

INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

Things Aren't Important; People Are Important



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Candace is dreading this Christmas. Her father took his own life eight months ago. He had just turned 50. This will be their first holiday without him. Their family is small, just Mom, herself and her 20-year-old sister Mary-Jeanne. They all knew that Dad had been depressed for many years and drank way too much, but he was an expert at covering his pain. They never expected he would do the unthinkable. Candace found him in his car with the garage door down and the engine running.

She's played the horrible scene in her mind dozens of times, but the ending is always the same. What if she'd gotten home earlier? What if she'd insisted he see a psychiatrist? Did she miss some obvious cues?

But there's no turning back.

Lost in thought, Candace forgets where she is. She doesn't even hear the check-out clerk in the grocery line repeat with a broad smile, "Hi, how are you today, miss?"

"Fine," Candace mumbles unconvincingly.

"Parsley or Dill?" the clerk asks, holding up a bag of unidentifiable greens.

"Parsley," Candace replies. She's been doing the weekly shopping for her mom, who's become house-bound since Dad's death. Candace is the self-appointed family caretaker. Too bad she's not very good at taking care of herself.

Candace absent-mindedly pushes her loaded shopping cart past the Christmas wreaths and garlands. This used to be her favorite time of the year, she remembers. Her car is at the far end of the parking lot. The chilly wind pierces her parka like a knife. But her heart aches more.

Now that he's gone, Candace thinks about her dad every day. They were actually very close; in their own quiet, special way. She understands he was sick, but she still can't forgive him. How could he leave the family this way? How could he leave her? There was so much she wanted to tell him — to explain, to apologize. If she could only say "I love you" one more time.

Psychologists and other therapists know that the holidays can be exceptionally stressful, especially for those who have suffered a loss.

With the continual focus on our troubled economy, it's essential that we not forget those who are alone, recently separated, divorced or bereaved. The presence of a comforting ear, outstretched arms and an open heart can work wonders. For those needing more, contact a professional for guidance.

This will be a hard Christmas for many families.

When I was about 8 years old, I pleaded with my parents for a bicycle just like my friend Rachel's. It was a shiny fire-engine red with really cool chrome wheels and wide white-wall tires. My parents just couldn't afford it. Instead they got me a pair of roller skates. When I opened the small package, my dad couldn't help but notice my badly disguised disappointment.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said. "Just remember, it's only a thing. Things don't matter. People matter."

I recently heard from Rachel. We've kept in touch all of these years. She's happily married and is a successful publisher in Manhattan. Tragically, her only son, Matt, passed away after a short but hard fight with leukemia. He was only 22.

"Things don't matter; people matter" — this is an important reality check. We're reminded that people and relationships are the only investments we can really count on.

So this season, consider giving the gifts that won't cost a dime. Build connections with friends and family from whom you may have become disenfranchised. Let go of petty feuds or old grudges. (If not now, when?) And forgive one another while there is still time.

"Teach us to count our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of the heart" — **Psalm 90:12**

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