cognizant of this fact she was able to build in a series of rituals

and practices that enabled her to more consciously acknowledge the date. These included having a warm bath for several nights before the 13th, going for a walk on their favourite bush track, scheduling a massage, lighting a candle by his photo and playing some shared special music. These simple additions to her life enabled her to give expression to her memories and feelings in a more conscious way - and her migraines stopped.

There is no right way to grieve and members of a family will often react very differently. Some people want solitude while other people won't want to be alone. Some people want to talk about a loved-one while others may find the conversation too difficult. Some people become oversensitive to everything while others are oblivious to all but their own thoughts and feelings.

Christmas can evoke powerful memories of past family gatherings regardless of whether they were happy or difficult occasions. Many families struggle to relate happily to one another at Christmas-time and this can compound our grief in unexpected ways. Being prepared for this is really important rather than just hoping that things will be ok. Getting caught 'off guard' compounds our feelings of grief so setting aside time to consider how we might traverse these days more consciously can assist us to be as comfortable with our discomfort as possible.

The first Christmas after a loved-one dies is often traumatic as the empty space that person filled in our lives simply gapes at us. However, it is very common for the second, third or subsequent Christmases to be difficult or devastating as we fully comprehend the consequences of our lost love.

One of the most helpful sessions in our grief program (called *Healing Grief*) involves people identifying the behaviours, the environments and the things that they do or have in their lives that give them a strong sense of connection with themselves. Participants in our programs list things like being in nature, fresh flowers, listening to or making music, a good talk to a real friend, warm baths, massage, support groups or counseling, prayer, meditation, rituals, dancing, singing, perfumes, candle light, aromatherapy, bushwalking, the company of pets, small children, friends or family, visiting special places that are meaningful, keeping a journal, having a good cry, painting, hobbies, craftwork, exercise, yoga or being in the garden. Increasing the number of these activities – or the ones that we find individually useful – around Christmas or other potentially challenging days can be very helpful in minimizing distress.

This is often quite difficult with the busyness of Christmas however making some of these activities a priority in the lead up to this time can be very helpful. Scheduling in some time for ourselves so that we can express sadness, disbelief, anger or frustration can be more effective than it coming out in less helpful reactive language or behaviours. Making time for tears or for sadness gives us greater capacity to respond to other people rather than simply react unskillfully.

Setting aside time for reflection so that we honour the relationship we have lost or writing to the person can be helpful. Visiting the cemetery or a favourite shared place in the lead up to Christmas or doing something that you both enjoyed previously can assist people with their feelings of grief while for others creating a new way of

experiencing Christmas might be appropriate, perhaps changing the food we traditionally eat or the venue. Opening Christmas gifts at a different time or changing our usual routine can create a new way of experiencing this time together. Keeping a candle lit by a photo of our loved-one or creating a special decoration or flower arrangement in their memory can help us acknowledge their continuing presence in our life even though they are physically absent.

The key is to set aside time to acknowledge our feelings of grief and to consciously choose how we will spend this time together rather than just hoping that we 'get through it'.

Young children experience grief in powerful ways too. It is often thought that young children have little concept of death but this certainly hasn't been my experience. It is crucial to provide a child with strategies and rituals that help them to assimilate the reality of loss as well as instilling the possibility of a continuing loving relationship with someone no longer physically present in their life.

Wrapping young children up in a rainbow and connecting up from heart to heart before they go to sleep can be an immensely helpful ritual for children. The child can then send a rainbow from their heart to the loved one who has passed on or, perhaps to a tree or garden if one has been created in memory of the person or to their photograph if a child has one by their bed. The ritual involves telling the child that you're going to wrap them up in a rainbow and connect up your hearts via a rainbow. You then run your hand from the top of the child's head to the tips of their toes asking them to imagine you're wrapping them up in a cloud of red, the colour of strawberries, fire engines and tomatoes. You ask the child if they can see the colour and of course, children always can. You continue with each of the seven colours of the rainbow all the while running your hand gently from the top of their head to the tips of their toes. Then place your hand upon their heart and ask them to imagine a really bright rainbow that starts in their heart and that comes across to your heart – while you move your hand to your heart.

The little prayer I used with my children when I started wrapping them up in rainbows before they went to sleep when they were aged four and seven went like this:

*I wrap you in a rainbow of light to care for you all through the night.
Your guardian angel watches from above and showers you with her great love.*

A child can then send a rainbow from their heart to other family members as well as to the person who has passed on. This simple ritual generally stops nightmares and separation anxiety and is very helpful as a way for children to remain connected to the people they love. The full Rainbow Ritual can be freely downloaded from the resource page at www.questforlife.com.au and has also been written into a children's book called *You, Me & the Rainbow* which is available at the Quest online shop. There are also beautiful little rainbow ribbons available with a heart on each end. Children love to have these as a visual reminder of the loving connection they have with the person who has passed on and often like to have them tied to their bed head.

Young children also enjoy making a Christmas decoration that is especially in memory of their loved one who has passed on. This can be hung upon the Christmas tree or displayed on the mantelpiece or on the Christmas table.

Many people berate themselves for having a good time or for laughing and enjoying themselves when they are grieving. This too is very normal and understandable. Some people think they must be in denial or they feel guilty or mortified that they can find pleasure in anything after the dreadful pain of loss. Having fun or enjoying each other's company is not a sign that we miss a loved-one any the less.

Traditionally, Christmas is a time of happiness, shared times, excitement, reunion and love. Even at the best of times, this can be an enormous and unrealistic pressure on individuals and families and for those who are grieving, Christmas can feel full of potential pain. For some people it will feel like all the world is having a wonderful time with their loved ones and the grieving person is starkly reminded of their alone-ness and the loss of their loved-one. Feeling the pressure of having to be happy, jovial or even pleased to see people, can feel insurmountable and only accentuates the pain of loss.

By honouring our unique way of embracing grief and removing the pressure of other people's – and our own – expectations of how we *should* grieve, we can create a healing pathway for ourselves. There is no healthy way around grief. Just as the potter knows that the pot is made strong by the furnace of heat, we must traverse the depths of griefs' valleys if we are to discover compassion for ourselves and for all people that likewise suffer.

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