

# The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation

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[www.griefHaven.org](http://www.griefHaven.org)

## E-Haven Newsletter from griefHaven

Where Hope Resides®

(310) 459-1789

E-Haven™  
December 2009



*May You Know  
Peace of Heart®  
During This Holiday Season*

Wreath created and donated to *griefHaven* by  
June Truedson, Laguna Beach, CA

## **Helping You With the Holidays**



***In this season I will find hope,  
and grief as well.***

***—Martha Whitmore Hickman***

***Dear Friends,***

***In this holiday newsletter, we have re-searched many wonderful books written by specialists and those who understand the holidays after the death of a beloved.***

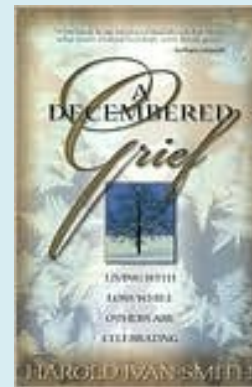
***We bring you excerpts from some of those books hoping you might find suggestions and support that will guide you as you decide what you will and won't do over these next few weeks.***

***We at griefHaven hope that you will experience moments of Peace of Heart during this holiday season.***

***Love,  
Susan Whitmore  
Erika's Mom  
Founder & President***

**Excerpts From:**

***A Decembered Grief:  
Living With Loss While Others  
Are Celebrating***  
**—Harold Ivan Smith**



Foreword by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

**A**s you are no doubt painfully aware, holidays are often difficult for anyone who has experienced the death of someone loved. Rather than being times of togetherness, sharing, and thanksgiving, holidays can bring feelings of sadness, loss, and emptiness.

Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief—a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. Society encourages you to join in the holiday spirit, but all around you the sounds, sights, and smells trigger memories of the person who died.

**7**he thousands of mourners I've had the privilege of meeting during my years as a grief counselor and educator have taught me that it helps to:

- Talk about your grief.
- Be tolerant of your physical and psychological limits.
- Eliminate unnecessary stress.
- Be with supportive, comforting people.
- Talk about the person who died.
- Do what is right for you.
- Plan ahead for family gatherings.
- Embrace your treasure of memories.
- Renew your resources for living.

Keep each holiday as a reminder of all things you shared with the person who has died. And remember: grief is both a painful necessity and a privilege, for it comes as a result of having loved.

## Suggestions From *A Decembered Grief*:

### ***Alter—Rather than Abandon—Traditions***

#### ***Anticipate the Holidays***

Merchants force the issue. For some griever, their first encounter with displays or merchandise . . . produces angst: “Oh, no! How will I deal with that!?” Grievors who have been down this road advise: You will deal with it by making plans and by making backup plans. Some would advise, “Plan tentatively.”

Some grievors and some families will decide “the holidays as usual” and go full steam ahead. Victor Parachin wisely counsels grievors to call a family conference in which everyone can express both needs and wishes. Realistically, “through compromise and negotiation, everyone can get a little of what they really need.” Unless you have someone who insists on having it “my way.” That’s when the skillful art of diplomacy begins.

#### ***Appreciate the Grief Styles and Decisions of Others***

Look at your fingertips. No one on earth—no one—has a fingerprint like yours. So why should your grief print be predictable? You had a unique relationship with your loved one.

Most families have the designated “strong one.” Families whisper, “You have to be strong for \_\_\_\_\_’s sake.”

One expression of hospitality you can give others this holiday season is the gift of recognizing that grief has many formats and forms of expression.

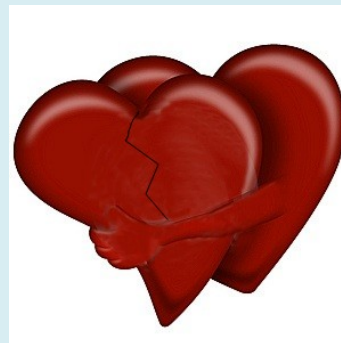
#### ***Be Alert to the Culture’s Obsession with Excitement***

It’s bad enough as a griever to hear, “I am soooooo excited!” It’s the next part that wounds: “Aren’t you excited?” You want to scream, “Stifle yourself!” You just want—somehow—to get through the season without breaking down in a nine-Kleenex episode of public grief.

The last thing you want to be called is a party pooper. You may suspect the accusation even when you don’t hear it. But seasonal excitement is not always soul deep. For many people, it’s “Put on a happy face and at least *act* excited!” Some activities may well be so excitement focused, you will want to politely “pass.”

### ***Befriend Your Grief***

Grief—even during the holiday season—has important lessons to teach those who pay attention. Some have discovered that previous holiday traditions, celebrations, and expenditures must be re-



evaluated and altered. Others have come to appreciate the traditions even more.

