

The Year I Ran Away From Christmas



A Young Widow's Take on Grief and the Holidays

by Judy Wark

A few years ago I ran away from home and took my kids with me. As we approached the first Christmas following my husband's death to cancer, an unbearable sadness swallowed each of my kids.

For anyone who has experienced loss, the holidays become gaping reminders that your deceased is not there anymore. Nadine Garipey-Fisk, Hospice Calgary's Director of Programs and Services says, "The holidays are pressure points for parents struggling to help their children while trying to manage their own grief."

One of my sons grieved with anger. He wanted his dad back and until someone came up with some answers for how he felt, he stayed in his room and refused to go to school. My daughter would draw out her sadness with markers on her bedroom mirror. My teen hurled into school activities, ignoring the pain by staying busy. We were all pretty miserable.

Finally, ten days before Christmas, I called my travel agent and said, "Get me a beach, a buffet and a direct flight." We survived the first Christmas with beach therapy at a resort in Cuba. Did it help? Not really. The real healing began when I discovered Hospice Calgary's Sage Centre.

My younger son started seeing one of the child/youth and family counsellors. She helped him to find ways to express his feelings about his father's cancer, dying and death. After several sessions, I remember his counsellor asking, "Where is your daddy now?" He drew a garden

filled with flowers. My husband was sitting on a bench wearing his favourite hat. He was smiling. This wise counsellor helped my son to find safe places to store those painful memories and to find what he needed to re-engage with life.

My daughter attended a children's grief support group. She called it her art therapy but I called it a godsend. At one session the children made memory ornaments to hang on their Christmas trees. While the kids met, there was a session for bereaved parents. Here I found the support of other young widows and widowers who were also trying to parent their children through life-changing loss.

Over the passing years, I discovered that Hospice Calgary was there for us whenever one of the children needed a little help managing those feelings of loss. Sarah Walker, Hospice Calgary's executive director, says that this ongoing support is the cornerstone of Hospice Calgary's service. "We are here to help individuals and families as long as they need us," she says.

I have no need to run away during the holidays anymore. The other day my daughter, now a young woman, reminded me that Christmas is her favourite time of the year. I smiled and said, "It's mine too."
