

The Holidays and Grief: Finding Your Way

*Remarks taken from **Light Up A Life** 2016 Remembrance Event*

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It's wonderful to be part of a supportive community that has gathered to bring Light to each other, to help bring Light to the world. As we do so, we align with the human experience going back throughout known history. During the season of winter, when the days are shortest and there is the least amount of sun shining on our planet, we find ways to celebrate and share the power of light. From the indigenous celebrations of the winter solstice, to the Hanukkah experience and rituals of candle lighting, to the lighted ornamentation of Christmas trees, and here today with our modern ritual of Lighting Up Lives.

Today we have a special task, to honor our loved ones who died this past year, and to support each other in healthful grieving. This may feel especially challenging as we head into the holiday season, which has been imprinted on our consciousness since youth as being a time best spent with loved ones. That disconnect often creates a swell in our hearts, as, in the words of Edna St Vincent Millay: "The presence of that absence is everywhere".

So these can be turbulent waters for us to navigate over the coming weeks, and the most important thing I invite you to understand is that **there is no right way or wrong way to find your own, unique way** through the season.

Stay present with what is happening, and realize that this is more important than any expectations needing to be lived up to or fulfilled. Like the best surfers riding the most challenging waves, fewer "pre-conceived" agendas and more "in the moment" authentic shifting with the tides will serve us all well. Everything is allowed and is okay, because while our culture tends to go crazy with the holidays; death, as they say, never takes one.

So some of us may be feeling strongly that the best course of action is to continue with the holiday traditions of the past; others may be pulled more toward a radical departure from the

past, which could include an actual departure from town to a completely new, and memory-less location, environment, and experience.

There is no right way, and no wrong way, to find your way this year.

Most of us will probably find ourselves somewhere in the middle of those two paths, continuing with some holiday traditions while dropping, or modifying others. Maybe this year you don't cook all the special dishes but turn your gatherings into potluck affairs; maybe fewer gifts shopped for and given, fewer cards sent, or different family members host the special events.

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Some people find it helpful to integrate into the holidays the loved one who has passed. One family's children made special ornaments to hang on the tree; another kept a chair and place-setting for the deceased; some create a special prayer or tell a favorite story of their loved one before the big meal; others have planted seeds so that new life can grow in their honor.

Nothing like this HAS to be done, but if you are struck by or inspired to do something along these lines, then just go ahead and do it.

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And some families have shared with me how powerful and healing it was to engage in activities to serve others in great need; providing meals to the homeless, toys to the under-privileged, or even songs for the neighborhood.

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But whatever directions you find yourself flowing, be clear and simple in communicating with others what you need, what you want, and what you can handle. And know that emotional and mental states may come up, and it is alright to change your mind, to change your plans.

Finally, I invite you to engage in the generous spirit of the season by gifting something to yourself. When January rolls around, what will be your answer to the question: "What supportive and caring thing did I do for myself this holiday season?" And don't be fooled into thinking that drinking a lot is self care. If anything, make physical movement or exercise as a

priority, as it is an antidote for depression; too much spiced eggnog is not an antidote for anything.

So maybe start your days with an affirmation, an intention to be open, to grow; immerse yourself in the senses, spend time in nature, and allow yourself some of smiles or even laughter. Use such moments of lightness to light your own unique path forward into healing.

As Caryll Houselander has written: "If allowed, God will enter into your night, as the ray of sun enters into the dark, hard earth, driving right down to the roots of the tree; and there, unseen, unfelt in the darkness, it fills the tree with life, a spark of fire suddenly breaking out, high above that darkness a flame leading us to find our own way."