



CHRISTMAS IS THE HARDEST HOLIDAY!

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Why is Christmas the hardest holiday? Is it because of all those traditions that mean so much but NOW lie broken and empty in my heart? Is it especially hard NOW...because every time I try to roll out the cookie dough, tears drop into little salt pools on the counter? Is Christmas so hard NOW because of all the tinsel and tissue? Because of all the crowds dashing madly into and out of stores...buying something wonderful for someone wonderful? Is Christmas so hard NOW because I don't need to shop or bake or decorate any more? Is Christmas so hard because I don't have someone wonderful any more?

It's been a long time since I endured my first bereaved holiday season. But even NOW, my heart sometimes still echoes with emptiness as I roll out the cookie dough or hang his special ornament on our treasure tree. I think that hurt will always be with me, but now I know it only as a momentary ache - not like the first year when grief washed over me in waves, each new wave hurling me deeper and deeper into despair.

And it's not like the second year's hurt when I found myself both surprised and angry that IT hadn't gone away YET. I grew anxious about my sanity in the third year when my hands shook as I unwrapped the precious ornaments. When was I going to get better?!! When was grief going to end?!! Was I doomed to suffer miserably at every holiday for the rest of my life?!!

The year the little satin balls fell off the tree, I gave up. Even the Christmas tree died! As my daughter and I dragged the brittle (and shedding) mess out into the snow drift on Christmas morning, I knew we had reached the bottom. He had died, but WE were alive. Had our grief so permeated our house, our lives, that even a Christmas tree could not survive? His death was more than enough...had we lost love, too?

That was the year we began to understand. And that was the year we decided to keep Christmas anyway. So what if our now completely bare tree was stuck in the snowdrift, already waiting for the garbage men? So what if the cookies were still a bit too salty with tears?

So, in the middle of that Christmas day, now years past, we returned to that forlorn, frozen stick of a tree. And carefully, we hung the bare branches with popcorn strings and suet balls (not quite the same as satin!). I'm sure we were a strange sight that afternoon, but with a mixture of tears and snowflakes, we began to let the hurt out and make room for the healing to begin.

With each kernel strung, we found ourselves remembering. Some memories came with pain. Others began to grow within us - warming heart-places we thought had frozen long ago. By the time we were finished, we were exhausted. Memories take a lot of work! At last WE had a tree (although it was not the one we were expecting); but we had one, decorated with tears and memories, sadness and remembered laughter.



And now we've grown older (and maybe a little wiser) and we've learned that love isn't something you toss out, bury, pack away, or forget. Love isn't something that ends with death. Life can become good and whole and complete once again...not when we try to fill up the empty spaces left by

loved ones no longer within hug's reach, but when we realize that love creates new spaces in the heart and expands the spirit and deepens the joy of simply being alive.

We saved a tiny twig from that frozen tree...to remind us of what we almost lost. That was the year we chose to let Christmas come back. Now we don't have to wait for joy to return. For now we know it lives within us - where Christmas is EVERY DAY.

