



Living with Magic and Grief over the Holidays

By Megan McDowell

It has happened to all of us...one minute you are putting away your candy bowls and throwing out warped jack-o-lanterns and, the next thing you know, you are in the store walking straight into Christmas wreaths, turkey roasters and noise makers. For some, this brings a smile to their face as it marks the beginning of the holiday season. Besides, they can already taste the hot chocolate and marshmallows. The first Christmas tree I saw after my father died basically crippled me right there in the aisle.

We live in a culture which encourages the suspension of reality for the weeks in between Thanksgiving and the New Year. When we are grieving, this is much easier said than done. I have often said that grief robs us of the luxuries we didn't even realize we had. One such luxury is being able to get swooped up in the festivities of the holiday season. There is an unspoken illusion that we seem to buy into during this time of year. When we drink too much eggnog, family feuds get swept under the rug. Anyone who dares to be authentic enough to frown in public runs the risk of being nicknamed "Scrooge". This all adds up to quite a difficult time for those who are grieving. Grief has a way of stripping us of our egos, our masks and personas because all of our energy may be required to simply get through a day.

Living with grief over the holidays has taught me to see the "magic" in the "magical time of year" in a completely different way. The magic being talked about is a really a feeling we are all striving for on a day to day basis – grieving or not grieving, holidays or no holidays. We must remember that "magic" describes the mystical, unexplained forces of life. Magic requires a belief in what we can not see with our physical eyes. When we are grieving we add the exploration of these concepts to a day already filled with work, caring for kids and running errands. The magic of believing becomes a necessary part of our survival. For reasons I do not fully understand, these ideas are often most pronounced from early November through December each year. When we are grieving, we are thrown into the whirlwind of exploring these very places within us whether or not we choose to. It is just more overt when there are songs being sung about it and catch phrases said to you by the man bagging your groceries. It is the magic you feel when you actually have an authentic laugh or go for a while without a pit in your stomach. It is the magic of discovering the unknown strengths that exist inside you the first time you change a tire or dine in a restaurant with no one else at the table. When we are not grieving, these moments pass most of the time without being noticed. The magic of being present with ourselves, with spirit, with our families often gets lost in the chaos. When we are grieving, these moments are like rare gems found in the dirt. We need not be afraid of the bombardment of the "gratitude, peace on Earth, good will to men" atmosphere that begins like clockwork in mid-November. We are all more familiar with these concepts than we realize...it is just not as easy to be present with them as it once was.

My seventeen year old niece, Kaitlin, whose father John was killed on September 11th, summed it up for me at the end of one of her college essays. She wrote: "what I struggle with today

is that I know that I have many things to be grateful for -- I know I am loved and that people have been good to my family...but mostly, I just want my Dad back.” This is an all-too-real reminder that those of us who grieve need to balance the fact that we have magic in our lives with the fact that we really wish that things were different. You need not feel that you must buy into anything this holiday season that does not feel real to you. Without knowing you, I know that you have done too much work and have too much on your plate to spend energy on things that do not work for you.

Here are some suggestions for not only managing the holiday season and staying authentic, but for allowing the true meaning of the season to remind you of the magic and untapped inner strength within you.

- Be gentle with yourself with whatever comes up for you on any given day. One of the aspects of grief is that it continues to change day to day and sometimes moment to moment. One day you may want to build a snowman, and the next day you may want to knock his head off with his broom. Build the snowman one day. Knock his head off the next. This makes perfect sense in the cycles of grief. Go ahead and do it!
- Avoid judgment at all costs. Do not waste time judging your mood, emotions or thoughts. Negative thoughts, moods and emotions are challenging enough just to experience. There is no need to add self-judgment to the mix. Remember that you are dealing with the age-old challenge of continuing on with life after someone you love has died. Honor the fact that this is difficult and treat yourself with the same respect you would give someone else who is living with adversity.
- Feel your feelings and allow yourself to fluctuate in and out of the moods that will inevitably have their way with you. You may find yourself cursing the neighbor you usually adore because she is having a holiday party and you are not in the mood for a party. Allow the annoyance to surface, process it with a trusted friend or counselor, and make a conscious choice on how to respond. You are not responsible for -- nor do you have control over -- what feelings come over you. You do, however, control how you respond to these feelings.
- The thinker is not the thought. You do not have to attach meaning to every thought that enters your mind. Part of the difficulty during grieving is that we encounter thoughts and judgments that we have never experienced before. You may be thinking horrible thoughts about people who do not seem to have a care in the world or who do not seem to know how lucky they are to not be grieving. Allow these to just be passing thoughts and judgments without them meaning anything about you as a person.
- Be honest and realistic about where you are on any given day. A great response to party invitations and holiday events is something along the lines of “I really appreciate you thinking of me, I am not sure what that day will be like for me, so would it be OK if I just let you know last minute [or later].” On the other hand, if it feels better to have structure, then tell people you would like to know about any events ahead of time so you can plan. If you are unsure of what it is you need, spend some time talking with a trusted person and working on your game plan.
- Use symbolism and ceremony as a part of the experience as a way to be present with the special person who has died and continue with your day. You could:

- Arrange a “gratitude table” for Thanksgiving, encouraging every person to leave a symbolic note illustrating their gratitude for the person who has died.
- Light a candle in the morning as a way to let the light of the person shine in the room while gifts are opened and dinner is enjoyed.

These ideas are especially helpful for children because they represent simple ways to encourage the “presence” of that special person in a way that also allows them to be included in the festivities of the day.