



"Winter's Gloom"

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I've packed away the few holiday decorations we got out, and I've cried the tears that accompanied each treasured memory and piece. But now what? I want to wrap myself with good-feeling things again, to hide from the winter's gloom. Yet, it creeps inside me and lingers far longer than it should.

There is a letdown after the holidays. We're relieved that we survived the glittering season, but we are often left without a sense of direction or purpose when January sneaks up on us. There's the usual dilemma of what to do about New Year's resolutions (I simply have resolved not to resolve anymore!), and most of us are faced with an additional pound or two. They can be hidden beneath bulky sweaters until mid-April but by then may have turned into five to ten extra burdens.)

Most parts of the country are cloaked in grayness; and after the holiday decorations have been packed away, the house seems emptier, quieter, lonelier than before. January also marks the beginning of the "Great Gathering of Tax Information", the homecoming of the holiday bills and a long, dreary month of poor television. Most of us could probably just skip January altogether!

If you are somewhere in the valley, January brings its own special kinds of pain. It's another year without... It's another year of memories growing dimmer. It's another year of discovering that grief takes toooooo long.

In January, I grow especially weary of false hopes, too-bright smiles, plastic sentiments and people whose New Year's resolutions seem to be to cheer me up!

Maybe I don't want to be cheered up! Maybe I want to be depressed. Maybe grayness suits my mood as well as my appearance! Maybe not, too. But what I do know is that whatever my mood in January, it's MINE! And I want to keep it thank you -- at least for a little while.

So many people get upset because we might be depressed. They can't stand to see us glum! It's as if our emotional state is a direct result of their actions and an insult to their intentions. There are some real reasons for my gloom -- some are weather-related, some are circumstance-related and some are just plain human-related. But it is MY depression, my gloom. They are my feelings and maybe I need to have them for awhile.

Depressed people are not fun. We don't sparkle at dinner parties. We don't radiate charm and warmth. We are not good conversationalists, and we tend to eat more or less than we should. We are not the first choice for an evening's companionship, and sometimes we stare at the television for long periods of time without really seeing the program or being able to follow a conversation. Sometimes, we seem distracted. Sometimes, we cannot concentrate, and we forget who we are where we put the car keys. Sometimes, we spend hours looking through scrapbooks and use inordinate amounts of tissue. But whatever else we may be, we are functioning through this situational depression and although it looks (and feels) uncomfortable, a period of depression during the journey through grief is as normal and natural as the periods of anger, guilt, fear and hurt are. It's just that depression is such a difficult emotional state and one that is hard to define and even harder to endure.

Grieving people often become the target for loving and concerned family and friends who simply cannot stand to see us "down." We become their mission. They become almost possessed with the task of lifting us up out of the gloom.

Sometimes, they hold team meetings (if they are professionals) or they gather in little groups to discuss the task at hand. We may become someone's project. We may even become someone's "New Year's Resolution." Plans are made -- we must not be left alone. We must be cheered up, entertained, helped to "snap out of it." (IT, I suppose, is the black mood we seem to be experiencing.)

We're invited out to lunch, receive little "thinking of you" notes or plates of goodies (those ARE nice, but please don't stare while I gobble). All these efforts in an attempt to Lift Us Out of Our Mood.

We do appreciate those kind and loving gestures of concern. Please don't stop thinking of us or sending food or visiting! But, perhaps if we all understood that a certain amount of depression is appropriate, and maybe even necessary to the grief process, then perhaps we could all relax a bit about this mysterious emotional state.

Depression that is a part of the journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death (otherwise known as GRIEF) is truly a natural and normal part of the process. One day, the



grieving person realizes that even the pain of grief has disappeared. Where once there existed a searing pain somewhere near the heart, now there is NOTHING. Memories that used to bring tears and a tightness to the throat now don't even float past the mind. It is as if we have fallen into a vast NOTHINGNESS, a void where not only have the painful feelings left, but we have seemingly lost the good memories as well!

We begin to believe we have lost the sound of our loved one's voice, the special scent that spoke his name. We think we have lost the visual pictures we carry with us, and we cannot remember everything we once thought we knew about our loved one. Gone are not only the painful thoughts, but those thoughts that used to

bring us comfort have left, too. We are cast into the gloom of emptiness-truly a most difficult part of grief!

Yet, I have learned that this vast emptiness is really quite a "busy" time for those of us who are struggling through grief. Though we may appear to be quite listless and may even "hibernate" for a time, this period of situational depression (as opposed to a clinical depression with accompanying chemical changes in the brain) has its purposes as clearly as do the other emotions of grief.

If we could think of this depressive "phase" or period as a gathering time, perhaps it would be easier to understand. When we tumble into the "nothingness" of grief, we really are busy searching for clues to the question of, "Who am I now?"

When we have lost the framework of our personal identification, we must search for new identities, and part of the grieving process is just such a search. Am I still a mother if there is no one to tuck in at night? Am I still a dad if there is no one to loan the car keys to? Am I still a husband or wife if there is no one sleeping in the other half of the bed? Am I still a sister, a brother, a friend...? Who am I now that my loved one has died!?

It is a painful, yet necessary question; and during this gloom that we seem to experience, we become busy picking up the scattered pieces of our self-identify and carefully turn each one over, looking for the place in the puzzle where they belong. We are gathering in all the pieces and trying to create a new picture of ourselves, a new identity, a new "me."

It is an important and solitary job. No one can help us create the new identity we must find in order to continue our journey. We must each take the steps to seek out a new and different us -- not necessarily a stronger or "better" person than we were, but definitely a different person than we were before our loved one died.

So, if in January, you begin to feel the weather's gloom creep inside you, or you begin to notice a grieving friend's growing silence and a slowness to his walk,

acknowledge the emotion and be gentle in your expectations. Don't dash over to help "lift" the depression. Instead, be supportive in the struggle to integrate the loss and redefine the identity of those left behind.

Depression that is a part of grief can become a more serious condition if not acknowledged, understood and addressed. If the depression seems to be totally debilitating or lasts far longer than even the grieving person is comfortable with, or if it seems to include thoughts of self-destruction rather than self-identification, then further assistance may be required.

But first, explore the gloom and do not fear the absence of sunlight. Be patient with yourself and others, and remember that January may be the gathering time for you as you travel through grief. You can always turn on a light, get assistance, diet, or turn over and sleep a little later.

Maybe January should be called the "snooze-button" month. Maybe a little extra kindness and patience will ease the transition from winter to spring. Maybe this "resting and gathering" phase will result in brighter blooms come spring. Maybe it's OK to wonder "who am I now?" and begin to search for new ways to answer.

Don't lose hope just because the days are too short and the winter is too long. Snuggle deep into a warm quilt, grab a bowl of air-popped popcorn (for the health-conscious) and spend some time with yourself. Invite others in when you wish, but only to share your journey with you -- not do it for you!