Stepping Stones™
NEWSLETTER

A Gift That Keeps Giving

This holiday season, you can give your loved ones the gift of peace of mind. Consider sitting down with Mom, Dad, your spouse or kids to set up an emergency file containing vital statistics, funeral wishes, and important biographical notes. If services are mapped out ahead of time and paid for, imagine the peace of mind that the whole family will have. That is a gift that keeps on giving. For complimentary preplanning assistance for any member of your family, call today.

Sincerely,

Lunn Funeral Home

2 The Twelve Days of Christmas

3 Light a Candle

DECEMBER

IT WON'T BE THE SAME THIS YEAR

By Dr. Linda E. Jordan

Rituals, by definition, are observance, habits, or ceremonies that we create in order to take care of ourselves. They mark special moments like birthdays and anniversaries as well as national occasions like Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. They represent special family traditions like eating pizzas every Thursday or story-time before going to bed. They contain important symbolism like baptisms or bar mitzvahs. Rituals serve as an expression of the values and relationships that we hold most precious.

Grief can be acute around holidays and special occasions because most often friends and family gather at these times, and the absence of the deceased can be very present. Often certain practices are connected to these gatherings, such as exchanging presents to express love or cooking a particular meal together. When someone we love dies, we miss them daily in a myriad of ways. This is especially true when that particular celebration was a favorite of the deceased.

For bereaved persons, it is important to acknowledge up front that it won't be the same this year. Things are not the same. Someone pivotal in our lives is gone. Moreover, we are not the same persons. Death forever changes the self we were before. Therefore, we cannot expect to "buck up" and act as if nothing has changed. Everything has changed.

Having said this, I want to suggest that there are ways, not only to survive special days, but also to make them, in fact, meaningful in a different way. The key to doing this is found in the word RITUAL.

Some persons find comfort in keeping traditions as much the same as possible. If that is the case, find ways to remember the deceased in those

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THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

By Janet K. Brennan

It was Christmas. The snow that gently hugged the tips of the mountains and the farolitos (paper lanterns) that graced the homes and business establishments in the desert Southwest told me so. But it was not Christmas in my heart. My children were busy with their holiday parties, and simply baking the perfunctory cookies for them was a massive chore. You see, tragedy had struck our family just four months earlier by way of the untimely and sad death of my oldest daughter, Kristen.

Much to my surprise, life proceeded, albeit on a surreal level. *How would I get through the holiday? How could I be strong for my family?*

Christmas was just two weeks away, and my parents decided to fly out and join us. They had not weathered the death of their grandchild well. It was good that we would all be together for this holiday. Little did we know what was about to happen to us on that holiday.

It was a quiet night. The lights of Albuquerque sparkled below us, and I had just finished playing Christmas songs on my piano when the front doorbell chimed. My son, Nick, was quick to see who had come to visit us this late.

"What in the world?" he exclaimed. "There is no one here."

My daughter, Kate, ran to the door and gasped in surprise. Sitting on the front porch was a beautiful white candle covered in a glass dome. The fire of the candle danced merrily, and we quickly brought it inside. How nice! Who could have given us such a nice present? Why didn't they stay so that we could thank them? So many questions!

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rituals. In this way the very occasions in which you miss them the most will include them, only in a different way. We might want to light a candle at the table to symbolize their continuing presence in our lives. We might want to set aside some time to tell stories. It's perfectly O.K. to cry. And it will feel incredibly good to be able to remember the deceased together. We might want to choose a particular activity that the deceased loved and do that in their memory, i.e. playing basketball or eating cheesecake. We might wish to make a financial contribution to some organization that symbolizes a commitment that the deceased had. In all these ways, we remain connected with the deceased.

Some persons find comfort in creating new and different rituals. This alternative is just as valid and must not be interpreted as a sign of weakness or as letting down others. Neither should new rituals be interpreted as avoiding reality or as betraying the deceased. Things are forever changed. One family decided that instead of staying home following the death of their loved one, they would take a trip together. Just having an entirely new environment was helpful. One family decided to introduce a new family tradition -- to make a holiday scrapbook of the deceased that they will display each year as part of their decoration.

Giving ourselves permission to discard some things "we have always done before" can relieve a great deal of pressure. We may even elect to ignore a special occasion, if only for this one time. This does not mean that we will forget the deceased, but we may need to care for ourselves by reducing the dread of a particular event. Nothing we do will make a bigger difference than respecting our own grief. Intentionally choosing what is meaningful and eliminating what is stressful will go a long way in making the holidays and other special days more bearable.

Rituals increase the sense of personal power in an otherwise powerless situation. Nothing leaves us feeling more powerless than the death of a loved one. Therefore, rituals offer us both the symbols of continuity and the means by which we can mark a significant life transition. Rituals help us design our own healing, and they provide for us a tangible structure for maintaining a healthy relationship with the deceased. We can remember them while moving forward in life-affirming and life-promoting ways.

