



Connecting

January 2021



As I write to you tonite on Ukrainian New Year's Eve, I recall New Year's Day activities many decades ago. Living in a tiny Saskatchewan town of 105 (in its heyday), all the children carried a little bag of wheat and went from door to door. We blessed each home and threw wheat into the home as we recited a little poem in Ukrainian, that wished all who lived there a healthy and prosperous year. The owner was left with a lovely mess to sweep up at the end of the day; after each child was given some money for their piggy bank and wished a happy new year in return. I loved that ritual, despite bitter cold January weather as we canvassed the town-- not missing a single house. So in keeping with tradition, I wish you all a healthy and prosperous year in 2021, but let's rely on a mental image to pretend there is wheat landing on your kitchen floor...indicative of a good harvest and prosperous year.

For many who grieve, a New Year is a welcome relief after a horrific year that they are desperate & eager to leave behind... especially if that is when they lost a significant person in their lives. For others, though, it is the polar opposite. They do not want to leave their loved one behind in any way. Turning a calendar page to indicate a new year is a blatant indicator that time is moving on, and some feel it deprives them of that familiar longing for ... and belonging to ... someone special. They worry that their cherished loved one, and



their memories, will be lost in time with the beginning of a new year. They do not want to acknowledge anything that vaguely implies moving on or leaving behind. To imagine existing in a new year without their loved one is just one more needle in the eye after a loss. Neither scenario seems to bring comfort. Regardless of the year, we are still alone, walking gingerly into the unknown.

Turning a calendar page doesn't usually minimize grief or sorrow in any significant way. This lovely poem written by an unknown author, tells us that no matter how many pages we turn, how many New Years we live through, we will always be cognizant of the date and time of our loved one's death. Everything we do, every place we go, and no matter how long it has been since somebody died, it feels as if it just happened; and it seems that everything is thereafter measured as being either "before" or "after" the death. It clings to us like a tattoo... a permanent, indelible marker. We cannot believe how our grief can be disenfranchised or oddly misunderstood with the passage of time.

Sorrow does not know a day, a year, or a decade. I want to reassure you that we never have to leave our memories behind anywhere...in a drawer, in a different city, in another imagined dream, or even in a year that has just come to an end. We take our loved one with us...always. They are permanently embedded in a special corner of our heart; and nothing can change that.

So what we can do, though, is determine a different way to honour them this year, as opposed to something we might have done at the onset of our grief journey. We may have had some time to adapt to life without our loved one...all the necessary forms may be filled out, and all the thank you cards mailed. Last year was the time for tying up loose ends after the death. Removing their name off utility bills, etc. Now you have the time and this imposed period of isolation to clear your mind and devote some attention to what is significant to you or your loved one, and how best to memorialize them. Maybe you are already browsing the garden magazines at Sobey's to see what shrub or tree might best personify your loved one....spring planting will be here before you know it. Maybe you

The Year Before Last (author unknown)

The holiday season is approaching,
And with it comes the New Year.
Although for me time passes slowly,
New Year's Day will ring in quickly.

I dread this New Year's Day
Because they will look at me
In a terribly strange way
When I get misty-eyed,
And talk about something you had done.

After you first left me,
They reasoned when I cried,
"He's only been gone a few months."
And I would catch that look of
Understanding in their eyes,
And found some comfort that they knew.

But on last New Year's Day,
My first thought upon awakening was,
Oh God, my son died last year,
Not just a few months ago, not even this year,
But last year.
He will never live in this year.

They didn't understand, they didn't reason,
That last year, for me, the loss was still new.
They thought, "It happened last year,
So long ago, why does she still cry?"
I could see it in their eyes.

This New Year's Day, will it be different?

Will my first thought upon awakening be,
Oh God, my son died the year before last,
Not a few months ago, not this year or even last year.
But the year before last?
He will never live in this year.

Will they even listen, should I not look them in the eyes,
For fear that I shall see,
"Why is she crying? It happened so long ago.
It was the year before last."

Those words that we use
To describe the passage of time,
A few months, this year,
Last year, the year before last.
They don't know that time stands still for me.

Will they understand that's why I cry?
Don't they know
My son just died.....

.....the year before last?

may want to get a companion for your late husband's elderly border collie. There is nothing that brings excitement into a home than a new baby...human or animal. That would keep you browsing online for weeks looking for the perfect furry little creature to join your family. Perhaps you may consider being the phone contact for a community group that you both supported in the past. Find something that might suit your particular interests, your age, and your risk factors during the pandemic. Perhaps a fundraising drive for a local shelter...that you can do from the safety of your own home, but that also puts you in contact with others in the organization and lets you branch out of your bubble, albeit virtually for now. That might help a wee bit to look towards 2021 with some degree of anticipation, knowing you are doing something special for the one who still walks with you like a shadow, even when you are unaware of their presence.

We carry our deceased friends and family members forward with us. Some say..."like a security blanket," others, "like a precious jewel we never want to lose sight of." Their spirit gives us the courage, the incentive, and the ability to walk with confidence, taking baby steps at first, then a comfortable jog, and finally a full-bodied race to a brighter day as we lift each leg high in our journey, now without assistance. What we cannot tolerate, though, is for others to stand at the sidelines with a stop watch, or a checkered flag, monitoring our progress, or prodding us to go faster to get

us to the finish line. Instead we want them to be our cheerleaders, knowing that each time we push ourselves to do more, to do better, to try something new is a challenge. And every success, no matter how small or insignificant, is monumental to us. The day we cook a meal for a loved one instead of having them bring food for us is a big day; and we should celebrate it as such.

