

# Tinsel and Tears

By Andrea Gambill

Holidays and special days create difficult scenarios for the bereaved. There is so much sentimentality attached to those occasions, and the loneliness is dramatically increased when a dearly loved one is absent. No one can tell another which day might be the most difficult - that is so personal and individual. We all attach our memories in different ways.

Annually, in November, we are expected to set aside some time to recall, register and appreciate our blessings. We generally gather together those to whom we feel the closest bonds, load a table with the best culinary efforts of all the available cooks, overeat, reinforce our love for one another, rest, eat again, clean up - sometimes even eat again - kiss, hug, promise to keep in touch and then drift back into our old habits and tracks. About four weeks later, we repeat the process, only this time we add gifts.

It is worth noting that most holidays are one-day events that are here and gone in a relatively short time...except Christmas! Around the world, Christmas has become a commercially exploited holiday that often starts in July! It seems impossible for the bereaved to escape the bittersweet conflicting emotions that go on and on, seemingly without end. No wonder so many mourners wish they could go to sleep in November and wake up sometime after the new year.

Winter speaks to us of hibernation. It is a time when we "draw in," gathering about us whatever we have that will increase our warmth and our security. Nature calls for a slowdown, while mankind steps up the pace. At every turn, we are reminded of the rapidly approaching, difficult and often-dreaded, holiday season. There is dissonance in our souls, and we struggle to achieve balance.

The media would have us believe that every family (other than our own broken one) is intact, content, loving and "functional." While they all seem to be having the "Hallmark" holiday, we can feel isolated, lonely, left out and frustrated, along with feeling the pressure to "keep up." It's hard to maintain a sense of perspective in the face of that emotional bombardment. It's like a war, and we're shooting our own wounded! The truth is that the grieving often wish they could retreat to a dark corner with a security blanket until all the hype has gone away.

Perhaps the most effective defense for the bereaved is to stop pointing our weapons at ourselves. We can be our own worst enemies by demanding unrealistic expectations from ourselves. We set ourselves up for failure when we fall into the trap of believing that we have to "do" or "be" whatever everyone else around us wants to see. We need to stir some courage into the cookies and take a gracious, but firm stand. We can forgive ourselves ahead of time for what we simply cannot do this year. Armed with that new resolve, we can politely declare our boundaries and limits to those around us who may not seem to be sensitive to our hemorrhaging souls.

Actually, there are people in each of our lives who would feel a lot better if they could just help - but they haven't got a Charlie Chan clue what to do. We can give them the

gift of "permission" and creativity. We simply tell them what we wish someone would do for us, and many of them will happily rush to fill that void. We need to learn to receive graciously without a sense of obligation.

While we know of no way to make special days "easy," over the years there have been many lessons the grieving have learned that have made these leaden times a little more gentle. Here are some holiday survival hints that have been helpful to some "experienced" griever:

Try not to let special days "just happen" without any warning or preparation. Plan an agenda, and include the needs and feelings of everyone who will be sharing that day with you (both bereaved and bystanders). Decide what's really important and what can either wait or be deleted. If your concentration is impaired, make lists. Writing things down magically frees the mind from worrying about remembering. (Just try to remember where you put your list!)

Don't be afraid to change traditions. Our lives have been dramatically changed, and we have the right to alter some observances if we want to. Be sure to keep in mind the "grief rights" of other mourners, but know that there is almost always some compromise that will make everyone more comfortable. As you become aware of things you'd like to change, let those who are close to you know your plans and, when appropriate, explain why. Next year, you may want to change things again, but this year could also start new traditions.

You might want to shop from catalogs or Internet sites instead of experiencing the stress of the malls. If there is a small difference in price, consider it a gift to yourself to preserve your sanity. In the rush of gift-giving holidays, there is a great temptation to think that if we spend lavishly, we will feel better - not in January when the bills come due! Spending too much can be a false positive that creates a depression later. We need to consciously decide to create as much balance as we possibly can under the circumstances.

