

Healing with Haven

November 2007

Holding On Letting Go

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By Heather Legg, Roswell, Georgia. Senteria@mindspring.com

I never thought I would be so intimate with death at the age of thirty-six. I had expected my grandfather to die; he was old and had lived a splendid, full life. Did I expect my friends to start losing their parents at this point in our lives? Not really. In fact, I probably never thought about it until two of my dear friends lost parents in the span of a year. Was I prepared to hear the news that one of these same friends lost a thirty-five-year-old cousin to brain cancer or that another friend's brother died in his sleep?

And least of all was I ready to lose my only brother, Adam "Ace," to suicide? In recent years, I have experienced and witnessed way too much sadness, sent far too many condolence cards and talked about too many funerals. But I've also learned that a big part of life is death.

The shock of death leaves us in such a foggy state of not knowing what to do—probably much more so when the death is sudden. When my brother took his own life, I was swept into a grief that I had no idea how to handle. An enormous part of that grief is because I simply didn't have my brother anymore. We couldn't create any more memories, so the old ones became even more vital. I searched my house for remnants of my brother, for he had visited in the year before he died. I found a book of matches and some toothpaste, and I remembered a torn shirt he had left behind. He had told me to just throw it out rather than send it back. I was so mad at myself because I did get rid of it for him, and I would have done almost anything to get it back after he died.

In my mind, I have a mental picture of myself sitting in my priest's office a few weeks after Ace died. I had tears

streaming down my face and couldn't find a tissue, but I was telling Father Sean my fears of forgetting my brother. How could I remember everything? What if the memories faded away? Father Sean tenderly smiled and assured me, "You'll never forget him; you don't have to worry about that."

A little over two years later, I know Father Sean was right. When someone we love dies, how are we to know we won't forget them? Oh, I knew I wouldn't forget that I had a brother and I wasn't worried that I'd forget his name. I was afraid I

would forget his laugh or the time when we told animal cracker jokes or his really loud voice. No new memories can be made; we have to cling so hard to the old ones, for they're the only ones we have.

However, there is a fine line between holding on and letting go. Just as we have to remember the details, we

also have to let go of the person in order to move on. But how do we see that line, and how do we gently release it, like the string of a balloon? I think it happens gradually, with small steps, and everyone's timeline is different. It took me months, but there finally came a day when I was able to take Ace's number out of my cell phone. It was actually a cleansing moment, and probably because I knew I was ready, I was okay with it. I still have the memory of my eldest daughter accidentally calling him when she was playing with the phone when she was two years old. He'd call back and laughingly say, "Could I please speak with Alea?"

As survivors, we are like swimmers in a rough ocean, struggling to keep our heads above water and grasping for whatever odds and ends will help us stay afloat. I have met a survivor who started wearing her husband's deodorant



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after he died and another one who couldn't throw out the menagerie of the bottles of shampoo that his partner kept. I have a T-shirt that Ace gave me and I struggled with the fear of it becoming threadbare if I wore it too much, but wanting something of his close to me.

Just like letting go of that balloon, you have to be ready to let go. We've all seen toddlers accidentally let go of their balloon and then fall apart in tears as they watch it float away. They just weren't ready to let go. But when we choose to let something go, it's a good thing. It's a release in not only a physical sense, but an emotional one, too. A few weeks after Ace died, my daughter and I released a balloon into the air for him, and it was the first time that I had felt any peace since he died. But like the toddler's balloon, if someone takes our memories away too quickly, if we have to give things up before we're ready, the detachment is much too painful.

I have found that when I am able to release Ace little by



little, I feel more peace. It doesn't mean I'll ever forget him, and I no longer am afraid of that. It means I've realized that he was such an integral part of who I am and what I have yet to become that there is no way my mind or soul will ever

be void of him. I don't have to talk about him everyday or rehash the good or the bad so frequently anymore. I know what is there, just as I know what is missing, whether his phone number is in my phone anymore, or his scent and his dog's hair is washed from his jacket that I now wear. The old shirt he left at my house is long gone; however, I have vivid pictures in my mind of him wearing a great smile and that same shirt.

Yes, it's a fine line, the one of letting go, one only our own eyes and our own heart can detect. If we let go, do we forget? I'm pretty sure we won't. Our loved ones were

here for too short a time, but the time we were able to share was enough to ingrain them into our being in a way that we will never be without, whether we are still holding on to that metaphorical balloon or not. 🎈

Embracing the Good Stuff

By Sandy Goodman Riverton, Wyoming

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It is here. Winter. This means...holidays. Happy happy, joy joy, merry merry and all that crap. My usually positive outlook takes a sudden nosedive, my dog starts to resemble Godzilla, and the mailman might as well be Ted Bundy. I am full of black energy and nothing anyone can say or do will eradicate it. It stays with me for a good three months. Two months of celebrating, and then a month of getting used to the idea that the celebrating is over. I become the "B word" of the neighborhood. It is not pretty folks, and if you are bereaved, you know exactly what I am talking about. You are probably nodding your head right now and maybe even grinning a little. However, do not get too comfy, because you probably are not going to like where I am going with this little ditty about our temporary holiday insanity.

