

Holding Grief and Love in December

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This year grief has come close to our family. My beloved mother-in-law, Mary, passed away suddenly and without warning. We are still navigating the shock, still stumbling into a new normal that does not yet feel normal at all. Her absence echoes in every gathering, every memory; in every quiet space there's a silent longing to hear her soft Monaghan voice one more time. Death arrived totally unexpected, and yet, as people of faith, we are invited to see, even in these moments, that mortali-

ty can hold a strange and holy gift.

As we move through December, her loss feels especially tender. Last Christmas, Mary was with us, as usual, adding her warmth, presence and much-loved turkey stuffing to the season's celebrations. Now, as we prepare to mark the holidays again, I find myself walking a delicate line between grief, seeing the ache of her absence in my husband's and children's eyes, and, at the same time, feeling immense gratitude for her lifelong gift of enduring love and

ever-constant presence.

There is something profoundly vulnerable about this month. Nature itself preaches it: trees stand bare, the light shortens and the earth grows still. Advent unfolds in the same spirit, inviting us to pause in the quiet, to wait in hope and to reflect on life's thresholds. We are between darkness and light, and I feel between sorrow and joy, between absence and presence. In these in-between spaces, faith becomes less abstract and more of a lifeline. We proclaim that those who die in Christ are not lost to us, but remain bound to us in love through the Body of Christ. Their presence shifts, but it does not vanish. Mary is no longer at our table, but we trust she shares in the great feast of heaven, and somehow, I believe mysteriously, graciously, her unconditional love is still with us.

To call mortality a 'gift' may feel almost offensive in the rawness of grief. But the gift does not lie in death itself. It confronts us with the preciousness of each day, the reality that our lives are held in God's hands. Mortality teaches us to live awake, to live grateful, to live oriented toward those we love in each moment, that is the true gift of the season. This December I have found solace in small spiritual practices of remembrance: lighting a candle for Mary, speaking her name in prayer, sharing stories at the table. These acts are not just sentiment, they remind me that love endures beyond death, that my beloved departed remain part of my story.

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with light and love. In that way, we discover love does not die. Mary's love, and the love of all those we still grieve and hold in our heart, still shape us, still draws us toward hope. So perhaps my invitation this December is to linger with the liminality of grief and love. Don't run from it. Honour it. Bring our treasured memories of celebration past, bring our tears and even our gratitude into prayer. In this tender space, may we all sense the quiet gift God gives us through mortality, the assurance that death does not end our communion, but transforms it. This Christmas, our family's grief is teaching me to remember Mary in a new way, not by focusing on what has been lost, but by trusting in what is yet to come. My family and I stand with her on the threshold, together waiting for the day when Christ makes all things new.

So, if, like me, you are struggling with grief this December, know that you do not have to carry it alone. Reaching out for support is not a sign of weakness; it is an act of faith and healing.

Bethany Bereavement Team offers a free, confidential listening service, with trained volunteers who understand the pain of loss and grief. Helpline 087 9905299