"We carry our deceased friends and family members forward with us ... like a precious jewel ..."



This year has been a grim reminder that life can be turned upside down in a split second. There are anticipated deaths and those that knock the legs out from under us as we try to catch our breath learning of an accidental overdose, suicide, heart attack or violent death that we never saw coming. Everyone can think of a death more fitting for their loved one, no matter what their cause of death happened to be. Those whose loved one died from a medical issues like cancer might have hoped for a cardiac event, where there were not years of cancer pain, surgery and chemotherapy. Others who were called to a hospital to identify a victim wished they had one more second with their cherished person, even if that meant struggling with some horrible disease. "At least I would have been given a 'heads up',

and time to say good-bye.” We do not have control over when or how somebody might die, but we do have many options as to how we choose to live. The days ahead of us are ones of hope and promise in a better tomorrow -- a time for reflection, or an attitude adjustment for those of us who may be lacking in some areas of our spectrum.



Many of our families have had a close encounter with Covid and that is a visit that nobody wishes to have again. Lives were lost, sometimes through a lack of understanding, preparation, expedient medical intervention or due to hesitation to seek medical help in time. We are shaken to the core as we try to move forward despite fear and uncertainty about the safety of other family members, and the realization that we ourselves are vulnerable beings. This is the time to stay connected to friends, family, spiritual mentors, and others who can be the anchors we need in our lives to keep us securely fastened to our beliefs and those things that will sustain us when so much of the world appears to be in disarray and utter chaos. Know that Canada is still a safe and decent place to be; and we are much more socially aligned than many places, with little patience for dissent and non-compliance. We have much to be thankful for.



I can't promise you that 2021 will be without its hard times, its heartaches, or its challenges, but we are strong, resilient beings, who can thus far claim having survived the carnage left by Covid...so we can reassert ourselves to give our all to beating this virus, along with knowing that we are doing everything in our power to cherish the gift of life that our loved ones no longer enjoy. They are still cheering us on, wanting every moment of this new year to be one that brings us peace, healing and hope for a new and better version of life as we knew it. Some behavior modifications may apply; goodness knows, we all have

things we can change... how we react to crises, how we teach our children and grandchildren about what is truly important in life, not necessarily the latest gaming chair or most popular social app.

We have all grown in this pandemic; and I suspect, for the better. I already see hints of “less is more” springing up in all aspects of our community, our families, and our homes. A minimalistic view was sometimes seen as cheap, or boring. Now it comes with a new appreciation for releasing ourselves from all that ties us down unnecessarily. We want to be free to dress down, to wear less makeup, to less commitment, to less involvement with others affairs. The ties that bind us are connecting to some, and suffocating to others. You will need to determine where you fit in to either one or the other.

Someone wiser than myself, and I'm not sure who, once said: “in a crisis, you can break down or break through.” I think this aptly addresses a grief journey for most of us....we initially seem to break down, but the spirit of our loved ones strengthens us so that we can “break through” the sadness and re-create ourselves. If you are the person who has crumbled into a million pieces after your loved one died, maybe it is helpful to assess where you are today. Are you still relying on others to take care of you in ways that are not sustainable long term? Some are very fortunate to have family or friends bring food to them daily, or do their shopping, entertain them or take care of their pets. But it is up to us to come to terms with whether this has become too much of a dependency; and determine whether it is time to resume some of these things for yourself. Your caregivers will appreciate that you are taking over some of the “self-care” tasks again, and maybe even reaching out to others who may require a little TLC themselves after they devoted much time and energy to you or your family.





Valentine's day will be here before we know it; and the sweet-heart we miss should be honoured and celebrated in whatever way feels good to us. Maybe a box of chocolates to the elderly lady at the end of the street with no family nearby...these are the chocolates my wife loved so much." Maybe a 'Canada Post delivered' card to somebody who is struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues in memory of a loved one who suffered in a similar way before their death. Your small gesture of kindness could be a matter of life and death—and sometimes we may never know the impact of our actions.

I find that the little things we do matter the most; and it always feels right to remember our deceased loved ones in some way that will brighten somebody's day that is not part of our usual circle of family or friends. Our most precious memories are often of those unexpected acts done by folks that expected nothing in return, and others who we never dreamed would take the time to do something special for us. What better way to honour and celebrate somebody whose name is proudly noted on a card..."remembering you today, in memory of my partner, Jonathan, or grandma Nellie, or little cat Cindy." The most unlikely friendships often are born out of a kind act by somebody "who I didn't know very well." Be that person; and watch your grief dissipate on a day like Valentine's Day that may be a difficult one for so many to bear.

Personally, I am remembering a dear friend whose husband passed on that holiday. Yet, she has put her heart and soul into ensuring that his untimely death would not be in vain. Our SABF group is the benefactor of her wisdom, compassion and tireless efforts in helping others through their sorrow by sharing her own grief experience with them.

Warm hugs surround you, new friendships await you, and brighter days linger on the horizon...don't spend your time cursing the darkness, while the Northern Lights dance joyfully just outside your door! Sit quietly with your loved one.

Was it last year?

Or the year before last.....



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*I came alone;
I left connected.*



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