



Delta Hospice Society
comfort, meaning, dignity and hope

Coping with Social Events and the Holidays: A Widow's Story

by Lisa Scott, an editor of the *Globe & Mail*

It's over. We got through it; the joyous Christmas season and all that. For some of us, the toughest season of the year.

You probably saw some of us on the subway, or on a bus, or staring at a cup of coffee and a doughnut at the next table, or ahead of you at the supermarket checkout: people coming up to the first Christmas season without their mate.

I met regularly with a group of such people, each one of us going through the cycles of coping: struggling to make something of the life we have now, a life without a partner; sometimes trying to keep alive a reason to stay alive, flailing around, trying to rebuild home with the rubble that is all that was left after it was leveled by the shock waves of a partner's death.

We soon learn that home as it was cannot be rebuilt. Vital building blocks have ceased to exist and there are no satisfactory substitutes. With a little practice, each of us finds ways to begin building something new. We fit ourselves, a moment here, a moment there, into niches of one kind or another, fill up the emptiness with busyness, make little forays into new territories, forge links with new friends, attaching ourselves here and there with the thread of other interests to a new kind of life.

Most successfully, we make friends of other recently bereaved people. Even the best of coupled friends are somehow separate from us now; they have each other and do not know how lucky they are. Neither did we before one of us died. We hold things in common with other recently bereaved people that we do not have to talk about, do not have to explain. We forgive each other everything. We know how much courage goes into simply getting up to start a new day.

We know how alone each of us feels, and there is some solace in that. We are learning to expect nothing. And we are learning that we always seem to get much more than nothing, that no matter what, the world goes on bestowing all kinds of gifts. As our vision begins to clear, we find this to be an amazing thing.

By standing within the family circle of couples, our loss rises up around us, erecting a wall between us and them. We know they care, know they want to help, but the memories that tramp through our minds render us helpless to respond with the appreciation they deserve. We feel sure they can see how artificial our smiles are; how false our sentiments when we speak.

It is almost all that we can do to endure the Christmas season with good grace. We vow not to yield to the despair that slides around just beneath the thin ice of our public countenance. Alone, we cry. Pace. Perhaps scream. Beat the pillow.

Sit staring at nothing while time slips by unmarked. We try to remember the face we will never forget and cannot believe it when we are unable to bring it into focus in our mind. We feel as if we have no center. And we feel something like shame for having lost our mates, as if we didn't take good enough care of them and couldn't hold them back from leaving us.



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Panic is there too. Panic that arrives with a frightening swiftness, filling us with a terror that whatever cohesive force that keeps us together as a corporeal body is in danger of failing and that we are about to fly apart, to shatter and scatter into the ether of space and will never be able to put ourselves back together again. We may never even find parts of ourselves again, for we don't really know all that well any more who we are.

Will joy ever return, we wonder? Will we ever notice the little hum of happiness we took for granted? Will we ever feel part of normal life again?

This has been my second Christmas season without my husband. Last year, I took the bus across the country to visit family and friends. I kept on the move for almost three weeks. It was soothing on the bus, watching the sun go down on the north shore of Lake Superior, seeing it rise in a huge clear sky over the snow-covered prairie, and then finally arriving in the cool, fresh beauty of the winter forest in British Columbia. I don't remember much else.

This year, I decided to stay home and tough it out. Wait for Christmas to come. Wait for it to pass. I have only recently perceived that what a person has to do is stop wishing for things to be the way they used to be and to begin seeing and admitting how interesting and different the world is or could become. But how difficult it is. Even in relatively intact families, Christmas ignites an ineffable longing. For those of us whose mate is gone, the longing is doubly sharp. Without him, without her, without *us*, what is there? Our sense of self as the severed part of a couple has already diminished us, and in this season of family reunions, we are so sadly aware that reunion with the person we love is impossible.

Loss seems to sharpen awareness. We who have lost so much are a little unnerved to find we have also gained. In forging ties with so many others who have experienced what we ourselves have, we have become part of a new, larger family. The price of admission is very high and nobody would want to pay the dues, but once they have been extracted, the reward is great. Home cannot be built again as it was. Something new always happens. And when we realize that the Ghost of Christmas Past is required to make way for the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come, we recognize that we are looking into the future.

And *that* is a miracle.