

Holidays with Heartache: I Will Put a Bow On It

by Kathryn Quinlan,
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“People you love never die. That is what Omai had said, all those years ago. And he was right. They don’t die. Not completely. They live in your mind, the way they always lived inside you. You keep their light alive. If you remember them well enough, they can still guide you, like the shine of long-extinguished stars could guide ships in unfamiliar waters.”

— Matt Haig, [How to Stop Time](#)

I remember discovering this quote a few years ago. My dad had been living with heart disease which precipitated signs of vascular dementia. He was my rock, my mentor, my guide, my teacher, and the kind of good, moral, and ethical person I aspire to be. He was the only man I could always count on, who always believed in me, and never let me down. About two years ago, his health was in rapid decline. We were told he could pass next week, next month, or in years. I started having anticipatory grief. “What will my life be like without him to support me? Who will I turn to? Who will believe in me and inspire me the way he does?” I would look at this quote and practice hearing him in my head. Got it. I could hear him, and luckily, still see and spend time with him in person.

This past October, that changed. He had a major medical emergency and passed away with all his family with him. Finally, it had happened. We each began the journey of grieving in earnest.

Oh no! Holidays! They are coming too fast on the heels of his passing! When you are living with someone living with dementia, you get used to things always needing to shift to accommodate the changes they are experiencing. Things are like they always were, just different. The changes we made in how we celebrated holidays were slow and gradual changes we got used to. But now, he’s not here. How do we cope?

I’ve been doing some research and here are a few things I’ve learned and am embracing. Each one mourns in their own way. The best thing we can do for ourselves and others having a first holiday without a loved one, is to respect what works best for the individual. If it is too much to put up decorations and have a party, or even attend one, then don’t. If you would like to be social to draw strength from, to support you, and celebrate your loved one, go for it. Your feelings will fluctuate from day to day, even hour to hour, and that is OKAY. If Mom isn’t ready to do all the things we used to do as a family I will be mindful not to try to convince her that doing it will make her feel better. If she expresses a need to keep things as much the same as usual, then I will do my best to support her while also keeping my own needs in mind.

In my research, I also discovered many people suggested creating new memories to celebrate the loved one who will be missing from the table. It can be about something

they cared about, music playing that they liked, creating a new ritual, or practicing an old one in honor of them.

Without realizing it, I contributed to a new ritual that I will keep. On the day of my dad's funeral in October, after the ceremony and on the way back to the house for the celebration of his life party, I stopped at the grocery store and got a cherry pie. It was an impulse from me. It was his absolute favorite dessert. He wasn't a big sweets eater, but he could polish off a whole pie in less than 24 hours. I didn't say anything, and just put it with the other desserts. When my mother noticed, she asked "where the heck did that come from?" I said "Me, it's for Dad." From now on, at every holiday gathering, I am going to bring a cherry pie, asked to or not. My contribution for a new ritual. That one is for the family.

And finally, I am going to let go of a personal ritual.

A long time ago, my dad asked not to receive gifts from us, his family. "Spend it on the kids," he said. Sometimes I would get tickets to go hear music he liked, or take him to a ballgame, but not all the time. However, there was one thing I always did, every year, most of my adult life relationship with him. I would look back on the past year and write him a letter of gratitude for how he had supported me, specifically, what I learned from him that year we were celebrating or mourning, or whatever was passing. He was always supporting me moving on and growing.

So, this year, I plan to look back on this past year, then on his life well lived, then one last time, thank him for the gift he was in my life. I will take some time alone by the fire and let the flames be the final bow on my gift to him. The flames will take my gift into the darkness and to that one star I know is watching over me forever. I can already hear him saying "Thanks Kath. What you shared, really means a lot."

Each year brings change and needed shifts in how we celebrate for all of us. Sometimes it's the discovery of the reality of Santa, or why is Hanukkah gelt important? What can you do for your family? What can you do for you? What can you say "hello again" to or "so long for now" to, and how can you now join your party and family in remembrance? What can you send and release to the stars this year?

Happy, loving holidays to all...xoxo

Kathryn came to dementia care as a second career. She was a primary care partner to family and realized the power of good care and understanding the journey of living well with dementia for both the person and their care partners. She has been a part of the PAC team for four years. She is a Certified PAC Trainer, Coach, Consultant, and Engagement Specialist. She has experience in communities as well as private homes.