

Presence during the Holidays-2023

Hi, my name is Anne Pedrick and for those of you who I have not had the opportunity to speak with on the phone, I am the bereavement coordinator at Mealey Funeral Homes. I hope you will find some comfort in this service.

The theme for my talk this year is presence. How does presence help? You may be thinking to yourself, I do not even want to be here, let alone be present. I want to be with my loved one. So, let us explore this concept. Some may call it mindfulness, but that term can be new age for some, so others may call it being in the moment.

When we think of it that way, it makes more sense because moments are all we have. And your memories of special moments may be all you can think about as you grieve. You may be trying to keep the tide at bay and not remember the moments (even the wonderful ones) because it is still so painful.

I now live in a 55+ retirement community. And I have learned so much from the widows in our community. I have seen those who thrive years after the death and those who are still struggling. So, what makes them different?

There is a saying in grief work that you can use grief to make you better or you can allow it to make you bitter. Let me explain what I see in each approach to grief. My neighbors who do not allow themselves to cry or mourn often feel that they are coping. And without proper support it may be the best they can do at this time. They isolate themselves. They do not join others in activities or meet friends for coffee. They do not get physical exercise. They choose to not be present with sadness and pain. They fear that if they start crying, they will never stop. But what this does is it creates a dam holding back the tidal waves of grief. We cannot hold a wave back any more than we can grief. Eventually that dam will burst from the pressure.

I want to read a poem that explains this concept better than I can from the Loss Foundation.

As for grief, you'll find it comes in waves. When the ship is first wrecked, you're drowning, with wreckage all around you. Everything floating around you reminds you of the beauty and the magnificence of the ship that was and is no more. And all you can do is float. You find some pieces of the wreckage and you hang on for a while. Maybe it's some physical thing. Maybe it's a happy memory or a photograph. Maybe it's a person who is also floating. For a while, all you can do is float. Stay alive.

In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don't even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you'll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between, you can breathe, you can function. You never know what's going to trigger grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything...and the wave comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life.

Somewhere down the line, and it's different for everybody, you find that the waves are only 80 feet tall. Or 50 feet tall. And while they still come, they come further apart. You can see them coming. An anniversary, a birthday, or Christmas, or landing at O'Hare. You can see it coming, for the most part, and prepare yourself. And when it washes over you, you know that somehow you will, again, come out the other side. Soaking wet, sputtering, still hanging on to some tiny piece of the wreckage, but you'll come out.

Take it from an old guy. The waves never stop coming, and somehow you don't really want them to. But you learn that you'll survive them. And other waves will come. And you'll survive them too. If you're lucky, you'll have lots of scars from lots of loves. And lots of shipwrecks.

Grief is healthy and normal. I have so many clients that contact me asking if what they are feeling is normal even months later. But not ever crying and

not allowing those feelings to come up causes delayed healing. If we allow ourselves to be present in the grief, we can learn trust and vulnerability like no other time. Whether that is a spiritual trust or trust in others.

Grief work is hard, and it takes courage and being present with the unthinkable. I have several neighbors who are thriving as best they can even while grieving. There will always be a hole in their heart as their loved one is missing but they now find joy and hope in every day. One such neighbor, is a beautiful 81-year-old woman who lost her husband and her adult son. And yet every day she walks her dog. Every day she goes to the clubhouse for whatever activity is going on. She attends parties, happy hours, and she travels.

It may have only been a few months since your loved one's death and this future seems out of the question. But what I am giving you is a glimpse into a path forward. A path of hope and healing. This neighbor told me a way she coped in the beginning and that is the bookshelf method. Once a day, she would block off an hour and she would allow herself to cry, scream, get angry at the universe, look at old pictures and become as some would say a "hot mess." At the end of the hour, she would put the grief temporarily on the shelf. She would then do what she needed to do such as the dishes, laundry, etc. But she also relied on her family, friends, and neighbors.

So how do you get there? You cannot force your grief journey. You cannot fix it or pray it away. It is not something we can take Tylenol for and continue. You need space to lament, weep, and cry out in pain. Be present with the hard feelings. Take time to remember all the previous holidays and what is now lost. Remember that it is okay to not be okay during this time of year. Show your emotions to your family and friends that will listen to you. Don't pretend that it is "fine" and act as if this year won't be hard. Look around, you are not alone in your grief. Don't hide your emotions to make the holidays more enjoyable for others.

And if you do not have many people in your life that can handle these painful emotions, I am always here for you. Call the office or my cell phone and leave me a message and we will schedule a time to talk.

I want to give you some practical things you can do to help yourself grieve, heal, and be present during the holidays.

Find a purpose.

- It may be something you and your loved one enjoyed doing together, or a social cause you both agreed upon.
- It may be something you want to accomplish that will make them proud.
- Invest in others, serve others.

Connect with other people:

- Advocate for what you need. If someone says, “let me know if you need anything.” Tell them a specific thing they can do for you. They want to help you.
- Ask family and friends to share stories and pictures of your loved one with you via mailed letters, email, phone, or video chat or social media that allow groups to share with each other (or group texting)
- Give yourself permission to not do some of the traditions this year. You do not need to send Christmas cards or bake cookies this year, let someone else take the reins this year. And tell others you may not stay at the party or celebration as long as you normally would.

Create memories or rituals:

- a. Develop a virtual memory book, blog, or webpage to remember your loved one, and ask family and friends to contribute their memories and stories. Or start to organize all those hard copy photos you have. You can do this on the Mealey obituary page.

The Tribute Wall is available to post photos, videos, comments etc. about your loved one. It is an interactive "Facebook wall" style memory page. Once you are done forming the Tribute Wall, the office can make it into a book for you.

- b. Take part in an activity, such as planting a tree or preparing a favorite meal of your loved one who has died.
- c. Acknowledge your loved one, with an empty place set at the table, or set up a small memorial table with pictures, candles, etc.

Please know that I am praying for all of you. May you find hope in your faith, family and friends during this holiday season and be present with whatever feelings come up.