



FROM
HOLIDAYS

Past
TO HOLIDAYS
Future

FINDING JOY AFTER A LOSS

J. Dawn Rountree

Introduction

The word *holiday* and the term *holiday season* can have different interpretations depending on one's culture, religious beliefs, and life experiences. For example, Thanksgiving Day and the 4th of July are not celebrated in the U.K.

Conversely, we in the U.S. do not celebrate their Guy Fawkes Day each November 5—their bonfire day—to commemorate the fact that Guy Fawkes was caught in 1605 before he could blow up the Parliament building in London.

Regardless of our heritage or beliefs, most agree that, after a loss, any day that holds special memories may create apprehension as that day draws near each year.

If someone you love has died, I am truly sorry. You may be facing a holiday, a “first,” or an anniversary that holds priceless memories of your loved one—times filled with laughter, love, and food that cannot be repeated.

If an upcoming holiday is feeling daunting, I encourage you to give some thought and make plans that will help you get through it. Draw on your inner strength and faith. Search for ways to add bits of joy to your holiday—that's how new memories are made.

To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.

—Thomas Campbell

Holidays Past

“Silver bells, silver bells” rang out over the loudspeaker in a large store where I had gone to shop shortly before Christmas the year after my husband died. I had not thought about the Christmas music—music that would remind me of past Christmases when my husband Ralph was alive.

The music intensified the ache in my heart, and I wanted to clamp my hands over my ears and scream, “No, no!” But instead, I parked my empty shopping cart and hastily exited the store.

That holiday season music was only one of the harsh reminders of how much my life had changed in just a few months. The joy had departed from our old farmhouse we lovingly called Thornberry Acres.

My husband’s absence shouted loudly, reminding me that he was forever gone, and I looked to the holidays with dread.

I knew we would never have our entire family around our large dining room table, and we would no longer hear him tell stories or make us laugh. He would no longer put Christmas music on our old player piano.

I realized I must find a way to move forward, for my children’s sake and the sake of my four grandchildren. Somehow I had already managed to live ten months without him. Somehow I had



continued to eat, breathe, and work. Even though I was still very sad, I was alive.

There is a quote by Robert Frost which says it all. “In three words, I can sum up everything I’ve learned about life: it goes on.”

Yes, my life had to go on—I had to face my first Christmas without him.

It is Christmas in the hearts that puts Christmas in the air.

—W.T. Ellis

Holidays Future

That first year after my husband died, I chose to be alone at Thornberry Acres on Thanksgiving Day. I was still emotionally tired, and my future still seemed unsure. I needed solitude and no responsibilities.

I knew the Christmas holidays were coming soon, so my daughters and I discussed different ways to spend that time together. None of us wanted our traditional meal of turkey and dressing with all the trimmings and pumpkin pie.

We decided to eat out early—a week before Christmas. We chose Famous Dave's Barbeque even though we did not particularly like barbecue. We wanted to eat something that had no resemblance to our traditional Christmas meal. The experience was bittersweet—we were together, but it was not the same without my husband Ralph; we missed him terribly.

A couple of days before Christmas, I flew to Alaska and spent Christmas Day with my sister Joan and her family—a very cold and different experience—in a land of semi-darkness and ice carvings. But I was with people I loved, and I made new memories that I still treasure.

I still missed my husband terribly—there were tears. But I learned that life can, and must, go on. I realized that I would have Holidays Future after all.



*Perhaps they are not stars but rather openings in
heaven where the love of our lost ones shines down to
let us know they are happy.*

—Eskimo Legend

Holidays Present

After your loss, you may lack physical stamina, and your emotions may still be raw. Guard your heart by thinking about what you need, sharing your thoughts with your family and friends, then enlist their help.

When one lady was asked if she was going to host the holidays meal as usual after her husband died, the lady immediately replied, “Heavens, no!” Her message was immediate and clear, and a younger family member picked up the responsibility.

You don’t have to get together in your usual setting or follow your past traditions. You could meet on a different day. Also give yourself permission to limit decorations or not decorate at all. You don’t have to send cards unless that is your preference.

