



*November brings out poppies-- symbols of sacrifice and also of gratitude. Billy Ray Cyrus has a lovely song "Some Gave All" that epitomizes the courage of the young men and women honoured each year on Remembrance Day. The unimaginable loss of those brave souls lingers through the generations; and is felt by all of us who are blessed to enjoy the freedoms they fought and died for. We are grateful for each and every soldier, past and present, and also for their families, who are left to endure endless separation anxiety and daily anticipation of bad news throughout their tours of duty. We thank you for your service!*

# Connecting

November, 2020

## 'Twas the Month Before Christmas

**N**ovember is the time to overdose on left-over chocolates, sell off the residual Halloween treats and decorations in the stores and hurriedly replace them with all things Christmas. It is a time of change and anticipation; and seasons react accordingly. Every year I anxiously await the first snowfall; without exception, my favourite day of the year. It signals a time of quiet cocooning, brotherhood, sharing, traditions, music, wonderful foods, friendship, family, sights, smells, and lights of the holidays, visits to the Mall Santa, and dreams of a new whipper snipper or puppy racing out from under the tree on Christmas morning.

For those who grieve and mourn, however, November holds something very different. Rapid and irregular heartbeats, a lump in our throat, anxiety attacks, upset stomach, migraines, nausea, or the desire to disappear like a vapour into the air until it is all over. Somebody is missing. Nothing is as colourful as we remember it. The smells of cinnamon and spiced pinecones make us want to throw up. We have no desire to shop, wrap, or even think about gift giving. What is there to celebrate in a world that has turned off all the lights in our corner? Faith is sometimes strengthened, sometimes shaken. We struggle with either one. If we express any joy, even accidentally, we feel guilty for doing so. If we are angry at our God, we feel guilty about that too. There is no comfortable place to be when we grieve....no place that we belong. It is like walking a tightrope where any movement,

deliberate or accidental, can cause a misstep and be the end of life as we know it. Even the slightest breeze can knock us off our balance. We feel out of sorts, off balance, and barely connected to the world around us that suddenly resembles some alien planet that we have never seen before.

*We cannot give to others what we do not already have within ourselves.*

We wonder if we can get through the holiday season without being hospitalized for stress and overwhelming sorrow. Yes, we can! There are a few things that people have learned along the way about facing the Christmas season with a heavy heart, but with a hopeful soul. If we "plan" our Christmas to be what we want it to be, we will become focused on anticipation rather than dread. Perhaps you want to be alone surrounded by photo albums filled with lifelong memories, or listening to music you enjoyed with your loved one, or ordering in Anna's favourite pizza. Midnight mass might be replaced by watching a service on tv. You may spend the night cuddled up with your dog, Maizie, sharing a hot dog and some butter-laden popcorn. Perhaps a grandchild will arrange a Zoom meeting for Christmas day with your immediate family. You might introduce a lovely new tradition started by a member who allowed me to share her idea with all of you....it was a special time around her dinner table she called

“chatting with grandpa”. Each person, from youngest to oldest, shared special highlights of the year; anything that they wanted to tell Grandpa. This included losing a front tooth, or getting a driver’s licence, or telling him all about his brand new great grandbaby. Maybe nana’s favourite dish can be the entrée at Christmas Eve and her favourite chair, although empty now, can be decorated with some of her favourite things, something children love to do. Perhaps you wish to respond favourably to some invites, while rejecting others that might be too much for you this year.

Do not over-commit to anything. There is nothing that creates more angst and terror than saying you will do what you always did, and then finding that is impossible, since things are not as they always were. Nobody likes to cancel an event at the last minute, and you should carefully assess where you are in your grief journey. We cannot give to others what we do not already have within ourselves. If you are not at a point when you can joyfully remember your loved one, you cannot place the burden upon yourself of constantly lifting others up-- at least not yet. If you cannot get through a sentence without breaking into uncontrollable sobs, this is not the time to volunteer to chair the next board meeting at your work. This may be the year you decide to cut your decorating down by 90%, limit your shopping to online purchases only or gift cards for all, so as not to pressure yourself into weeks of tiring days at the mall, worrying the whole time about the pandemic and your vulnerability to it. Nobody, I mean NOBODY should ever tell you what you must do, should do, or shouldn’t do when you have suffered a loss in your life. You are the one who knows your body best.

You have the right and the responsibility to take care of yourself. Your deceased loved one will understand and applaud you for setting boundaries, changing your mind, or creating new

traditions, while honouring the old ones when you want to. You can always return to “tried and true” again next year, if the inflatable snowmen did not impress as much as the homemade nativity characters that you are accustomed to. Initially, grief is devoid of lucidity -- unpredictable; not unlike the sorrow you are feeling right now. One day the tears will still fall, without the inconsolable sobs that once were. Things will be less crushing, softer, quieter, and not so all-consuming as they are now. You might find that you are pulling out



the ornaments again someday...or writing Christmas cards again....maybe next year....or the year after that! Maybe you might attend a little gathering at the Ukrainian Village with a sleigh ride and wiener roast afterwards in lieu of your usual activities on Christmas morning. Things can be different this year...that’s okay. It may be a wee bit of comfort to know that others can relate to the loneliness and isolation that you are feeling. (Grief is a very personal and intimate time and it is often very hard to communicate that feeling of feeling “removed from life” to others who are still going about their daily business. This year, for almost everyone, Christmas will likely be different. (That being said, the Covid restrictions pale in comparison to the sorrow that overwhelms those who have lost a loved one to death; and nothing can even begin to compare to the sadness that accompanies that definitive reality). Still, it should be noted that loved ones will not gather in households as they typically do for the holidays.





