Happy Holidays?

*It’s time to party* the television advertisements say this time of year. Party? How could I party when some days I did not even want to get out of bed? I did not want to go to work. I did not want to confront my day. How could I party when I could not even look at my face to put on a happy one? Getting through one’s days are difficult at best after the death of a child but enduring the holiday season seems almost impossible to surmount. Depending upon the length of time in grief, some of us cannot or are not able to recognize that the holiday season is upon us, let alone enjoy it. In our early grief, some of us are oblivious to the presence of time in terms of days, weeks, months, and seasons. While most of us do not want to acknowledge the rest of the world’s observance of the holiday season and its celebrations, some of us are unable to recognize any of the events happening outside of their own pain.

Grieving is all-encompassing. It renders us incapable of viewing life beyond our own fog, our own pain, our own devastation. Life is totally occurring on the inside. In early grief, experiencing life beyond our pain appears physically impossible as we focus nearly 100% of our attention on our internal world that has been irrevocably transformed.

Is Halloween a scary event to envision with trepidation or is it a time to revisit yesterday’s joys created by the memories of past Halloween celebrations with your loved one? Thirty days after my son Zac’s October 1st death, my first holiday without him, it was frightening to recognize how frozen my feelings had become. The next month and my “first” Thanksgiving, I could only be grateful for the numbness that allowed autopilot to control my behaviors and move me through that day and its preparations. But it was the first Christmas, which was previously the most anticipated time of the holiday season, now became the most dreaded and most difficult to experience. Ultimately, in my grief process, I had to make a decision about my life. I had to choose to continue living and this included living through and celebrating the holidays. Year by year, decorating, reincorporating traditions and creating new ones replaced the angst.

Excruitiating as it was the first year, the pain and resultant dread of the holidays began to soften in the years through my grief process. Encouraging as this sounds but not to be misleading, bereavement does not come with promises of increasing enjoyment over the years. Getting through the holidays is one of the most difficult hurdles in grief. Nevertheless, the passing of each year allows for an accumulated history of experiencing feelings and recognizing the changes in your heart. There is no timeline as a guide for parents to know when their grief has reached a certain point or when they can expect relief. Because everyone grieves differently and each person reaches acceptance of their loved one’s death in their individual process, suggestions for surviving the holidays and changing traditions may or may not be helpful. Each person must find and incorporate what works for him or her. There are blogs, websites, books and newsletters that contain many helpful ideas. Support groups like Compassionate Friends is a wonderful resource for sharing and discovering new ideas.

Time will assist with the acceptance process and one’s ability to move beyond the debilitating fog of early grief in relation to surviving the holidays. Acceptance supports us in “living what is.” I know when I eat a Rice Crispie treat in his honor and when I hang, “The Judge” ornament on the Christmas tree that Zac smiles. I can hear him laughing when Lynyrd Skynyrd sings, “Santa’s Messin’ with the Kid.” And, although I still have days in which I miss him terribly, I am now enjoying the holidays…differently.