Consider getting together with fewer people or eat out. Leave yourself the option of leaving a gathering early if you choose. You can plan a simpler menu, choose to spend less, prepare foods that take less work, or let your grocery store help you with the cooking. There is always potluck. You have choices!

If you decide to prepare your large traditional meal, ask for help and try to take care of yourself during your Holiday Present.



*Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery.
Today is a gift. That's why it is called the present.*

—Alice Morse Earle

Listen to Your Senses and Trust Your Heart

As you plan for special days ahead, listen to your senses and trust what your heart says. Ask yourself the following questions:

- ♥ What do you want to *hear* during the holidays? The same music, different music, or no music at all? Some research indicates that some music may make the holidays more difficult since music evokes past memories. Trust your heart!
- ♥ What do you want to eat, to *taste*? Your traditional holiday foods, something entirely different, or both? Trust your heart!
- ♥ What fragrances do you want to *smell* during the holiday seasons? Favorite candles burning, fresh bread baking, hot spiced cider, or nothing to remind you of past holidays? Trust your heart!
- ♥ Who do you want to *see* during the holidays? No one, the same family and friends? New scenery or the same setting as in previous years? Trust your heart!
- ♥ What do you want to *touch* during the holiday season? Comforting objects like a warm fuzzy



robe, hugs from family and friends, a pet, or something new? Trust your heart!

There are no rights or wrongs, so let your heart and senses guide you, and take care of you.

At the center of your being you have the answer; you know who you are and you know what you want.

—Lao Tzu

Remembering

You may want to include your loved one in your special days. Here are a few ideas.

- ★ Light a candle in his or her memory.
- ★ Display photo albums or framed pictures.
- ★ Ask family and friends to share a special memory or funny story about your loved one.
- ★ Serve your loved one's favorite food in his or her memory; share the recipe.
- ★ Plant a tree, weather permitting.
- ★ Give a gift to someone in need in memory of your loved one.
- ★ Ask friends and family to tell something they are thankful for about the one who has died.
- ★ Hang a stocking for your loved one and write notes to place in it.

*Hope smiles from the threshold of the year to come,
Whispering it will be happier.* —Alfred Lord Tennyson



- ★ Publish a memorial in the newspaper or church bulletin in their memory.
- ★ Visit their grave and leave a note.
- ★ Donate a book to the library in their memory.
- ★ Buy yourself a flower in their memory.
- ★ Set your loved one's place at the table and light a candle.
- ★ As a family, attend a religious service in memory of your loved one.
- ★ Do something good for someone else.
Research shows that this is good for you, too.

To Love, Honor, and Dream

A lady told me a story. She said her husband knew he was dying, and he wanted to encourage her to move forward after his death. Her husband told her, “*I am the one who is dying. You are not the one who is dying. I want you to keep on living.*”

We cannot choose when we are born or when we die, but we *can* make choices about what happens in the middle, just as you can make choices about how to spend your holidays and the rest of your life.

So cherish your memories of your loved one—the love, the experiences, including your Holidays Past. Tell the stories to keep your loved one’s memory alive.

Your heart may still feel like it is breaking, but your grief will soften and become more manageable. The intense waves of grief will become gentler and further apart. Healing does not come instantaneously, but have faith that *healing does come*.

Even if you are older, you are never too old to dream a new dream and find a new purpose. So as you build a new life, look for ways to honor

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

—Psalm 30:5 ESV



the life of your loved one by showing kindness to others along your way.

Don't forget to be grateful for the good things in your life as you look forward to Holidays Future. Death cannot close the book on a love story because love does not end at death.

I wish you joy!

FROM
HOLIDAYS

Past

TO HOLIDAYS

Future

FINDING JOY AFTER A LOSS

From Holidays Past to Holidays Future—Finding Joy after a Loss gives simple, down-to-earth ideas for navigating upcoming holidays, the “firsts,” or any special day for anyone who is grieving.

Past holidays were likely filled with family gatherings, food, fun, and laughter. But after a death, the special days bring back memories, reminders that the holidays will never be the same. So it is no wonder that the approaching holidays can bring apprehension.

This booklet offers strategies for planning, remembering, and honoring the memory of loved one. It nudges the reader toward joy, hope and Holidays Future.

Joy comes, grief goes, we know not how.

—James Russell Lowell

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