

It won't be the same this year  
-Linda E. Jordan

Rituals, by definition, are observances, 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 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 love has died. However, our memories will not die. And our rituals can help us learn to live again.