

## Getting Through the Annual Reminders of Your Loss

-- Carol Luebering

*"Anniversaries serve as a chance to take stock; to see where the river of time and circumstance has led, to review some lessons, and plan what lies ahead. And, if nothing else, to celebrate the fact that by damn we've made it this far." —Peter Fossel*

Memory writes on every page of the calendar—here a birthday, there a holiday, further on a wedding date. In the wake of death, those precious days bear a bittersweet tinge, a pang that the celebrations they mark will never be repeated with someone you have loved.

Most of those dates are warmed by tender recollections; some are written darker than the rest. Whether this is your first turn around the calendar—or one of many—since your loss, these dates loom dark on the horizon. Tears that you thought were behind you swell again, and with them comes a terrible loneliness.

These days will not be wished away, even if you pull the covers over your head and wait for the sun to set. And perhaps nothing you can do will make them easy. But you can meet these milestones head-on and make them into a bridge stretching toward a brighter tomorrow.

Begin by planning a departure from your usual activities. Take the dreaded day off work, if you can. No use pretending that this day is like any other; it isn't. Don't let anyone—yourself included—accuse of "wallowing" in grief. Taking time to lean into your sorrow is facing reality.

**Reach out.** Choose your company for the day. Don't wait for someone to remember. Your grief easily slips out of mind—even within the closest circle of family and friends. Start dropping reminders when the day's approach first begins to haunt you. Don't assume that the best company is those with whom you have always spent that day. You might be more comfortable with someone who has been in your shoes.

Don't hesitate to present your need and ask for companionship. Claim the offers of "anything I can do" which were so generously made when your loss occurred. Be specific: Say that you want someone to drive you to the cemetery, that you want company for shopping or lunch, that you want a shoulder you can cry on, or even that you want someone to help you think of some way to mark the day.

Don't forget to tap the support of your faith community. In the Jewish tradition, bereaved families light a 24-hour candle on the anniversary of a death and recite prayers of remembrance at the synagogue service. Roman Catholics mark special days with a Mass. Both practices reflect a centuries-old wisdom, rallying the support of the believing community.

Whatever your faith tradition, ask for prayers. One family asked an understanding minister to lead them in a prayer of healing for both living and

dead a year after a member committed suicide. (The next year they planned a lakeside weekend together—and surprised themselves by having a good time.)

Others simply ask to be remembered in a Sunday worship service. To pray for someone is to stand with that person in God's presence, and is therefore a powerful way of being with another—even with someone who has passed through death's door.

**Look back.** Claim your memories, those bits of history which have made you who you are. Someone once observed that “memory is the power to gather roses in winter.” Clip your bouquet. Get out the scrapbook and the love letters; line up the gifts and souvenirs you cherish. Call to mind all the joys and struggles which shaped this interrupted relationship.

Write a new obituary, one which contains all the personal details you wouldn't have entrusted to the newspaper even had there been room. Include a physical description: the colour of eyes and hair, the way her nose crinkled when she laughed, the shape of his hands. Add the qualities which were important to you, the way your relationship began and developed.

Admit your regrets. If you are haunted by a bit of unfinished business—an unresolved quarrel cut short by death, words of love and appreciation left unspoken—say what you need to say in some formal way by writing a letter or by expressing your feelings to a valued friend.

Mourn the dead dreams: the hope of seeing a child grown, celebrating a milestone anniversary, enjoying a peaceful retirement together. Claim your grief. Give yourself permission to cry as much as you need to. Relive once more the illness or accident which precipitated your loss. (“Listen to the story once more” may well be what you need to ask of your chosen companions.) Recapture the feelings which swept over you at the time of death.

Recall, too, the signs of care which surrounded you in those difficult first days. Reread the cards and notes, the visitors book. Feel again the warm hugs, the gentle pressure of others' hands in yours, the sight of friends gathered to grieve and to pray with you.

Survey your journey through the calendar so far, with all its ups and downs. Take stock of how far you have come, of the unexpected strengths you have found within yourself.

Harriet Sarnoff Schiff, author of *The Bereaved Parent*, assures her readers over and over again that they have already done the most difficult thing imaginable: survived their child's funeral. Congratulate yourself for coming as far as you have, for getting out of bed on the days when that seemed impossible, for learning to manage the everyday stuff of life without someone who once was part of life's daily structure.

**Look forward.** Close at least one small door on the past. Make a conscious act of forgiveness to someone: the love who abandoned you, the killer, the doctor who didn't diagnose soon enough, yourself. Clean a closet, even if all you can do is rearrange it.

Create a new holiday ritual. Go out for Thanksgiving dinner instead of fixing the turkey yourself. Replace the big tree with a small one trimmed with bows instead of getting out the ornaments. Mark a birthday by giving just one thing which belonged to the person you mourn to someone who will cherish it.

Celebrate today's joys. Count the blessings you have, especially the people who grace your life with love. Ask yourself which of those relationships need attention, to whom you need to express your affection while there is still time. Mark your calendar to make a friendly phone call or extend an invitation.

Plan just one thing for the future. Think big, if you can: a change of job, a special vacation trip, redecorating the house. Or think small. Promise yourself lunch with a friend next week; get a book you have wanted to read from the library; rearrange the living room furniture. Dream of being whole and happy. Imagine yourself facing life with confidence.

**Take heart.** However unimaginable such wholeness may seem, it is the end toward which grief's journey leads. Time, they say, heals all wounds. There is some truth in that; leave a broken bone alone and it will mend. But only a fool hopes that time alone will make an unset bone straight and strong.

In the same way, time alone heals grief without bringing wholeness. The turns through the calendar mark the passage of time: one year, two years, 10. But time works its magic only when it is used well. Writing of her own sorrow at the kidnapping and murder of her firstborn in the introduction to *Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh speaks of the need to make room for pain: "The inexorably difficult thing in life, and particularly in suffering, is to face the truth."

On the days special in your memory, face the truth of your sorrow and the truth of the healing which has already begun. And believe the promise Jesus of Nazareth spoke: "Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh."

*"I expected the first 'anniversary' to be hard. I wondered who would remember the day. I was afraid of spending it alone, so I dropped some hints and one friend picked them up and invited us to diner that night. After dinner and putting the boys to bed, we went to a hearing on a new high school because I felt the need to commit myself to the future instead of living in the past. I had received no indication from members of my family that they remembered. One person who did remember was another widow. The next day I saw her car out front and excitedly greeted her. I could only splutter, 'You remembered!' She nodded that she knew what that date meant to me. We talked about the year, and as she left, she turned to me and said, 'Happy new year.' That's right! I thought, it is a new year. It was incredible what that statement meant to me as I ruminated with friends about the year and a whole new perspective opened up." —Joyce Phipps*