Some have learned that the season is not so much about giving as it is about relating. These holidays offer ample opportunity to treasure the memory of those we have lost—and to treasure relationships with those who are still with us.

And some other chapter headings:

***Celebrate Sensitive***

***Consider the Needs of Everyone***

***Create New Traditions***

***Create Decorations That Symbolize Your Loved One***

***Cry If You Want To***

***Define Your Boundaries***

***Do What You Need To Do***

***Donate to Your Church or a Charity in Honor of Your Loved One***

***Give Your Grief Its Voice***

***Give Yourself Permission to Say, “No,” or “I’ll Pass”***

***Guard Your Heart***

***Let Others In on Your Grief***

***Nap***

***Nurture Yourself***

***Remain Open to Seasonal Surprises***

***Say Your Loved One’s Name***

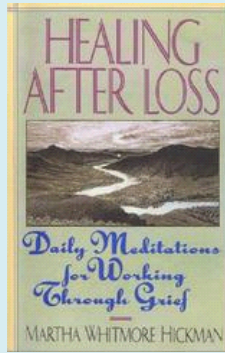
***Toast Your Loved One***

***Visit the Cemetery or Scattering Ground***

***Volunteer***

***Write a Year-End Letter to Your Deceased Loved One***

Excerpts From:  
***Healing After Loss,***  
—Martha Whitmore Hickman



**H**olidays are among the hardest times for those who have lost a loved one. They are so fraught with family ritual, the layered memories of years.

Sometimes we feel free to talk about it—indeed, there’s no way *not* to talk about it if the grief is fresh.

But after some time has passed, when the grief is in the background but not really yet assimilated into our lives, it may be even harder—the dull ache of absence, and everyone trying to be cheerful.

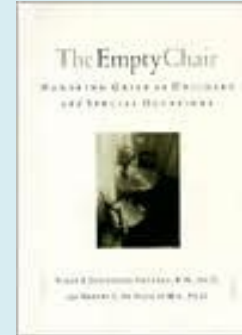
One year—the first year we tried to go back to our usual Christmas patterns—the unspoken gloom hovered behind our attempts at joy and repartee. Suddenly, almost as though by unspoken direction, we gathered in a circle, our arms around one another, and acknowledged our grief. Only *then* could we get on with Christmas.

**P**articulary at this time of year when families are celebrating the holidays, the “sudden small reminders”—and the large ones, too—come to plague us. We thought we were doing so well, and then there we are, crying as though our loss was yesterday.

We need to take heart. If our loss is recent, the sadness is understandably overwhelming. If it was a while ago and we thought we were over the worst, then perhaps this time it will not take so long for “the quiet joy” to reassert itself, the spiritual presence to return in its quiet and infinitely precious way.

Our life runs in seasons, as does our grief. Some seasons are long, some short. But if we are resolute in our efforts to be present to the moment, even as we know this moment will give way to another, we can be assured at these times of renewed pain that things will get better.

Excerpts From:  
***The Empty Chair,***  
—Susan J. Zonnebelt-Smeenge, RN, Ed.D.  
And Robert C. DeVries, D.Min., Ph.D.



**F**or many people, grief at the holidays is an oxymoron. Holidays are supposed to be happy, fun, joyful, overflowing with bonds of love. Grief casts a painful, somber, dark shadow over the holidays, shrouding the happy memories of past celebrations.

We grieve because we loved. We formed an intense attachment to another person. We became vulnerable, letting the other person deep into our life in intimate ways. Attachments, connections, once the glue that held our life together, have now been broken by death. We yearn to have our loved one close to us again.

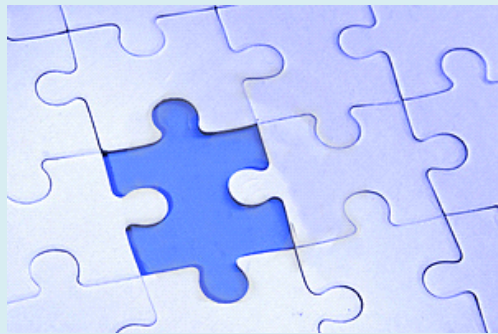
We grieve not only for the person who died but for the life we lived with that person. We grieve over the loss of someone who functioned in important ways in our life, who was a companion, who shared the same living space. We remember hugging each other, taking walks or eating meals together, and sharing rich holiday traditions.

**N**ow, that part of who you were together is [gone]. Your own identity is changing. Holidays are special times of the year when we are drawn to remember those significant people who have died, even if the death occurred several years ago and the memories are pleasant and no longer filled with pain.

The death of a child makes holidays difficult. Society judges such a death as the most unanticipated—the most out of order. In our culture children often occupy a prominent place in the family. They are our link to the future, for they will carry in their hands and hearts the generational torch after we die. This child was to be a significant part of your future, and with his or her death, part of your

future died. Perhaps the death was a miscarriage or occurred at the time of delivery. How you yearned to nurture that little life into someone significant, important, loving, and kind! Or your child may have died as an adolescent or adult. In any case, your hopes and dreams for what might have been with this child have been destroyed. So now, on this holiday, you are called to name the pain, to celebrate the memory, and to search the landscape for signs of new life.