Give yourself the gift of rest, good nutrition and exercise. When our physical condition is as good as possible, we are a lot better off emotionally. Walking is great exercise and nobody can see you cry. Avoid alcohol and/or medications designed to make you "feel good." They are temporary, sometimes addictive and not helpful in the long run. Bereavement is an opportunity to reevaluate all our priorities and establish a "new normal" for our lives.

Most people feel better if they can include their absent loved one in some definite and commemorative way that would give this particular holiday a new meaning and focus. You may want to:

- light a special "celebration of life" candle
- go to the cemetery with holiday decorations, balloons, flowers or notes
- give someone an unexpected special gift in memory of your loved one
- plant a memorial tree or flower bed
- volunteer to help a charity
- donate books to the public or church library
- create your own memorial service (as public or private as you wish)

- entertain someone who is at least as lonely as you are
- sign up for a class in something you've always wanted to learn

A support group can be a wonderful resource in finding compassionate understanding during difficult times. Sometimes it's easier to try to reconstruct the pieces of our lives when we have understanding friends who can help. It's also good for us to be able to help someone else when we've reached that plateau.

At holiday times when friends and family are getting together, social invitations can be emotionally conflicting. One minute we may want to go and the next, it just seems too difficult and demanding. Often, we don't know what we will want when the time comes. We can explain to hosts ahead of time that we may have to cancel at the last minute, or if we do attend, we may have to leave early. (Let's not leave their generous hospitality unacknowledged or unappreciated, but help them to understand that grief is whimsical and unpredictable and our vagaries are not their fault.) We might say, "It's a lovely party, but I'm feeling overwhelmed by grief just now, and I need to be alone for a little while." Or, "I hope you'll understand if I'm just not up to it on that day."

Decide to decorate according to your energy and not because of the expectations of others. If it's necessary to decorate because of other family members (perhaps young children), enlist as much help as possible and applaud yourself for the courage it takes to "make the show go on!" Prepare yourself emotionally for the unwrapping of holiday decorations. Remember that each one can be a loving memory of a treasured life, not just a reminder of a death. Before you dive into decorating, try to visualize an especially sentimental piece ahead of time and make specific plans for its use (or decide to leave that one out this year.)

To hang or not to hang the Christmas stocking is a particularly thorny issue for many bereaved. Consider all the alternatives: hang the stocking of the deceased with all the others, hang it separately, don't hang it at all. Some families decide to hang the stocking and instead of filling it with gifts, they all place love notes inside to be read later - either together as a family or privately. There are no "rules." Do what feels best, and compromise whenever necessary.

We need to forgive our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers because they can't "fix it" for us, and we need to take responsibility for our own joy. No one can get inside our heads and make us happy. As Abraham Lincoln said, "We will be just about as happy as we decide to be." Happiness does not suddenly wash over us, taking all the pain with it. It takes time and work on our part, but the effort is worth the price. Try to attach positive symbolism to the holiday reminders:

- Christmas trees are round, symbolizing the eternity of no beginning or ending. They form a symbolic "arrow" to Heaven. They are ever-green, reminding us that life and hope continue and that love is forever.
- Lights remind us that there is hope. Darkness cannot overcome light, but light can always prevail in the darkness.
- Gift wrapping reminds us that there are still wonderful things in our futures that we haven't seen yet.

- Special foods and fragrances remind us of the nourishment needed to go on living and the love and investment that it takes.
- Candles and fireplaces remind of us both warmth and light.
- Music reaches the soul in ways that words alone cannot. If it makes you cry, remember that tears can often dilute pain.

Some people find comfort in visiting the cemetery or memorial place with special decorations or sentimental tributes. If that idea appeals to you, go alone or take a tribe - whatever feels "right" for you. Make that time as simple or elaborate as you wish, as public or as private. It's your therapy and nobody else should be able to dictate how you do it.

Consider keeping a journal to record what helped and what hurt most during this holiday season. Next year, take it out and use it as a road map for getting through that season's challenges. It will help you chart your progress.

Be gentle with yourself whatever the holiday season brings. Give yourself the gift of liberation from what others may "expect" and the courage to declare your own boundaries and limits with grace and dignity.

**Understand that a particular day or time of year will not be terrible forever. The sun still shines behind the clouds.**