

When Bereavement and Holidays Walk Together

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The writer of the book Ecclesiastes states: “there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (3:1). The context and feelings around bereavement and holidays suggest that they should be opposite or separate seasons-- sadness and merriment. This very paradox is represented in Ecclesiastes 3:4: a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” Sometimes families experience the challenge of simultaneously facing these two seasons of life.

Holidays also tend to reinforce the various roles that family members play. For example the family matriarch or patriarch, such as a grandmother or grandfather, tend to subconsciously assume that authoritative role in small or big ways. Other examples might be the family “storyteller”, “clown”, “peacemaker”, or “know-it-all” who assume these roles with more energy over the holidays than at other times of the year. However, when a family member dies, relationships between members often need to be realigned and roles between family members may be altered (Walsh and McGoldrick, 1991). After a loss, explained Walsh and McGoldrick, families need to both draw together and remain flexible in relationships and roles.

What are some ways to cope with the loss of the role of a family member during the holidays? One way is through family rituals or traditions. You may need to change some traditions but keep some traditions the same. Perhaps Grandpa carved the turkey or said the prayer before the meal, and memories around this could be shared. Or maybe that teenager that died suddenly had a gift of making the shy and withdrawn aunt feel important. Talk with one another about the positive difference that role of the teenager made on the family.

The personhood of the deceased family member can never be replaced. However, in time, the Lord may realign the roles or provide someone to stand in the gap on behalf of that loved one. This realignment of roles often occurs within the biological family, but it can also occur from outside the family. In my family-of-origin, my brother, Ted, played the role of clown, storyteller, and encourager, as well as others. After his death, we felt the loss of these roles. But God in His divine understanding gradually reacquainted us with Ted’s best friend from his college days. Al understood and loved Ted’s sense of humor. He relates to our daughters as an uncle would, asking questions about school and friends. We sometimes play games together and always share a holiday meal together. Al stands in the gap for my brother.

Psalm 34:18 states: “the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” For those whose season of mourning or weeping also coincide with the holidays, how deeply the Lord wants to draw you close! May

the honoring of your loved one this season bring a great measure of divine comfort and love.

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