A sister or brother may have died—a comrade in blood. This was the one you teased and with whom you fought, yet you were also bonded with a strong sense of family loyalty. Siblings understand the nature of their shared environment, growing up together. But now the birth order may have changed—you have become the oldest, or maybe the only. Family reunions will forever be different. Family structures will change. Your family is now smaller—one less place setting for the holiday dinner, one less chair at the table. This important person is no longer here. There is now one less person to help with family decisions or plans, one less person to help care for an aging parent. And so the holidays force you to name the pain, to celebrate the memory, and to search the landscape for signs of new life.



Holidays seem to intensify the pain and add another layer to one's grief. The special days fall short of what they are imagined to be. Death has removed a significant person from your life. A meaningful relationship has vanished like the morning mist. In the middle of your celebration, you are reminded how closely attached you were to your deceased loved one. Memories of other important people who have preceded you in death may also flood over you.

A holiday celebration makes you face the reality of death all the more directly. It may be difficult to say the words dead or died. They refuse to be shaped by your tongue. Yet in the middle of the traditions of food, family, and friends—and all the activities associated with holidays and other special days—you have an empty chair, a place once filled by that special person, a reminder of the loss.

Here are some things you can do.

- Take care of yourself physically. Holidays can be physically draining, especially if this is your first experience with a holiday since the death of your loved one. Respect your mind and your body. The acronym DEER (drink, eat, exercise, rest) may help you stay focused on taking care of yourself. Holidays take enough energy by themselves without the additional gut-wrenching

**Yet in the middle of the traditions . . . you have an empty chair, a place once filled by that special person, a reminder of the loss.**

pain of a death. Failing to take care of yourself physically will only add to your fatigue and frustration.

- Think back to how you celebrated the holidays. What was your role in the celebration? How might that be different now that your loved one has died? Begin to consider how you might want to handle your traditional ways of celebrating this day following your beloved person's death. If you have children, or others to consider when deciding how to celebrate the holiday, listen to what is important to them. Then see if you can incorporate their hopes or wishes into the celebration without compromising what you need.
- Death puts things into perspective. Since the death of your loved one, many of the routine things that previously concerned you may mean almost nothing at all. Some of the festivities and all of the hubbub might seem ridiculous. This is understandable during the grieving process. Reassure yourself that eventually you can come to a new and deeper understanding of each special day.
- Talk with others about the reality that your loved one has died and that therefore your life (and your celebrations) will feel and be different.
- If you accept a holiday invitation to someone's home, give yourself some leeway. Be up front with them when you accept the invitation, letting them know that you will try to participate but that you may well excuse yourself at some point. We suggest that you not host an event during the first year after a death. As a guest you can leave when you want to or even cancel

at the last minute. You might also wish to consider making alternative plans that may feel more comfortable, as a back-up.

- Lower your expectations and the pressures you put on yourself. You do not have to celebrate the holiday in exactly the same way you did before. Plan your day, keeping it simple. Allow yourself time to face the hard reality of your loved one's death (in a manageable dose) if you think you can do so this year. For some of you, celebrating the holiday according to family tradition may be a comforting coping strategy. If it is not, take a break from the holiday this time, making the commitment to yourself to try and face this special day more directly next year.
- Talk about your deceased loved one. Tell a favorite story, give a toast, write a poem, play his or her favorite song, or make a favorite food. Such an act will help you express the importance of the deceased, and then perhaps you and other family members will be able to move on to appreciate the holiday with an even deeper significance.
- Write a letter to your loved one, recalling several memories you have of the holidays in which this person played an important part. In that letter, write about such things as:

*When I think of this holiday without you, I feel ...*  
*The thing I miss most on this special day without you is ...*

- Using photos, make a picture book of the holidays. Find some way to organize your visual memories so that you and your family can use them during the holiday celebration to remember.
- Go through cards, letters, pictures, and other personal memorabilia associated with your relationship with your loved one. Relive the occasions and remember as you review the mementos.



- Ask your friends and family to write down their memories of your loved one and collect them in a keepsake book or have each person read one.
- Remember that you can have wonderful memories of your loved one associated with past holidays, but that undoubtedly you enjoyed those days or times



for other reasons as well. Your loved one died; you didn't. Try to find something that will give you a renewed view of the day—if only for a portion of the time.

