

# The Greatest Gift is Your Faith

One inevitable task of grief is dealing with the first winter after a loss. Trimming trees, wrapping presents, planning holiday meals and other traditions are all part of the season; however, the season just isn't the same when a loved one is missing. Sometimes the pain and heartache is difficult to bear. The weeks that follow, after family and friends have gone, can be an even more difficult reminder of the reality of the loss.

The pain and sadness of grief manifests itself physically as well as mentally, spiritually and emotionally, often to the point that some survivors benefit from the reassurance of a doctor that these symptoms are indeed a part of the grief process. Caring members of a faith-based community can also offer valuable affirmation that spiritual pain is also a part of the journey.

Most experts agree that planning for the holidays, accepting that they may be difficult, and not feeling obligated to do everything like you have in the past are all good ways to cope after losing a loved one. In addition, it is important to remember not to isolate yourself and take time to create new memories and friendships.

Isolation is one of the more common coping mechanisms after losing a loved one. If your friends don't see you, then they won't see your tears. If you don't talk to anyone, then you don't have to worry about what they are going to say. Unfortunately, this escape from reality deprives survivors of much needed help and support.

When a lonely heart needs comforting, we often turn to our faith community. In a recent issue of the *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine*, experts write that "as people age, they increase their

involvement in religious activities because religion is one of the very few institutions in our Western culture that steadfastly values later years, and with its rehearsed rituals and houses of prayer, it is rich in emotional meaning and 'soaked' with life-long memories."

Religion and spirituality contain an element of community that binds people together and provides a support system that brings comfort in times of pain and happiness in times of joy. Faith-based communities reach out to hurting hearts in various ways, both formally and informally. Specialized ministries that reach out to those who are sick or grieving offer intentional support. Visits, calls and cards from members are also important when they come from fellow sojourners who have experienced the pain and heartache of losing a loved one.

Holiday memorial services are meaningful because they give hurting hearts the opportunity to commemorate their loved one and stand side-by-side with those who may be sharing the same difficult experience. Planning and attending these services can also be a time to create new memories and traditions.

Many candles burn during the holiday season, but none shine brighter than those representing the lives of our loved ones. Lighting a candle in memory of a loved one is an opportunity to remember days gone by and acknowledge that their spirit will always burn in your heart. I would never have used a bamboo fishing pole if it wasn't for Grandpa Dawalt. I would never have the wonderful memories I have of the McAdenville lights if not for Grandpa Norris, and I would never have heard the story of their 64 wonderful



years of love had it not been for Uncle Marvin talking about his sweetheart, Aunt Mary. I think of them, and others, every year as I light my candle.

Communities of faith acknowledge and bless our memories of loved ones who have passed away and at the same time, they extend help and hope to those with heavy hearts that life will go on and they will survive. That simple knowledge, to feel like someone knows and cares, may be the best gift of all to those dealing with their first lonely winter.

Larry Dawalt is the Director of Spiritual and Grief Care Services for Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region, celebrating 30 years of providing comprehensive hospice and palliative care services in nine counties in North and South

Carolina. He also directs *Chameleon's Journey™*, an overnight grief camp for children, which he helped begin in 2000.

Larry has spoken to thousands of people in groups large and small, including seminars for the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, Carolinas Center for Hospice and Palliative Care, the Alzheimer's Association and various health care providers, professional organizations and communities of faith. He is a frequently published writer of articles pertaining to grief and loss.

Larry lives in Charlotte and is the father of a son and two daughters.

