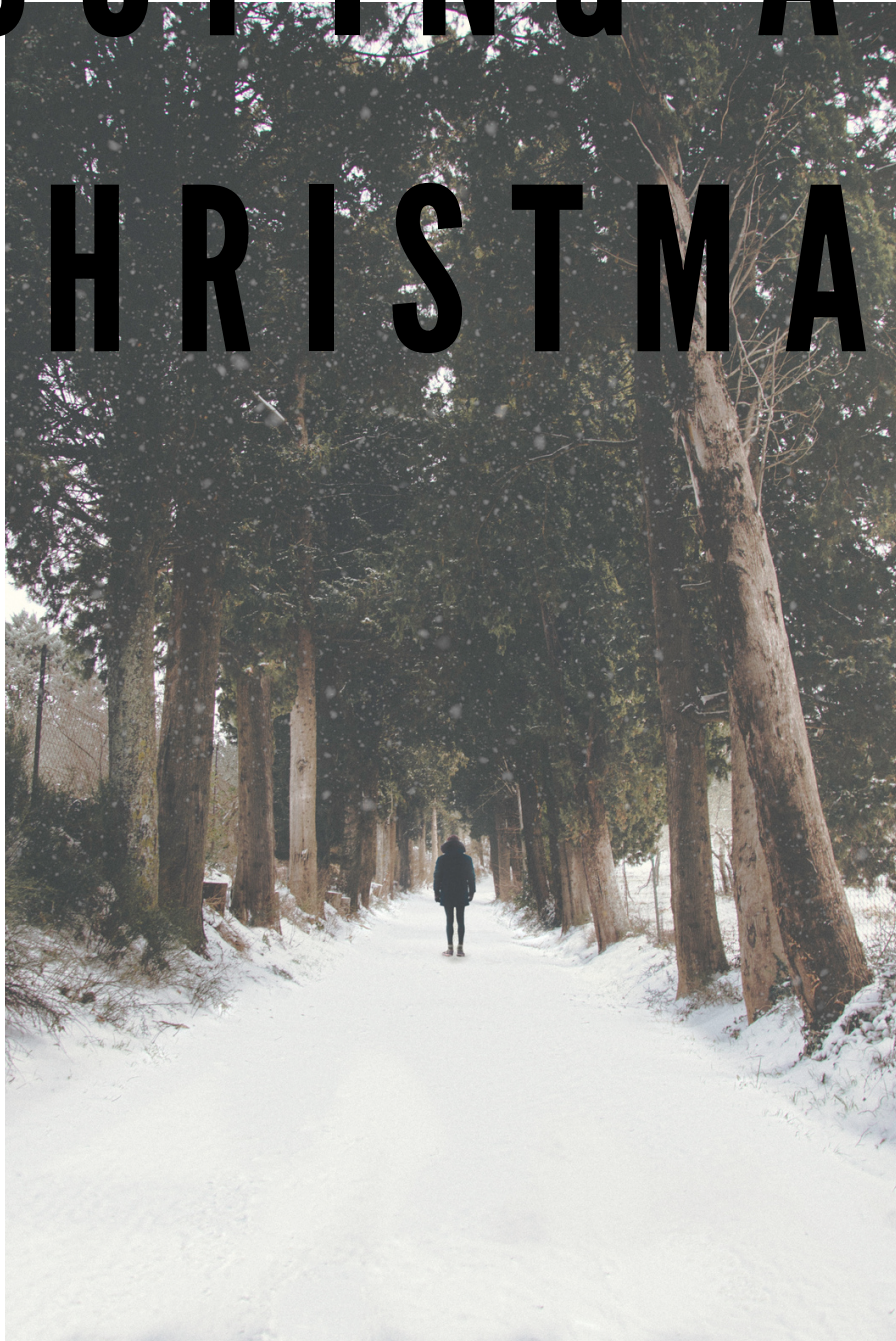


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HOW TO HANDLE THE HOLIDAYS
WHEN YOU'RE TOO SAD TO CELEBRATE

This project is dedicated to the life of my brother, Todd Hesselink.
My first Christmas without him was in 1999.

The memories of my child-hood Christmas's are full of excitement,
wonder, and delight - and they are full of sibling laughter and love.

For those who are experiencing a loss that shatters this season, may your
memories console you, and may you have glimpses of hope.

-Christa



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Thank you,

For some of us, there's a thick blanket spread out over December.



It's the kind that suffocates and darkens the twinkle of the season. We wish it wasn't so, but it hangs heavy on so many of us - it's impossible to ignore.

Maybe you know what I'm talking about.

Maybe you are a patient in pain wondering if this is your last Christmas. Or, over this past year, you've lost someone you loved deeply - the empty chair at the table reminds you of all the happy traditions never to be the same again.