Having experienced ten holiday seasons without my son Jason's physical presence, I've had some time to evaluate my snarky (which is quite an improvement over what used to be hopeless, devastated and raging) outlook during this "most wonderful time of year". I have also detected a similar

attitude amongst other bereaved persons who, like me, are a few years out on their grief journey. I have watched and listened, pondered and meditated, journaled and read, formed a hypothesis, tested it, and found it to be true. The reason we are so out of sorts during this most wonderful time of the year is that we are...grieving? No. We have moved forward. Sad? A little, but not enough to cause this distress. Angry? Nada. Wrong again. All of that is behind us. No, there is another emotion, another thought, that comes to us about this time every year, no matter how "far out" we are in our journey. We hold onto it, nurture it, act on it, but refuse to acknowledge it. It is a feeling of entitlement. A belief that it is our right, and sometimes even our obligation, to be unpleasant, bitter, and down right nasty from the first day of November until the end of January. That, my friends, is what I am talking about.

Please note that I am not referring to the early stages of our grief, when we are justly selfish. We are so focused on our loss that nothing else seems to exist. We have tunnel

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vision in a tunnel that is only wide enough for our self and our loved one. This “in the pit” period of our bereavement is normal and necessary. It is the piece of the process that we have to go right through the middle of. It is the part that waits for us to come in and sit a spell. It is the period of grief where we need to hold and nurture ALL of our feelings, until they change. During this crucial stage of healing after loss, any feelings we have are valid and allowed, even in December.

However, somewhere along the road there comes a time when we are once again able to smile when we think of our loved one. Love returns as the prominent feeling, rather than sadness. A feeling of joy for having known them overrides the despair we felt over their death. Life begins to pulse again and we laugh without guilt. We are healing. We have survived and life is good...until November, when we metamorphose into egotistical, repulsive jerks. It is as if we have been handed a ticket at the funeral that says “Good for three months of hateful obnoxious behavior every single year from November to January.”

Working through a significant loss is probably the most difficult task a human being encounters in a lifetime. Nothing hurts so badly for so long as the death of someone who has played a major role in our existence. However, grief does not

mean that we are entitled to a lifetime of resentful behavior every time the holiday juices start to run. It does not mean we have a right to alienate or hurt our living family members because we are “bereaved.” It does not permit selfishness or make cruelty and disrespect justifiable. Being bereaved does not mean we can suck the energy out of every person who comes near us, and it does not make obscene gestures directed at department store Santas appropriate. Plain and simple folks, loss does not

provide us with a get out of life free card. Grieving does not negate our responsibility to live...and to love.

So pull out the decorations, polish the silverware, and put in a CD with that chestnut song on it. Stock up on enough Kleenex for the season, dozens of candles, and a bunch of angel thing-a-majigs. Force yourself to smile at the sales clerk when she tells you Merry Christmas, and throw some change in the bell ringer’s can. Make some

cookies, look through some photo albums, and do not be afraid to remember...or to laugh. Christmas and Thanksgiving and the New Year are season full of light, gratitude, and inspiration. We owe it to ourselves and to our loved ones (both here and on the other side) to soak up as much of that “good stuff” as we can. To that, we are entitled. Not because they died, but because we live. 🍪



Ten

ten Christmas dinners
 ten lighted trees
 ten nights of candles burning by your grave.
 ten years, a decade...
 of missing you
 and still my breath catches
 when I close my eyes and call you to me
 and see you smile
 and hear you laugh
 and feel your love.
 you are not gone
 from our season of joy.
 you live on
 and touch us
 to remind us
 that trees and candles
 and family dinners
 are the memories
 we fill with the light of love
 to sustain us
 for eternity.

Grief & Loss Seminar Series

The next seminar will be held on December 13th from 3pm-4:30pm @ 2895 Temple Ave, Signal Hill. Light refreshments will be served. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406.

Individual/Group Support

As many of you may already know, Haven Hospice offers individual support and group support to all people in the community who are going through the difficult journey of bereavement. For more information on our groups or to make an appointment for individual support please contact Tina Stephenitch, Bereavement Coordinator at (562) 426-7500 ext 406

Make a Difference in Someone's life

Do you have a few hours a week to listen, give support, or assist in the office? Haven Hospice is seeking people who would like to give some of their time visiting patients, helping in the office or doing community outreach. If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or know anyone who maybe interested in volunteering their time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 ext 406 for more information.

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