Tears will be shed... isolation tears, frustration tears, fearful tears, angry tears and grieving tears. If we can anticipate that the holidays will have their low moments, then we can also be assured that even though some things in our lives are forever changed, others are not. The snow will likely fall on or before Christmas Eve. Stores will put up some decorations to awaken our senses to the light, the beauty and the solemnity of the season. Christmas cake will likely appear at Sobey's yet again. The queen will deliver her annual greetings, and we will put a few dollars into the Salvation Army kettles sprinkled around strategically placed exits. Children will write to Santa and then wait eagerly for his arrival as they always have...maybe leaving a face mask along with a cookies this year just to be safe! The love of family and friends still surrounds us even though it may not be as palpable as we would like it to be. Within "hugging distance" has been expanded to mean "at least six feet" (12 for good measure!) We all smile with our eyes now instead of with our lips...yet amazingly we recognize each other still, even behind the colourful array of masks.

In Canada, we are so blessed in that we have the winter season to comfort us. Huge snowflakes remind us to tuck ourselves inside and do what we wish we had time to do all summer...read a book instead of mowing the lawn. Meditate. Watch your favourite reruns of Schitt's Creek or The Good Doctor. Rearrange your photo albums holding each memory near and dear. Put a few pictures

into frames to remind yourself that somebody loves you, even if they are isolated in a nursing home across town or spending Christmas in Heaven this year. We need to draw comfort from wherever we can to see us through. Our lives are like seasons...each one brings with it new life, new adventures, unexpected happenings, and the assurance that good or bad, the time will come for one to end and another to begin. It is the hope and faith we have in "a

better day" that keeps us going, from month to month, and year to year. Your sorrow is not larger than the love you shared with someone. The unbreakable bond that connects you and the intensity of your love will sustain you through the darkest days of winter... through those times when you feel truly hopeless.

*"Even though we all must mourn our losses, grieving does have an end. It is a season, not a permanent lodging; you won't have to have your mail sent there.*

*The loss may always be with you, but the pain eases."*

*-- Patsy Clairmont  
from "Mending Your Heart in a Broken World"*

Try to remember that Christmas is only one day...although the artificial anticipation and commercialization of the holidays can certainly make it feel like it lasts forever. At the end of that day, you will see that many of your fears and apprehensions were unfounded, and others never did come to fruition. You may feel empowered and realize that you are so much stronger than you thought you were.

We, at St. Albert Bereavement Fellowship, are keeping you close in thought and friendship as we all look forward to a moment in time when, hopefully, events of this day will never again be replicated. The Christmas of 2020 may go down as the most unprecedented and unpredictable holiday season of our lifetimes. One can expect that Amazon shares will soar as gifts are delivered daily to doorsteps. We will watch with eager anticipation for a glimpse of familiar faces to drive by so we can wave frantically, blowing kisses to children and grandchildren from afar, and before we know it, the first note of "Silent Night" will bring me to tears as it does each and every year.

Between now and December 25th, I urge you to wear your mask, pray for a vaccine, and think of one sweet thing you can do to honour your loved one this Christmas. Until next month, know that you are a part of something so much larger than your "circle of grief" or your "personal bubble" as you shelter in place. Our main task now is to stay safe and well, so that we can give our loved ones the memorial service that they deserve when this chaos and disruption is all behind us.

Normally, we would be hosting the SABF Candlelight Celebration very soon, and our Christmas Social thereafter. This year, however, we can still unite as one beautiful chain of soulmates, forever linked by our shared grief experiences. We can still light a candle for our loved ones, while also honouring the departed of our dear friends within the group. Grief and loss brought us to this sanctuary we call St. Albert Bereavement Fellowship, but love and genuine friendship keeps us strong and resilient. We are linked forever in spirit; and that is something that even Covid is unable to destroy.

Until we meet again on this website in December, be patient with yourself. If tears surround you, let them fall where they may, and when they must. If the spirit of Christmas winks at you from behind a child's glee at seeing Santa, then hold that memory dear and savour the moment. We will walk through the holidays virtually-- arm in arm, safe within the other's sheltered reach. Let us lead each other to brighter, gentler days.

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Carol Dickson, CGSC  
Certified Grief Support Counsellor  
Links Support Group Facilitator

(780) 851-6562  
[carol@stalbertbereavement.ca](mailto:carol@stalbertbereavement.ca)



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