Maybe your relationship seems so broken beyond hope of repair, everything about this time of year reminds you of better days.

Perhaps you're a mom with little ones that demand more than you have to give, and you are at the very end of your rope. This season drains and seems to mock you.

Or you've lost your job, and this month makes it particularly hard to feel joy.

You find yourself facing this December with dread and the sting of loss. You're not alone.

I've been there.
Drowning in the dark instead of beaming with cheer.

Many years ago, I lost my only sibling, my brother, Todd, in a tragic car accident – and this happened within months of being diagnosed with cancer at the age of twenty-four.

That first Christmas and the ones ever since have been difficult. It has certainly gotten much easier over time, but I know how difficult this season can be.

I've also had other losses in my life – loss of significant relationships, loss of a job, loss of a dream. And, while they are not as significant as the death of my brother, they've still made this season a challenge all the same.

What about you? Have you ever felt this way?

Sadness

There are waves of grief that threaten to drown you, whether you've shed a tear or not.

You're desperate for some relief, but you're convinced it will certainly pass over your house this year.

Anxiety

The kind that seems to pull you apart and cement you in your tracks - you're never really sure how severe the panic will get.

Anger

You're not sure if the rage brewing beneath will strangle you, or blow you apart, but the storm brewing inside is real ... and it terrifies you.

Loneliness

That ache that shallows your breath and wearies your heart – you walk around like the living dead wondering if anyone really notices.

Or perhaps it's a combination of these feelings
This season is a struggle and you're not sure how you'll survive.

Christmas is hard. Really hard.



Instead of sparkled bows and paper, we're wrapped up in melancholy and despair.

Even if we feel this way the other eleven months of the year, feeling it in December stings and burns.

July-melancholy is hard, but when it prickles us in December, it leaves us almost inconsolable.

I've broken down in public restrooms because "I'll Be Home For Christmas" came on the radio and reminded me of good years gone and never coming back.

I've cried in my car because the Christmas card aisle reminded me of people no longer in my life.

I've sat by my Christmas tree, quiet and in the dark, wondering if the decorations and the smell of pine might ease my deep ache of loss.

I have a feeling you know what I'm talking about.

This season has a way of turning up the volume on our deepest emotions. We feel that joy should be humming at an all-time high, but sadness is all there is.

I'm going to share some things we can cling to when the weight of this season threatens to bury us.

Take whatever is helpful for you, and leave that which doesn't serve you well. No two losses are the same, and therefore no two expressions or needs in grief are as well.



TEN REMINDERS TO HELP YOU COPE

1. Be gentle with yourself. Be gentle with others.
2. Waves of grief will pummel you, but you won't drown.
3. Make a plan.
4. "Those who mourn well, will live well."
5. Do something to remember and mark the moment.
6. Slow down.
7. Hold tight to, "this too shall pass."
8. Advent is about waiting for better things to come.
9. Embrace the messy truth vs. faking it.
10. "Emmanuel" is not just a name.

1 | Be gentle with yourself. Be gentle with others

Listen. We're talking about the big stuff of grief and loss here.

Even though it's uncomfortable and everyone, including yourself, would rather have this pain disappear, it's important to let yourself feel.

The big emotions of grief are messy and ugly and hang on like trolls. Our instinct is to banish them from our kingdoms, but it's important, and even productive to invite these feelings to stay a while.

That's why we need to cut ourselves, (and others), some slack.

It's counter-intuitive, I know, but stuffing these feelings down behind lock-and-key, just because they are hard and awkward won't serve you well in the long run.

Be gentle with yourself and give others (especially those impacted by the same loss) space too.

Aren't we all just trying to do our best?

What would being gentle with yourself look like this season?

Take a couple of moments to brainstorm a few ideas. (ie. putting less pressure on yourself to perform and show up this month, buy a special mug or brand of tea to soothe, go to bed earlier, etc.).

2 | Waves of grief will pummel you, but you won't drown.

I like to call them "grief-bursts"; those awful and unexpected waves of emotion that crash down on us hard, and carry us out to the depths of despair like an unrelenting rip-tide. All we want to do is swim to the surface for air. I once was inconsolable, and couldn't stop crying in a restaurant bathroom - the whole thing took me by surprise and I was drowning. Something triggered me, and the wave hit, as if out of nowhere.

In those moments, as the wave swelled up within me, all I wanted to do was hold it back. I was convinced it would take me down and I'd never resurface and find my breath again.

Do you know what? That wave of grief did overwhelm me. It came AND THEN it went.

Remember - the waves will come, but you will survive and will come up for air every time. Find some people around you that can act as "lifeguards" if you start to feel the current pulling you out and down to places that are beyond you.

When have you been hit by the wave of grief? What did it feel like? How did you come up for air? What does this teach you about the nature of grief?

