

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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Narrating Grief During the Holidays



By Lorraine Hedtke

In upcoming months, families will gather to celebrate holidays and holy days. Times of celebration and reflection often connect us with those we love when we recall what is important, honor long-standing relationships and recount stories of the year. For those whose loved ones have died, these events can also invite sadness and missing. For the bereaved person, it can feel like they are carrying a ghost to the annual office party or family gathering, where clumsy social conventions often exclude the deceased.

Traditional bereavement practices of the last one hundred years have encouraged (if not insisted on) “closure” and “moving on” from the connection between the deceased and the living. While there have been challenges to this individual, psychodynamic view of death and grief that severs relationships, it has continued to largely dominate the professional and lay literature alike. The stories of the deceased are often silenced at holiday get-togethers and the bereaved are left to quietly, and privately, mourn.

Social Construction offers a theoretical platform for new practices that incorporate the stories, and love, of the dead into the ongoing lives of the living. Rather than relocating the dead to a distant land, we can fold the best of what they offered, their shining moments, into definitional ceremonies that stand against “letting go” in the face of grief. My work embraces practices that actively include those who have died, creating celebratory rituals to embrace a lived vitality when death, and grief, visits.

Sally’s mother died in June last year. When we spoke, she shared her apprehensiveness about Christmas. She knew her mother’s presence would be missed, particularly for her four grandchildren. She also wondered whether others thought that, after five months, she should be over her grief. She found that she seldom spoke of her mother and even her friends had stopped sharing stories. Sally’s mother was quietly disappearing from the family traditions. When we spoke, I inquired into what her mother liked about Christmas. “Most everything,” Sally replied, “but particularly baking cookies for the kids and seeing their joy.”

“What would it mean to your mom, if you were to continue baking cookies with some of her recipes?” I asked. She thought her mother would appreciate the chance to have a place in Christmas. Sally further thought she could prepare homemade recipe picture books to give to each one of the younger generation to remind them of their Grandmother’s love for them.

Those who die need to feature into the lives of the living, not just during holidays, but as a way to serve as ballast to the yearning that accompanies grief. This form of future remembering affords threads of continuity between the past and present to shape a relational future. In this regard, relationships do not die when a person does, but their influences can be continued in rituals that act as a touchstone for a larger story; a larger story that breathes life into generations, past and future.

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Bereavement Support Groups, by Lorraine Hedtke -
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