



What's Under
Your Tree?



Healing Gifts or
Pandora's Box?

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When grief hurts before, during and after the holidays, it's difficult to find a reason to celebrate the season. However, it is possible to find both sorrow and joy that can give you just the right balance in this season of peace.

Boxes have a lot to do with Christmas, although you may wonder what they have to do with grief. Gary and I have a lot of experience with boxes so using the analogy for our community holiday grief program was perfect. We've moved to new homes frequently over the past fifteen years; and our treasures have moved with us in containers of every size. Some of those boxes were so heavy we could barely lift them. When the movers delivered the mountain of boxes this time, we were overwhelmed with the amount of "stuff" we had accumulated, again. It is always my job to unpack the boxes. From experience, I know it usually takes about a year to sort through all of them. The contents of some of those boxes brought great pleasure as I re-discovered favorite items. Others contained items I knew I probably would never use again.

Grief is a lot like those boxes. We don't know what to expect until we open it up. Inside we store lots of things that bring on emotions like happiness, memories, emptiness and sad times. We put some of our thoughts and memories aside and shelve them because we aren't ready to deal with "what's inside" right away. The process of unpacking our grief—related emotions and issues—takes time and patience.

During the holidays this year, take time to discover the emotional, grief-related boxes that might be under your tree. We are often so overwhelmed with feelings of loss that we forget to look for the healing gifts of love and hope. Under a typical Christmas tree, you may find ten kinds of boxes. Four of those boxes represent our fears and concerns as we approach the holidays; and six represent healing gifts of Hope.

Four Boxes That Present Challenges

The four boxes that represent challenges are the ones that cause the holiday blues and discomfort. These are the ones most talked about by those who grieve. Most of us will encounter them, and they represent very normal reactions to the holidays. Grief is a new experience that wants attention. Ignoring the challenges and fears will not make those feelings go away. However, when you are aware of the threats they pose, it will be much easier to be prepared.

The Barrier Box:

This box is filled with obstacles and barriers that will affect how you approach and celebrate the holiday season. It may prevent you from acting “normal.” You’ve been through an emotional experience, and right now you have a lot of personal barriers or limitations in your life. You may not feel like celebrating the holiday season. You may frown on hosting dinner, putting up a tree, shopping, decorating, baking and all the activities that once were pleasurable.

Recognize your limitations and talk to your family about them. Be flexible and try some new traditions to

minimize the pain of your loss. Remember the holiday only lasts about twenty-four hours and then the intense feelings can rest.

The Fragile Box

The fragile box contains special needs this holiday. Fragile refers to our emotions, memories and inner spirits. You may need a lot of TLC (tender love and care), because nothing can prepare you for the twists and turns of life that hurt so much.

Set limits on how much energy and emotion you are willing to give to family and the holidays. Decide what to eliminate or change. Honor your inevitable “grief bursts,” and then allow yourself to enjoy the present moment.

The Care Package

The care package differs from the fragile box because this one is about self care. Recognize that you require attention physically, emotionally and spiritually. You may feel overwhelmed and think you are going crazy. There may be times when you feel exhausted from the emotions that threaten you. Remind yourself that this is a temporary feeling. Once the holiday celebrations pass, life will calm down to a more normal lull and the tension will pass.

Pandora’s Box

From history we know that Pandora’s box refers to all kinds of unexpected surprises and events that plague mankind. I like to think of it like a Jack-in-the-box. Bereavement makes us vulnerable and doubtful



about the unknown. Opening Pandora's box may be unavoidable. You may have already experienced some of the fears and concerns that accompany grief, such as financial issues, loss of dreams, loneliness, family relationship issues and holiday blues. Friendships may change. Some people will make insensitive remarks. Songs and memories may unlock your self-control. These are emotions and situations that come with loss and affect a wide-range of people, not only those who grieve.

While it is impossible to plan ahead for all the unexpected situations that could occur, you can prepare yourself mentally to accept the fact that you can't control what someone else says or does. You can only control your reaction to the moment. Don't allow fear of the unexpected to prevent you from participating in social or holiday events. Avoiding them will not make it easier. Don't pre-judge how awful the holidays will be; give happiness a chance. You may find that it wasn't as bad as you expected. Typically, family and friends want to make it easier for you. They just need some direction on how to do that.

Six boxes are symbols of Hope.

Nestled among the four boxes that represent challenges are six more boxes. These can be the vision of hope you need to guide you through the holiday season. Grief requires finding a new normal and re-inventing who you are and who you can become. Each day, we look for small signs of hope to inspire us. Look for each of those boxes under your tree.

The Memory Box

Our memories give us hope. This box can be filled to the brim with the wonders of telling your story. When you share your memories and the stories of your loved one, you give yourself encouragement and pleasure every day. Memories become a sacred gift to be cherished through every season.

Moving Boxes

The moving box isn't about moving to a new house. It represents transitions as we move forward in our healing and grief. This can be a positive experience offering many new beginnings. Transitions can be about living life more simply than before. Sometimes transitions require evaluating and setting priorities. Transitions can put you in touch with new social circles, new experiences, and renewed plans.

The Promo Box (branding)

This box is about branding, or creating a new identity. Discover who you are now; understand how you grow spiritually, mentally and emotionally. Promoting yourself is about aligning yourself with the right people who make you feel good. It is also about defining

what motivates you. Discover ways to use your grief experience to grow mentally, physically and spiritually. Spend time with someone who inspires you.

The Dream Box

In the dream box, are opportunities and a chance to build new dreams. Following the loss of dreams that death brings, it's important to be inspired to seek new opportunities. Perhaps you have always wanted to do a certain thing, but you've never found the time to do it. This is the time to revive the dream. Follow your dreams and follow your heart.

The Gift box

Give yourself a gift or receive a special gift from others. We all have gifts that include our talents, skills or just being present in another person's life. Give the gift of your presence to family and friends. Share your life experiences. Receive love and support from others who want to be a part of your life.

The Christmas Box

This box is about hope. The message of Christmas is hope. You have the power to benefit from hope through your personal and religious experiences. It's the force that keeps us going when the world looks bleak. It comes from within. Building your positive attitude and reinvesting in life gives hope.

All of this brings us back to the legend of Pandora's box and the unexpected. According to Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman created by the gods, and they gave her gifts. Zeus gave Pandora the infamous box and told her never to open it. She was warned that the box imprisoned "things" that could destroy mankind. But Pandora was so curious that she opened the lid. From inside flew out into the world all the evils including sickness, crime, disease, poverty, theft and deceit. Pandora struggled to close to lid on the box, but after she shut it, she peeked inside to see that only one thing remained in the bottom of the box. It was hope. It was said that hope was all that remained to comfort mankind.

You can spend your holidays fearing all the things that can go wrong or you can face the holidays with hope for the future. May you find hope in the boxes under your tree.

For more information about this Program, contact Nan at wings2@charter.net.