

Ghosts, Goblins, and Grief

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By Fredda Wasserman

During the month of October we are bombarded with images of ghosts, goblins, skeletons, tombstones and other symbols of Halloween and Dia de Los Muertos. While these images may have been experienced as playful and funny in the past, for those who are newly grieving these representations of death may be unwelcome intrusions this year. Curious about the lens through which griever see the world, I set out to discover how Halloween affects them. Here are some of the responses I heard:

“No treats in my candy bag this year; life has played the ultimate trick on me.”

“Visit a haunted mansion? My own house feels haunted...so empty and cold.”

“Instead of celebrating Halloween, I’ll just turn out the lights and run the sprinklers.”

Costumes and Masks

Candice is the mother of three young sons. She has traditionally spent months conjuring up elaborate Halloween costumes and masks for herself and her family. It was not uncommon to hear the drone of the sewing machine humming late at night, punctuated by giggles and laughter as she put on the finishing touches. But this year Candice sent her boys with their dad to buy costumes at the local toy store. Since the death of her best friend Marta, Candice feels lethargic and exhausted much of the time. Her enthusiasm has waned and she dreads the expectations that will be put upon her when it’s time for the children in the neighborhood to go from house to house. “They will either expect me to go with them, or stay at home and give out the candy. I don’t think I can do it. I don’t even have the energy to put on a mask.”

“On the other hand,” Candice confided to me, “Sometimes I wish it was Halloween every day. That way I could hide behind a mask and not worry about people asking me why my eyes are red or where is my smile.” Candice frequently feels that she has to put on a false face when she is out in public and pretend that all is well in her world. But all is not well.

Making Alternate Plans

Marvin is a recently bereaved father who for 10 years had enthusiastically decorated the walkway up to his house with skulls and pumpkins and greeted the trick-or-treaters with rattling chains and ghostly music. This year, Marvin has decided to go out of town for the last week of October. “I couldn’t bear to hear the doorbell ring and see the children’s eager faces. Too many reminders of past Halloweens.” Wistfully Marvin recalls the fun that he and his son would have planning and installing the lights, sound effects, and decorations. Although he anticipates that in the future his playful spirit will re-emerge, Marvin is taking it one day at a time and is doing what he needs to do for this year.

Dia de los Muertos

Day of the Dead is a Mexican holiday dedicated to praying for and remembering friends and family members who have died. Traditions connected with the holiday include building private altars honoring the deceased, visiting cemeteries, eating favorite foods, and telling stories about ancestors. Since the death of her mother, Alicia and her family appreciate being with their community and not feeling so alone in their grief. “There is good reason for these customs. It helps for us to be able to speak about my mom and celebrate her life.”

Getting Easier

For Mildred the first few years were really hard. But now that four years have passed since the death of her husband, she is able to see the jack-o-lanterns and other symbols of Halloween without cringing. “Remembering how Hal loved Halloween and hearing the excited voices in the neighborhood brings back happy memories now instead of just pain. But I am more sensitive now and have chosen decorations accordingly.”

Just like Halloween candy...

Holidays are a mixed bag. A griever can't help but have mixed reactions to certain accessories that characterize Halloween and Dia de Los Muertos. If you know someone who is grieving, be sensitive to their perceptions and reactions. And if you hold a special Halloween memory that includes their loved one, go ahead and share it with them.

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