



## Incorporating Loss into Our Holiday Rituals

By Candice Courtney

Incorporating loss into our lives requires that we also incorporate the loss into our rituals. Because ritual is often done in a more conscious and focused way, incorporating the loss into our rituals can help us to incorporate the loss into our lives. Whether rituals are simple or elaborate, practiced alone or in community, they serve a multitude of purposes in our lives. In grief, they can help us move toward acceptance, and they can help us to create a place in our life for the one(s) we have lost. They can also provide us with space to honor our sorrow, and to express our love.

Special times usually accentuate our sense of loss, and it is often suggested that we change how we normally do our holiday rituals to help make them less traumatic, such as having Thanksgiving dinner at a new location. But changing things just to change is not enough of a solution. We need to change the rituals so that they address the needs we have in grief. As I worked my way through the difficult years that followed my husband's death, I learned how to change life's rituals to fit where I was in my grief. For those struggling through this holiday season, I offer two simple rituals that may help as they make their way through the darkest season of the year, in the midst of what may be the darkest season of all their years.

### **Thanksgiving**

One of the reasons some people choose to have Thanksgiving dinner in a new location is to avoid "the empty chair." If yours is a family where everyone has their own place at the table, you might have everyone sit in a different place to avoid the stark reminder of the empty place. Some though, might choose to leave the chair empty, and place a candle in front of it to signify that the spirit of this person is still present. Just before the meal the candle can be lit with words such as:

*We light this candle in memory of Tony. His spirit still is a part of our lives. His love still shines onto us, and our love for him still glows in our hearts. As we share this feast of Thanksgiving, let us talk about those things for which we are most thankful to Tony — the things we learned from him, and the times that we laughed with him. In doing so, we affirm that he lives on in all of us.*

### **Christmas/New Year**

The end of the year festivities are still the hardest times for me, as they are for many people—our grief weighs heavier, and everyone else is celebrating. However, there are meanings among the roots of the traditions that offer comfort and support. Through their

metaphors they address our sense of loss.

For years, I could not bring myself to put up a tree and decorate it. It felt too festive, too poignant, and seemed like far too much work. Instead I have practiced a simpler, but more meaningful alternative that draws upon the very early roots of this tradition. We know it was practiced by ancient Celts, and undoubtedly by people long before them, in a time when even the continued presence of the sun was not certain.

When the days got shorter and the nights grew colder, the world all around began to speak of death. Trees and shrubs lost their leaves, turning into skeletons. Plants shriveled and turned brown before descending into the earth to decay. The earth became stark and barren.

Yet there were certain trees and plants that held onto their green life when all else died. It was believed that these held a special life force. So the people gathered branches from these magical trees and shrubs and brought them into their homes to give them faith and hope that somehow life could survive the darkest of times. Unlike those ancient people, we trust that after the winter solstice the sun will rise higher in the sky, but we may not fully trust that the light will return to our lives once again. The cycles of the year are predictable, but it is sometimes hard to trust in the cycles of life.

On December 15, the day before the anniversary of my husband's passing, I gather boughs of pine from the forest or a florist. I put some of the greenery in vases of water, and some of the pine branches I lay on the table around a candle. Both ancient Celts and American Indians associated pine with immortality, and the scent of pine was believed to help soften the sharp edges of grief. The sight and scent of the pine branches are a silent affirmation of faith and hope during the dark time. I add rosemary—for remembrance. And a red rose for love. Sometimes I also add a few simple decorations, such as apples and pinecones, or angels.

The fragrance and the rich green of the pine boughs can bring us into connection with this holiday tradition in a new way, and in a way that honors and supports us where we are in our grief. Gathering the greens and placing them in our home can be a way not only of affirming our faith, but also of honoring our beloved and honoring our sense of loss. We can allow this practice to give us hope, not only that we can survive, but that the cycles of life will indeed turn, and that some day, however distant spring may seem, daffodils will push their way up out of the ground and into the strengthening light of the sun.

### **About the Author**

*For more than 10 years, Candice Courtney has been working to make the rituals of life more personally meaningful by creating custom ceremonies for funerals, weddings, and other life passages, as well as offering workshops on holiday rituals. She is writing a book on healing rituals for holidays and dark days. Candice can be reached at [cccourtney@earthlink.net](mailto:cccourtney@earthlink.net).*

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