Who are the lifeguards in your life who can support you when your grief feels unmanageable? Who can swim beside you? Do they know they are your lifeguard?

3 | Make a plan.

The truth is, the anticipation of things is always worse than the actual thing. Read that again.

Whether it's a special holiday, an anniversary, or an event that is loaded with a heavy charge of emotion, the lead-up to that day or event that you're dreading is almost always harder than the moment itself - it's strange like that.

It helps to make a plan so that you can have a bit of control and know what to expect.

Let's take the Christmas holidays for example? Are you dreading a certain day or moment?

It's time to make a plan. Here are some questions to consider:

1. What will you do on that day or in that moment?
2. Do you need/want people around? How would that look?
3. Do you need/want to be alone? How would that look?
4. Do you need to make a new tradition or preserve an old one? What are your ideas?
5. Do you need to mark a moment to honour your loss or loved one? What are your ideas?

Whatever you do - make a plan. It will still be hard, but a plan makes it all a bit more bearable. And, even if the moment or day you've planned doesn't go exactly the way you had hoped, you're walking in with some agency and preparation.

4 | "Those who mourn well, will live well." This is one of the most important things I've ever learned.

Did you know that grief and mourning are different?

Grief is the universal feeling associated with loss - sadness, anger, fear, anxiety - and everyone who experiences a loss of any kind has these sorts of feelings.

But mourning is different.

Mourning is the outward expression of those grief feelings. It's the effort to "go public" with your grief, give expression to your feelings, and work to reconcile this loss into your life - the effort to create a "new normal".

The way we mourn changes over time and is different for every person.

We need to find ways to give expression to our grief and loss. They can be large, significant gestures, or small, private ones. Whatever it is, we must acknowledge our loss in meaningful ways, instead of keeping the feelings to pulse like toxins on the inside.

For me, in the early days, the "outward expression" meant a lot of crying, journaling, and talking with trusted friends. One year I got a tattoo. Another, I made a picture book.

Today, there are far less tears, but I'm still mourning. I continue to bear witness to my loss, and mark moments so that I can pay attention to my grief and remember. If I don't, the grief I feel, even after all these years, will work its way into my life like poison and create some ugly and unhelpful ways of moving in the world.

I want to live well. And, I know that only happens if I mourn well.

What are some ways you can mourn and give an outward expression of your grief this season?

5 | Do something to remember, honour, and mark moments.

Mourning looks different for everyone at every stage of creating a "new normal."

On that first Christmas, after my brother died, my family flew to Florida to try and forget about the holiday altogether. It was all we could do to manage the pain. It looked like "escape", but it was our way of telling ourselves, and the world, that Christmas would never be the same.

Some years it's looked like a special toast at the dinner table, or lighting a candle. Other years it's been quietly reading letters, giving a donation to a charity, telling stories, or planting a tree. It doesn't matter what it is, as long as it's an expression of the grief you feel.

For me, this Christmas, marking the moment looks like putting up special Christmas tree ornaments. The angel on the top of my tree carries a broken heart in her hands. It's subtle - no one looking at my tree would even know it - but I do.

And I have a picture by my kitchen sink; it's of my brother and me as kids sitting in front of the Christmas tree. When I'm messing around in my kitchen, I see that picture and get in touch with the good memories of the past and the ache of missing him.

It may seem counter-intuitive to intentionally mark moments since they have a way of conjuring up difficult emotions.

If you want to have great moments of joy, you must embrace the vulnerability of having great moments of grief. They always go hand in hand.

6 | Slown down.

The body naturally depresses itself when our soul knows it needs attention.

Experiencing all the feelings of grief is exhausting. It really is having a whole other job we need to attend to.

Give yourself permission to slow the pace of your life down in order that you can do the "grief work" your soul is requiring of you.

This season will demand hurry and busyness of you, and non-stop activity is a great way to keep hard feelings tucked away, so do your best to embrace a slower pace.

Your loss is your permission slip to pause.

Take a moment and tune into the pace you need right now.

What can you do to slow things down this season?

7 | Hold tight to, "This too shall pass."

Change is the most predictable thing there is.

Chances are you're reading this because your world has been shaken and you're here this December longing for things to be different.

But here's what I've been learning: life is always changing. If I'm in a beautiful season of life, it will not always be this way, and if I'm in a hard season, it will eventually change as well.

The changing seasons have a lot to teach us. Yes, you are in a very cold, icy, bitter season, and winter will be here for a while, but...

...seasons change. It's predictable and true.

When we've lost something or someone significant, life will never be the same, but we will not always be in this pit. Honestly - this darkness will not always feel so dark.

If we keep walking through the night, we will eventually see the sliver of sun on the horizon, even if we have to walk miles and miles in shoes we never asked to wear.

Hold on!

