

Finding Your Spirit-Fueled Joy in the Midst of Gripping Loss

Like fog in the morning, the spirit of Christmas had vanished. Still, I shuffled in the garage. One by one, I retrieved the bins I'd stored the previous Christmas. While the aroma of sugar cookies wafted through the air and "Silent Night" played in the background, I began the decorating.

Placing the nativity scene as the focal point of our family room, I spread the rest of the decorations around the house: red and green candles, musical boxes with winter scenes and bright red poinsettias framed with green garland adorned with burgundy velvet bows. They all transformed our home into a lively winter land.

Next, I retrieved three stockings to fill the marked places above the fireplace; each embroidered with our sons' names: Jason, Jeff and Joe. Once Jason and Jeff's were hung, with tears burning my eyes, I clutched Joe's against my chest.

The empty stocking seared my heart. It had been years since Joe's tragic death.

Long years that his absence left an emptiness we can almost touch.

Christmas didn't call for a celebration. Not anymore. Not when you had a vital part of your life missing. Festivities didn't have the joy they should. And Christmas trees didn't emanate the scent they should.

Actually, my days needed to erase Christmas, the birthdays, the holidays—as all ushered pain rather than delight. They reminded me of what I once had and now what I missed so

terribly, like the air I breathed.

The world continues to celebrate; greetings of good wishes fill the room. But when tragedy turns your world upside down, no amount of cheer can bring clarity to the fog of sadness.

Strange, though, because often, it's the scorching pain that forces our eyes to open to a bigger picture. It did for me as I rewound memories of Christmas years ago.

Back then, when our three sons, including Joe, were still young, I focused on providing a perfect Christmas, a perfect tree to wrap a perfect celebration. As a result, little things tended to roil in me, such as a light strand that refused to shine because of a burned bulb. Annoyed at the glitch, I promptly set off to resolve it –I fussed, I rearranged, plugged and unplugged until frustration grew hot in me.

How foolish and silly. I focused on that one bulb, dismissing the glow of the star atop the Christmas tree. I'd done the same with light bulbs that burned in my life—from broken relationships to shattered plans. Exerting tons of energy trying to fix them, I missed the star—the one that gave significance to my life.

Joe had left that radiance to my life. He'd been the star that should still shine in my heart. His sweet smile, his tender hugs and his sense of humor should be what sits atop of my life, casting off that glow to bring back the joy. To remind me that he's not gone—not from my heart, not from my mind, nor are the images of his spunky self gone.

When that void in our heart aches to be filled, it's the star of comfort that makes it whole. When bitter sorrow robs the spirit of Christmas, it's the star of genuine love that whispers joy. When a health diagnosis shakes our world, it's the star of reassurance that shines the certainty of new tomorrows. When the economy robs our security, it's the star of endurance that ushers the radiance of expectations. It's

the same star that never loses the brilliance of hope, incomprehensible hope, one we can only embrace when all strands of life burn out.

With eyes focused on the star, I hang Joe's stocking along with his brothers'; not empty anymore—but filled with sweet memories—his wit, laughter, his hugs and kisses.

God called that bright light His "Morning Star" to dispel our darkness, dry our tears and repair strands we cannot fix.

"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star" (Rev. 22:16). {eo}

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