



FROM THE CEO, DREW DYSON

When The Lights Aren't Quite as Bright

Dear Friends,

I love the holiday season! Lights. Trees. Traditions. Baking. Crowded dinner tables. Give me all of it! From the time I was a child, wide-eyed and wonder-filled, I enter every holiday season with a song on my lips and joy in my heart. And yet, over the last five years with the loss of a sibling and both of my parents, grief has joined my emotional landscape during the holiday season. I know that for many of you as well, your joy this season will be tempered by an empty chair at the holiday table.

With each passing year I find more joy in the memories and comfort in the sorrow, and you may as well. At the same time, it is important to be gentle with ourselves, to give ourselves the time and space to grieve, and be prepared for the little moments of grief that are sparked by a familiar smell or song or other incidental trigger. I have learned not to expect that grief is behind me, but to welcome it, give it space to resonate in my heart, and let it give way to special memories and new joys.

Sociologist Nancy Berns writes and speaks about the myth of closure. “Closure is a common assumption about what we need after loss,” she writes, but “the concept of closure does not capture the complexity of grief.” In her TED Talk, she invites her listeners to let go of the expectation of

closure and to “understand that it is possible to hold joy and grief together.”

Rabbi Samuel N. Gordon encourages folks who are grieving to welcome the presence of their loved ones in telling stories and sharing sacred memories. “Sitting at our dining tables, with the candles, china, silver, challah, wine, good food, we can feel the spiritual presence of those who have sat with us in the past — those who have shared those meals, those who used to prepare the meals which we now prepare ourselves,” he writes. “The chair is empty, but we often feel as if they are sitting with us.”

For those of us facing a new loss this season, or continuing to feel the absence of our loved ones, Berns suggests several practices that may be helpful:

- Welcome the memories when they come and give attention in the moment rather than let the accumulation of these moments turn into a deeper sadness.
- Find a trusted friend or conversation partner who will take the time to listen deeply.
- Turn to your family for support rather than trying to “go it alone” or “put on a brave face.”
- Grieve in community with your temple, church, bridge partners, lunch group, etc.
- Volunteer for an organization that will honor your loved one.



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And for all of us, as we encounter and encourage those who are grieving, here are a few suggestions:

- Listen more than talk; ask questions that give space for the grieving to share at their level of comfort.
- Acknowledge the loss and express your care.
- Do a simple task (shoveling, shopping, wrapping, baking) that would relieve the burden for that person or family.
- Include and invite the grieving person to special events without expectations that they participate.

For the last several years, my family has intentionally set an empty place at our holiday table. We decorate that place setting with photos, ornaments, notes, and special mementos. Before we eat, we give an opportunity for everyone present to share, if they'd like, a special memory of one who is no longer there. This practice has grown to include memories of parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, friends, and more. There are tears shed but there is also a lot of laughter and love. And, in our experience, this moment of shared reflection has become an act of healing that has opened the door for new memories and true joy.

I encourage you, my friends, to find your own way to acknowledge your grief this holiday season. For me at least, even though things are certainly different, the lights still shine brightly and once again I will enter this holiday season filled with joy, wonder, and awe. Won't you join me?

All the Best,
Drew A. Dyson, PhD
Chief Executive Officer