

Pathways

through grief

...the firsts

Facing the “firsts” after a death can be threatening and scary. The “firsts” could include the anniversary of the death, birthdays, wedding anniversaries, holidays, or any special occasions that might bring back an over-powering flood of emotions and memories.

Intentionally making plans ahead of time for getting through each “first” may be helpful. Give yourself permission to celebrate in a different way or to celebrate as before—whatever will make it easier for you.

It is just as natural for a broken heart to heal after a loss as it is for a broken bone to heal after a fracture.



Grief Pathway Outlook

Terrain:

Falling rocks, rain-slick roads, curves

Weather:

Overcast skies.
Rain 90%

Heartache Index:

High

Travel Tips:

■ The first anniversary, holiday, or birthday may hold many precious memories, making them difficult to celebrate after a death.

■ Let your family and friends know how they can help you get through the holidays or any of the “firsts.”

■ Some who are grieving have less emotional and physical energy for the holidays or the “firsts.”

■ You can choose to celebrate in your traditional way or do something totally different and simpler.

■ Consider ways to make new memories. One family chose to make a holiday breakfast rather than a large dinner and that breakfast tradition continued.

■ Consider including your loved one in your “firsts”—through photos, lighting a candle, or talking about memories.

■ If you are not able to get out of bed, to eat, or sleep better by now, consider talking to your doctor or a counselor.

A Different Kind of Christmas

It was late afternoon when my airplane landed in Fairbanks, Alaska. My sister Joan met me at the baggage claim, and we headed out of the terminal. A cold blast of air hit my face, and I immediately felt the hairs in my nose freeze—a strange sensation! My sister had warned me it would be extremely cold, so I had worn layers, a scarf, and gloves. But I still was not prepared for the frigid weather.

The blast of 30-below air cut through me as I was introduced to a land of frozen tundra, snow, ice carvings and twilight in December. It was a totally different world than Kansas. My sister had invited me to spend Christmas with her family in Alaska that year in an effort to help me get through my first Christmas and anniversary after my husband's death. She knew it would be difficult for me to repeat our traditional Christmas meal at the farmhouse without my husband Ralph.



So I had gone to Alaska where Joan packed my days with new sights and fun. On Christmas day there was food galore at my niece's cabin in the country. We snow-shoed, my first time, and I found that walking in snow shoes was not as easy as it looked! I saw mushers and dogsleds, ice carvings and a real ice castle, and a mother moose and her baby—my camera lens kept freezing over, making my later-developed moose photos blurry.

We drove to Chena Hot Springs about 60 miles from Fairbanks—an actual end-of-the-road location. We swam in an indoor pool then went outside to the hot springs. The water was extremely hot, and the outside

35-below air was ideal for turning the trees around the hot spring into a frosty, white winter wonderland. Our hair immediately froze white in the humid air and sub-zero temperatures, and we looked like we were wearing white caps that matched the landscape!

One afternoon my sister drove us to her cabin about 40 miles from Fairbanks. Again 35 below! No indoor plumbing. No electricity and only a wood stove. I shivered while we waited for the fire in the wood stove to heat the cabin enough so the propane lanterns would light. We slept in sleeping bags, still fully clothed in our coats. I was so padded I could hardly move!

But one day stands out vividly in my memory—December 28th—the day that would have been my 45th wedding anniversary if my husband had lived. As my sister Joan and I were driving back toward Fairbanks from the cabin, I could see a gold mine in the distance, and it was twilight. I was in a cold, foreign land as the sun dipped below the horizon in the almost-dark light of day. A strange sight in a cold, harsh land that is not for the faint-hearted!

My heart ached for my husband, and I wished he had been there to experience Alaska with me. But that was not possible. His death had drastically changed my life forever. Emotionally I was also in a strange, frozen land, but life must go on, just as it has for millions who have lost someone to death.

That Christmas, that anniversary—both immensely different from any I would have ever imagined. But as the sun set I realized I had made it ten months without my husband.

I had made it through a different kind of anniversary and a different kind of Christmas. As the last bit of light left the horizon, I was pleased. I was thankful. *Life would go on.*

J. Dawn Rountree

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“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

– Abraham Lincoln