

Capturing the Joy in Grief During Christmas

For a child, there is no holiday more exciting and filled with expectation than Christmas. Christmas reigns as king of all days for most kids when all wanted is translated and understood in all received. It's the most wonderful time of the year.

In all that expectation and desire, however, lives an element of anxiety: What happens if those desires cannot be met?

As a parent, I've experienced first-hand what the worst-case scenario of what that anxiety looks like: When the eldest of my three daughters was 8, my first wife, their mother, died.

A few weeks after she died, a friend of a friend offered to do a full photo shoot for us at no cost. Immediately, I agreed. To capture the images of my girls during this point in their lives meant the world to me. In the photo, my daughters are standing still, radiant and beautiful against an aged and battered wall. They are holding onto each other like they mean it, like they need to. Their faces glow with a contentment that seems almost misplaced, even inappropriate for that occasion in their young lives.

I had decided to let the girls pick out their own clothes for the photo shoot. I told them, "Wear whatever you want. Pick out your favorite outfit—something that you feel beautiful in." Then I brought out Marianne's small jewelry chest and told them to pick out any of her jewelry that they wanted to wear. They were so excited for their "photo shoot," as they referred to it. They felt special. They needed to. I needed them to.

It amazes me how alive they were in that moment, especially because of all that had just been stripped from them.

Christmas is supposed to be a time when we give to each other, when we appreciate the blessings in our lives. As a father who has had to help his children navigate an incredible loss, sometimes Christmas can feel like the jewelry in that box: familiar, beloved, but bittersweet.

I've learned in the years since losing my first wife that the holidays do not have to be just a reminder of the past, but can also be an incredible gift to the future. The following are just a few ways to recapture the joy of Christmas—now, and in the years to come:

1. Surround yourself with friends and loved ones. It's best to avoid isolation and being alone, and instead make plans for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day well in advance so that you can ensure that you and your children will have a supportive community around them.

2. Keep your holiday plans simple. The holidays are as much for you as they are for your children. As important as it is to avoid unnecessary isolation, do not overcommit and rob yourself of opportunities to rest from the frenetic pace of every day life.

3. Honor established traditions and create new ones. Rich with tradition, Christmas offers multiple occasions to remember sweet things from the past. To this day, my daughters and I still cook poppy seed muffins to celebrate their mother's birthday. I knew of one family we attended a grief support group with, who lit a candle during the first Christmas after the loss of their son and left it lit throughout the holiday season. This reassured the children that though the family was celebrating a special time of year, they had not forgotten their brother and would continue to honor his memory. Additionally, look for opportunities to create new traditions to commemorate the joyful moments happening now.

4. Give of yourself. Grief often causes us to focus on our own

circumstances; find ways to give to others—your time, company, material resources—and look for ways to encourage and bless others. Encourage your children to participate in giving of themselves, and do so together when you are able.

5. Remember, next year will be different. Time is the greatest healer of wounds, general wisdom tells us. Not every year will be as tough as the first holiday following your loss. Though it may not feel like it, hope will return and so will normality in life. Find the good in everyday and you will have found the path of hope.

In all of this, recognize that grief, while seemingly the opposite of joy, is equally as rich in the grand scheme of the human experience. Though your and your children's celebration of Christmas may look different than those of other families you know, it is yours. And that makes it special, and worth celebrating. As we remember the incredible joy of a Savior coming into the world this Christmas, the time you take to nurture and comfort your children, even if not yielding immediate or obvious results, is the greatest gift any parent can give.

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