

Redefining traditions, resilience in the face of loss

By Kaitlin Sylvester

MOST RELIGIONS AROUND the world recognize December as having some sort of spiritual or religious significance. In our hemisphere, the long, cold nights have us turning towards each other for warmth, community and for support. This year I haven't quite known what to say when folks ask me how my holidays were. On Dec. 4 my family lost a close friend, then hours later an immediate family member fell into a coma he did not wake up from. These kinds of crises are bad enough on their own, but against the backdrop of the holiday festivities this year took on a seriously macabre atmosphere. Christmas originated as a pagan celebration of the return of light after the lengthening days of early winter. The Christian calendar adopted the date from naturalists celebrating the solstice on Dec. 21, welcoming the return of longer days and joyfully looking forward to spring and new growth. Yet these same holidays can be a source of stress, particularly for those struggling through the loss of a loved one. During the in-between time between Christmas and New Years, I had coffee with a friend who lost her wife early last year. She told me that on Christmas day she made plans to stay home with herself and cry. She knew what she needed and what she would be capable of giving on that day. Another friend was worried by this retreat, but I admired the honesty and authenticity in saying it was all too much. Too many people try to put on a brave face when confronting grief and what I really want to know is - who is this even for? My family is quintessentially British - a stiff upper lip and all that. We're not into wallowing and we have a pretty dark sense of humour because of it. Truthfully, I think we might have laughed more than we cried while gathered in hospital corridors this season. It's a fine line, putting on a brave face versus avoiding our problems and I'm sure we crossed over it more than once. While I do believe in the power of brevity, my life so far has taught me the best way to avoid sadness is to meet it head on. The holidays can be hard for people for reasons that have nothing whatsoever to do with the great hereafter. Sometimes the holidays suck because we're working, or we moved, or went through a breakup, or had to put down a beloved pet. Grief is a burden, no matter what form it comes in though it can get lighter over time as we learn to carry the weight. Sometimes I think death feels like the only socially acceptable form of loss. As though losing people and places in other ways isn't just as painful. As though when we love someone or something deeply we won't inevitably mourn the loss just as hard as we loved it in the first place. I keep thinking about what the holidays are going to look like next year. This year had a strange aura where celebrating felt tacky, but not celebrating felt like giving up hope. I did small things at home, I put boughs in my windows and lit candles on the longest night. My family gathered for a festive dinner and drank a toast to those in absentia. It was nice, I think. Or at least it felt like a comfort during the darkest times. I don't know if we'll be able to recreate that sense of peace next year but I do know the best thing we can offer for ourselves at that time is emotional honesty. Honestly saying 'no, thank you that feels overwhelming?' or 'I'd rather not be alone this holiday?' is the best gift we can give ourselves and those around us. Grief is tricky, and people rarely know the best way to support us if we don't give them something to work with. This year I opted to keep my new year's eve plans, though more than one of my friends questioned if a party was the right place for me so soon after a loss. I worried they thought I was callous, but I knew I needed the noise and the distraction to not fall apart this year. Grief is hard to understand from the outside and against the backdrop of the winter festivities the divide becomes that much more visible. I've seen how this has been a hard year for everyone, with more than one person saying how lackluster this holiday season has been. People I've chatted with mention inflation, the genocide in Palestine, climate concerns, and labour strikes. I'm not alone in my grief this holiday season and in some ways I've drawn a strange comfort from that. Life is hard. I have heard this again and again this year and I've had enough knocks of my own to know how true that is. Yet I persist in believing life can also be surprising and beautiful. Surprising to learn just how much space we have within ourselves and beautiful to see how much of that lies in the compassion we hold. Compassion for ourselves, to know and say what we need; but compassion for those around us as well who might be struggling with the right thing to say, or with challenges we know nothing about. Last week I took my holiday decorations down and I could hear the lecture I would have received about pine needle debris in my head. It made me smile. People don't leave us, not fully. They live on in funny, small moments that grow into other ideas with different people in different places. Pagan traditions honour winter as a natural part of the life cycle. Plants die back and provide nourishment to seeds and roots and little growing things. I think our memories do much the same thing over time. The days are getting incrementally longer now. It's not much truthfully, the nights are still long and cold and dark. Without the commitments of holiday parties and doctors appointments to keep me going, grief is a ready companion. But we continue. Slowly the empty spaces will fill up and what feels sharp today will inevitably soften. I don't know what next year's holiday season will look like next year but I know I won't be alone ? and I have faith that it's going to be okay.