What image of change (like the seasons) can remind you to hold on for better days?

8 | Advent is about waiting for better things to come.

If you identify as a Christian, you may know that this is the season of Advent. But regardless if you are a person of faith or not, Advent is the season that reminds us that waiting is a part of life and is a practice good for our soul.

Waiting gets us in touch with what we really long for. We are all longing for love.

We want love for ourselves, love from and for other people, love for our world, for life, and also love from, and for, the Transcendent that our souls yearn for.

Our invitation is to wait with hope. The season of Advent invites us to wait for a promise that seems too good to be true, to actually come true.

In this season that feels so difficult to endure, let's allow ourselves to long for a love that seems lost to us. This season honours the longing we must do in this life, and holds out hope that we will not always have to wait.

Fill in the following sentences:

I am longing for:

My hope is:

9 | Embracing messy truth vs. faking it makes life rich.

When I was a kid, I adored the old-fashioned, Norman Rockwell-esque pictures of Christmas. The horse and sleigh, the warm glow of candles in the window, the feast prepared, and the family gathered - it was perfection.

I am still drawn to that perfect image - snow lightly falling, cocoa by the fire, and everything as it should be.

This scene served a purpose, but living with loss during this time of the year jolts us out of anything that resembles perfection.

Life feels raw.

**Even in the rawness,
We can experience the richness.
A rich life is a life that honours what is true,
even if it is hard.**

A rich life is one that holds the tensions of joy and sadness at the same time.

For those of us living a messy, raw life this Christmas, we are not exempt from living life richly. We have important gifts to give and receive this season, and perhaps the most important one is to live truthfully and authentically, even when it hurts.

How could the rawness of your life be a gift to someone else this season?

What “riches” of meaning and purpose are brought into focus because of your loss?

10 | "Emmanuel" is not just a name.

When everything seems like it's unraveling, I try to remember an important message that this season offers us.

We are not alone.

In the Christian tradition, the baby Jesus was called, "Emmanuel". This literally means, "God With Us".

Whether you are a person of faith (or no faith), why not consider the idea that humanity and divinity are much closely connected than we think.

It's an audacious idea, and yet it reflects the notion that The Divine may actually desire to be close - to love and suffer just like us. Whether this idea resonates with you or not - perhaps for today you might be consoled as you consider this type of camaraderie and companionship with the Holy.

Breath this in for a moment:

- **God** is with us: GOD. In whatever name you use to call the Transcendent. Love. The Holy, Mystery, the Lover of your Soul.
- God **is** with us: IS- not was, or will be... is. Right now. Right here. Today.
- God is **with** us: WITH - God can be experienced as a companion, right alongside us, even in our pain.
- God is with **us**: US - no one is excluded from having Love come to be present with them. No one.

How could the idea that "God is with us" support you this season?

Christmas is complicated by our grief, our loss, and longing. December can be as brutally long as it is dark. The winter solstice, the darkest day of the year has been venerated as a beacon of hope for millennia. While it's the longest day of the year, it is also the turning point where more light begins to wash over our days.



Darkest day.
Where light is in such short supply,
and warming glow flickers away,
threatening to ash quiet our very breath.

We ache without words.
We long for what was.
What could be.
What will be.

In the silence, in tightness of chest,
In the cold hollow, we sit
on the seat of desire.
For a new day.
A brighter one, and warmer.
One that takes this spiral of fear and sadness
and restlessness.
And puts it to rest.



Darkest day.
You are but just one.
You are darkest, and then you are not.
For day breaks new, a garnet sliver
on the east horizon
a messenger heralding light, warmth,
and sings a chorus of hope.

There is no place this canopy of Day
does not cover.
No corner remains hidden and black.
What could be is here.
What will be has come.
The Light has arrived and is with us.

Enjoy this poem, and perhaps write your own - one that reflects the anguish of your loss and the hope (for hope) you long to have.



**HOW WILL YOU HANDLE THE
HOLIDAYS THIS YEAR?**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christa is the author of the Canadian Bestseller, *Life's Great Dare: Risking It All for the Abundant Life*, which was released in March 2016. The book is about her personal story of transformation after being diagnosed and treated with cancer and losing her only sibling, Todd, within months of each other.

She is a well-respected keynote speaker, workshop facilitator, and retreat leader, and her focus content includes transformation & vulnerability, the inner-life of an effective leader, contemplative spirituality, grief & loss, and soul care.

Christa is the founder and creator of SoulPlay.ca

She is known for her strategic and collaborative approach to working with individuals and teams and her greatest satisfaction comes when designing compelling experiences for people to slow down so they can wake up to their souls.

Follow Christa's latest projects at: [@soulplay.ca](#)

Find her book, *Life's Great Dare: Risking It All for the Abundant Life* on Amazon.

