

Surviving The Mid-Winter Gloom

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Why does January seem so empty?
Just as the world is stiff and frozen outside
my window, I feel dead and cold and
scattered inside myself.



I managed to make it through the
holiday season, though the hows of that
feat are truly beyond my recollection. I can't even remember eating the
holiday meals. (I do, however, remember doing the dishes--again and again
and again. Next year we are eating out or on paper plates!)

In those glittering days, I managed to smile and even to find a few
moments of peace and joy; but here in the gloom of winter, all I seem to see
are the scattered pieces of my life, cast before me on the card table, waiting
for me to pick them up and make the picture.

But what picture do all these pieces form?

I used to think I knew. I used to know who I was and where I was
going and how I was going to get there. But now, now in the chill of winter,
I can't even remember where the puzzle begins and I end.

I think I'm still grieving, and that surprises me! It's been ... (too long,
regardless of the time frame you insert), and I *should* be getting better. Why
do I still ache from a sunburn I got years ago when we were together on the
beach? Why is there still sand in my shoes and why does your name still
stick in my throat? WHO AM I NOW that the memories grow cold in
winter's chill?

Am I still a mother if there is no child 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 wife if there is no one to snuggle up to in my bed? Am I still a husband if there is no one waiting at home for me at the end of the day? Am I still a sister or a brother if there is no one to tease? Am I still a child if my parent has died? Am I still a human being, capable of loving and being loved, if the one person I loved more than anything has become frozen in time? WHO AM I NOW that my loved one has died?

The gloom has permeated even my toes, and my whole body seems icy. Why can't January be warm and gentle--especially after the struggle of the holidays? I need some sunshine, some warmth, some help in turning over the puzzle pieces and putting them back together. I need some spring.

But spring is a way off and I must (somehow) get through these days. If you're feeling like I am, perhaps these few suggestions will help you find the pieces to your new puzzle.

1. Identify specific feelings. Do not generalize. Try to figure out exactly what is bothering you. Look for the tiny grains of sand that are still hiding in the bottom of your shoes. Acknowledge them. Be honest with those feelings, whatever they are. If you're angry, be angry. If you're sad, be sad. Be specific in your sadness.

2. Pick your worries. Focus on only one worry at a time. Give up being worried about being worried. Prioritize your worries. This helps combat feelings of being overwhelmed and you can decide which worries to keep and which to send to your: 1) mother; 2) children; 3) family; 4) neighbor; 5) enemy.

3. Keep a picture or two of the sand castle where you can enjoy it



every day. You may decide not to make a shrine out of your memories, but don't lose the joy that you had in making that marvelous moat! Keep the sand you found in the shoe-- you just don't have to keep it there! That's what memories are for - a place to stash the important stuff that we NEED.

4. Become as informed and as knowledgeable as possible about this new world in which you live. We fear what we don't know, what we can't see, what we can't touch. Read, listen, learn all you can about grief. It's not where you planned on being this winter, but it is where you are. Look around.

5. Listen to everyone. You will receive enough advice about how to do it (grief) to sink a fleet of battleships. Be grateful . . . at least someone is talking with you! But, FOLLOW YOUR OWN MUSIC.

6. Be kind to yourself. You survived the holiday season, and now it is the beginning of another season, another way of living. Learn to forgive yourself for living.

7. Set small goals first. Accomplish them. Then, set bigger goals. Try starting with getting the garbage out on the RIGHT day. Then, open the closet . . . the drawers . . . the heart. Try going out. The next time you might be able to get farther than the driveway. TAKE YOUR TIME. It's a long way to the beach. You'll get there again . . . someday.

8. Remember that life requires effort on your part. Make friends with the vacuum, the checkbook and the car. Become determined to learn to remove the box before microwaving the dinner.

9. Don't wait for happiness to find you again. Make it happen. Build another sand castle, maybe on a different beach this time. Don't lose the memories just because they hurt. Look at the pictures, listen to THE song, remember the love . . . you haven't lost that. How could you possibly lose the love you shared?

10. Keep turning the puzzle pieces over. But don't keep trying to put them back into the same picture. That picture is gone. There is a new picture to be made of those scattered pieces. Search for that scene. Search for the new you. Search for the new person you are becoming.

11. Don't forget how to dream, how to laugh, how to dance. The music is different but so is the season. The room may be empty, but the heart is not. The spirit may be filled with sand, but the shoes remember the steps. One day at a time is OK if you can manage it, but know that some days all you can manage is one minute at a time. But minutes add up to years, eventually, and each grain of sand adds to the strength of the castle. Build the sand castle again, if only in your memory. Just because it's January, doesn't mean the beach is closed forever. Build your new castle in the middle of winter. Find the new occupant-the new YOU.

12. Be gentle this winter season. Turn the pieces over slowly, experiencing each piece as a newly found treasure. We can fill our days with bitterness and anger that the picture will never be the same. Or, we can hope for the spring that will surely come if we let it.

I know there are good things on the horizon. Winter can't last forever. If those things turn out to be less than we hoped, we will simply have to make whatever we get into something livable. Perhaps that is the secret to melting winter into spring: The challenge is to always carve out something beautiful from the icicle. There is joy in living, if we allow time in the winter to reassemble the thousand-piece puzzle.