- Make a plan for how you will get through the day and with whom you will spend it. There is a decided advantage in thinking ahead about what you want the day to include.
- Don't hesitate to meet with a grief professional to assist you in deciding what to do on any holiday. Trained grief professionals can help you articulate your feelings, fears, hopes, losses, and concerns. When those are expressed, you will be better able to figure out what you can and can't handle.
- Each year you might find yourself dreading the holidays. If it's because you find yourself surrounded by people who won't talk about him or her, who carry on as if everything is the same, who ignore your requests for simple things, such as to say her name, and who seem to avoid and ignore the fact that this day is one that is difficult and requires some greater sensitivity and understanding, then you might need



to rethink how you will spend this holiday season. Maybe it's time to take a break and do something different. If you haven't told your family what you would like for the holidays, then do. No one is a mind reader, and what is comforting to you might not be comforting to someone else.

To purchase any of the books  
in this newsletter,  
please visit [www.griefHaven.org](http://www.griefHaven.org),  
resources tab,  
or purchase from any  
of your favorite resource stores.

## *“Memories Of You” Candles*

Meet Kim Griffin who created these beautiful memory candles after she lost her son, Ryan. You may order them on our website in our *griefHaven* store or by contacting Kim directly. Here is her story:

On April 28, 2007, our 20-year-old son, Ryan Griffin, died from an accidental overdose. I say “accidental” because Ryan had struggled with depression for two years prior to his death. After counseling and medication, Ryan had turned to drugs to try and feel better, which resulted in his death.

My grief journey has led me to starting the *Ryan Griffin Memorial Scholarship Foundation* with the remembrance of Ryan's love for wrestling. Each year we award a college scholarship to high school wrestlers. I also created a line of memorial candles called *Memories Of You* in loving memory of Ryan.

I hope that you will find some comfort in your keepsake candle and that, as the flame flickers and shines, it will bring some comfort to your heart.

Sincerely,  
Ryan's Mom,



Each “*Memories Of You*” candle is hand poured with 17 ounces of 100% soy wax and includes a photo of your loved one. For any questions or to place an order, please contact Kim Griffin at

[kimberggriffin173@yahoo.com](mailto:kimberggriffin173@yahoo.com)

Kim Griffin  
c/o Memories Of You Candles  
173 Black Rock Lane  
St Charles, MO 63304

### **Scene Selection:**

- Doves In Flight
- Mountain View
- Flower Garden
- Jesus Embrace
- Cherub Angels
- Stained Glass Madonna
- Serene Fishing
- Deer Hunting
- Vibrant Sunset
- Crayons
- Teddy Bears
- Child's Blocks
- American Flag
- Breast Cancer - Pink Flowers
- Breast Cancer - Purple Flowers



# Help For The Holidays

from

Compassion Books

[www.compassionbooks.com](http://www.compassionbooks.com)

10% discount through December 24

As the holiday time of year approaches, many of us experience reawakened grief and longing that can make celebrations difficult. Here are some resources that can help make our feelings at these times more manageable and less confusing.



**Renewing Your Spirit**, by Sherry Williams. Sound advice to help make sense of confusing holiday feelings after a loved one dies. Special emphasis is given to rituals and ceremonies. Guided journaling exercises. *56 pages.* #G08D

**Thoughts For The Holidays**, by Doug Manning. Wise thoughts and practical advice on coping with the stress and disruption of grief during the holidays. A thoughtful gift possibility. *23 pages.* #G07T

**Holiday Hope**, by Fairview Press. Offers comforting tips, activities, essays, stories, poems, and music for helping people cope with grief during anniversaries, birthdays and many special days and holidays. *149 pages.* #G07H

**How Will I Get Through the Holidays**, by James Miller. Twelve brief chapters full of helpful, encouraging information and quotations. Includes: 'Take charge where you can.' 'Be gentle with yourself.' 'Remember to remember.' 'Harbor hope.' *64 p.* #G559

**Light A Candle and Songs of Remembrance CD**, by Paul Alexander. Four songs created especially for ritual remembrances such as candle lighting ceremonies, Christmas ornament memorials and tree plantings, memory walks, and balloon releases. *33 Min.* #M02B

**A Ray of Hope DVD**, by Paul Alexander. Learn ways to be true to yourself during a holiday season or any special day of remembrance. As you listen to the advice of other bereaved individuals you can benefit from the wisdom of their experience. #V07U

**Grief: Coping With the Holidays DVD**, by Kathleen Braza. Time-tested healing techniques and activities designed to help the bereaved at difficult holiday times. Explains what to say or do to help turn holiday traditions from a time of sadness and loneliness into healing rituals. *38 minutes, DVD.* #V07X

**Sweet Memories**, by Elaine Stillwell. Hands-on activities and projects children can do to remember a person they miss. *20 p.* #C00K

**Helping the Bereaved Celebrate the Holidays**, by James Miller. Anyone wishing to plan and conduct events to help the bereaved celebrate holidays or hold remembrance ceremonies will find this planning sourcebook an immensely helpful guide. #R559

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