So, it won't be the same this year. Someone we loved has died. However, our memories will not die. And our rituals can help us learn to live again.

Dr. Linda E. Jordan is the retired Manager of Duke Community Bereavement Services, Duke HomeCare & Hospice.
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The following night, after a particularly stressful day, we once again heard the sound of the doorbell. The children laughed merrily. This time, a basket of freshly baked ginger cookies was left for us. They were still warm and covered with a clean red-checkered dishtowel. Nick quickly ran out onto the porch and into the driveway. No one was there.

What was going on? Who could be doing this? And how could they disappear so quickly without a trace into the night?

On the third night, we waited with anticipation. Nick had a plan that he felt would be foolproof. He would be ready this time if the doorbell rang. He camped out in the foyer, directly in front of the door. Sure enough, this time, there came a knock. Before anyone had a chance to respond, Nick swung open the door. However, much to his chagrin, he wasn't fast enough. Nestled among delicate green foil were two crystal tree ornaments. They were filled with a fragrant, spicy potpourri. We immediately placed them in a prominent location on our Christmas tree. This was fun! My father's eyes sparkled with life, and my mother's face was lit with a happy smile. How wonderful! Someone was playing the "Twelve Days of Christmas" on us. But who? Who could be doing such a wonderful thing?

The fourth night arrived, accompanied by a storm. Wind and snow lapped against our windows with a fury, and we were certain we would not receive a visit from our Christmas Ghost on such a dreary night. We were wrong! Right on schedule, the front door rattled with a knock, and this time, two tiny, wooden angels with starched lace wings were left behind for us to behold. The children ran to the end of the porch. Nothing could be seen, not even a footprint in the snow. Such a mystery!

On the fifth, sixth, and seventh nights, we received tall, honey wax candles, a nut bread bursting with cherries and almonds, and a tiny nutcracker carved from clothespins and held together with pipe cleaners. Now it was time to get down to serious business. Our curiosity was piqued. We simply had to know our mystery benefactor.

"No," said my father. "Whoever it is does not want to be seen, and it is our responsibility to keep it that way. This is part of the gift. This angel is also receiving a gift, the pure and obvious joy of giving, secure in the knowledge that he or she is bringing joy to this family at a very difficult time." He, of course, was right.

On the eighth night, we waited. No one came. Disappointed and tired, we went to bed. We had come to look forward to our nocturnal visits and now wondered why they had stopped. Morning dawned brightly, and when my husband stepped outside to retrieve his paper, lo and behold! On our threshold were two gifts: a red poinsettia, and a lovely Christmas cactus that was preparing to bloom. Our friend had truly caught us off guard this time. Indeed, our eighth and ninth day gifts had been quietly left outside our door sometime during the night.

On the tenth night, we received an apple pie, steaming hot and carefully wrapped in red and green napkins. On the eleventh day, brown and white handmade coasters made of cardboard and lined with satin ribbon were left. So lovely!

Christmas Eve was upon us, and it had happened so quickly that we forgot our sad spirit. Our sweet angel had taken our minds from our loss and had treated us to a very different kind of Christmas. It was one that we had never anticipated. Each night, the children had run outside in a vain effort to catch a glimpse of our benevolent friends, and yet, on the twelfth night, we still had no idea who had so diligently and kindly bestowed us with its sweet blessings.

On the twelfth day -- Christmas Day -- we sat in the living room. All of our gifts had been exchanged, and we had enjoyed a quiet family dinner. It had been a good Christmas, after all, loving and joyous. Then, as usual, the front doorbell rang. Right on cue, our secret Santa disappeared into the night, leaving behind a small white envelope. Upon opening it, we found that our twelfth Christmas gift was a message, neatly written in a child's hand. I read:

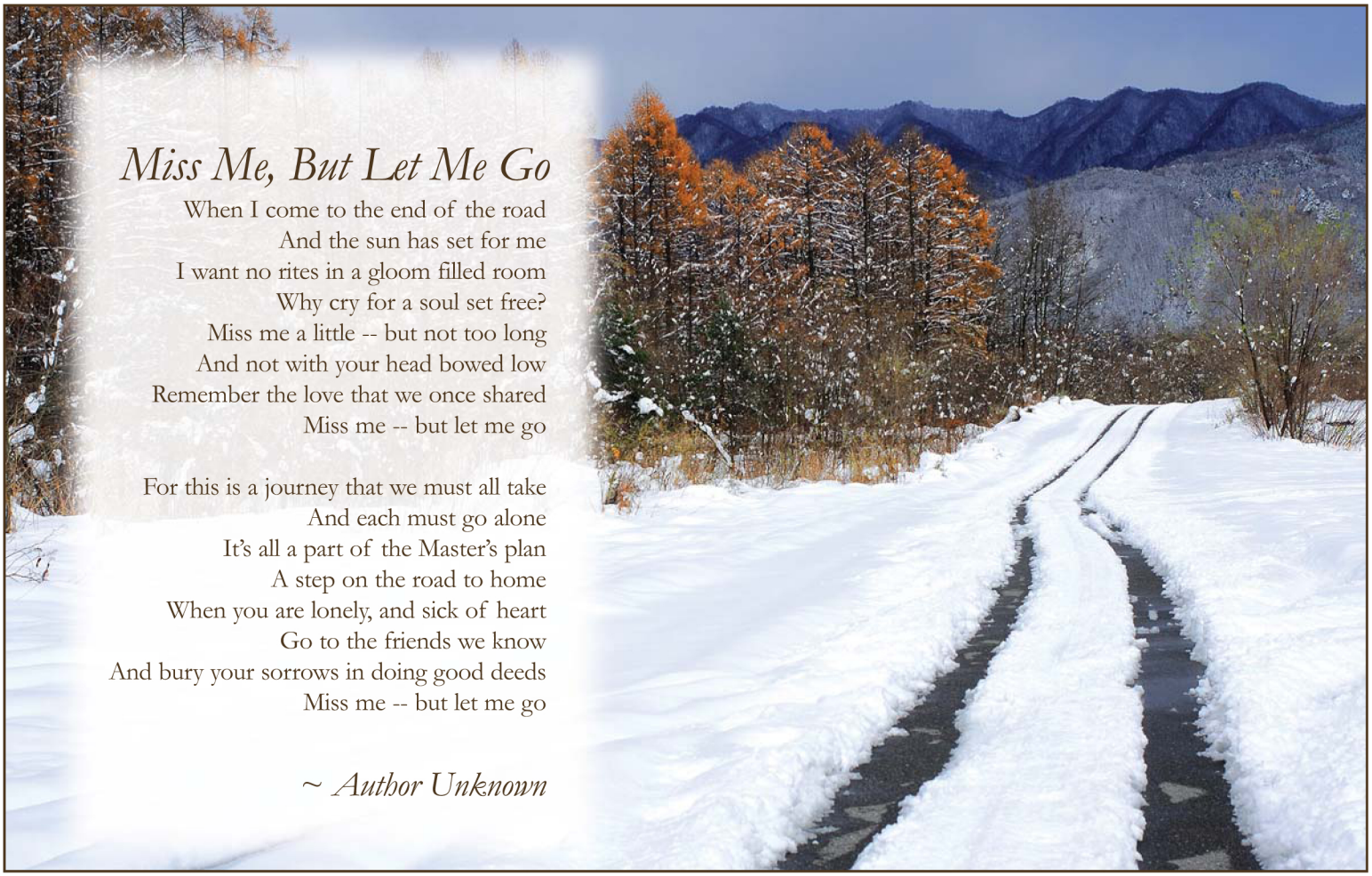
I am the spirit of Christmas
Which is PEACE
I am the spirit of gladness -- HOPE
I am the heart of Christmas, which is LOVE
Have a Merry Christmas!

We were changed from that night on. We began to heal. Going on with our lives seemed a bit easier. We never knew who left all of those wonderful gifts. We did, however divine the "Spirit of Christmas" and how important it is to take the time for friends. We learned how essential it is to bring a bit of sunshine into a dark place, not simply at Christmas, but all year through.

Light a Candle

Light a candle, it'll help to remind you
Of your time together on earth,
and as the flame flickers, remember
His kindness, His goodness, His worth.
So, glow little candle, that briefly,
You'll know that his memory can't die,
As you see his sweet face in the glowing,
Shed a tear, say a prayer, then goodbye.

~ Kathy Holler



Miss Me, But Let Me Go

When I come to the end of the road
And the sun has set for me
I want no rites in a gloom filled room
Why cry for a soul set free?
Miss me a little -- but not too long
And not with your head bowed low
Remember the love that we once shared
Miss me -- but let me go

For this is a journey that we must all take
And each must go alone
It's all a part of the Master's plan
A step on the road to home
When you are lonely, and sick of heart
Go to the friends we know
And bury your sorrows in doing good deeds
Miss me -- but let me go

~ Author Unknown

We are pleased to continue our tradition of caring through these complimentary issues of *Stepping Stones Newsletter* and our professional staff.

Seymour Memorial
FUNERAL HOME
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If you have enjoyed this reading, please let us know! We'd love to provide you with additional grief materials and resources to help you cope during this difficult time. If you would like more information, or if you would like to speak to someone who can assist you with filing for veterans' benefits, Social Security and insurance benefits, or who can help you prepare your own or a loved one's funeral plans in advance, please reply to this email, and a funeral home representative will contact you shortly. We sincerely hope that we have been able to brighten your day with this edition of *Stepping Stones*. Please don't hesitate to let us know if there is anything we can do to assist you.

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