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I am thinking now
of grief, and of getting past it

Mary Oliver (1935-)

THE EMPTY CHAIR

In the Memorial to his mother, my friend Henri Nouwen (1932–1996), the spiritual author and social activist, wrote,

In a society which is more inclined to help you hide your pain than to grow through it, it is necessary to make a very conscious effort to mourn.



This year I have received more emails and messages from people about loss than at any other time I can remember. Bereavement can come from many experiences; a wildfire, a camp on the island of Lesbos, a deportation center, or in a house down the street.

This pain is not only experienced by older people. It can be felt by anyone who has personally experienced the loss of someone they loved and who loved them greatly. And, I think it is more intensely felt at this time of year when there is an empty chair as we gather around the hearth.



Quite a few of you shared a sense of sorrow with me this year. And it was a sharing I felt privileged to receive. All I have to offer in return is my own experience, which has been quite deep in recent months. As you know our Sister Marti died from pancreatic cancer on February 22, 2016. We had been spiritual wayfaring companions for over half a century and she was certainly the center of our joy at this season of the year. My feeling of grief seems to increase with the weeks leading up to any festivity but especially Christmas because that was Marti's favorite time of year.

There was one thing in particular that I wanted as Marti grew weaker.

She had loved to visit art museums especially one in San Francisco. I was determined to take her to the museum one last time, but her illness sped up and the dream vanished. My regret is probably a sign of all the many things I wish I had done for her. For whatever reason it is something that has bothered me greatly.



This year David, who is the wonderful person Marti and I had adopted at birth 31 years ago, had some days free from his concert tours which he spent with us at Starcross around Christmastime. One of the first things we decided was that we would visit the museum. From the minute I

entered I knew Marti was with us and my spirit lit up! As Mary Oliver once wrote,

*I feel my boots
trying to leave the ground.*



I don't use the word "closure" because I never want my sense of Marti to stop. But as our Sister Julie put it, the pain had become more "every day" rather than catastrophic and raw.

I don't know if my experience can be helpful to any of you who are grieving at this time of year. I appreciate that there is a deep anguish when we are not sitting with someone who brought a unique sparkle

to times of joy. But at what was to be her last Christmas Marti said, *“I will always be with you at Christmas.”* And I suspect that the person you are now missing so deeply said or thought the same thing — it is true.

There is no magic pill to be used. But Henri Nouwen once pointed out, at times of great loss someone else in the circle of friends or family steps in to fill the void as best they can. In the process, the love in a home or community grows, as do the people who lent a hand. This was



certainly true for me this past Christmas. Someone lit the fires in the morning that Marti always lit. Someone else made the fruitcake that was her specialty. In the chapel, someone said the things that we remembered so well from her. And did I hear her voice when we sang the carols she loved? Yes.



We feel especially bereaved during the autumn and winter holidays — Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Christmas, New Year's — which we remember sharing with our intimate circle. But there are also other days that were made special by our relationships — birthdays, anniversaries, and adventures or accomplishments.

Spiritual guides suggest rituals for all these times, perhaps a prayer

of remembrance before a dinner, sharing stories, lighting a candle. But above all be gentle with yourself and keep in mind that you are not alone in those moments.

During the AIDS pandemic, a 10-year-old girl who knew she had very little time to live, said to us in the room, *“Remember me at the parties!”* I'm sure that no one who heard her has forgotten that good guidance.



Here at Starcross we have a special tea around the New Year. We bring out our little Tina's favorite tea set. She died when she was almost three but truly lives on in our hearts. We fill the tiny cups with Grand Marnier, which for some totally unexplained reason was what Julie and Marti found in a bag

they had brought to the hospital on Christmas Eve when things were in a bad way with Tina. Each year we toast Tina and Marti and others whom we have lost.



In a place that has been sacred to us — church, temple, meditation room, bench, spot in the woods or in the garden — let us say a quiet prayer from time to time and silently open ourselves to the presence of those who will always be reaching out to us. For, as it says in a Jewish prayer,

THEY STILL LIVE ON EARTH IN
THE ACTS OF GOODNESS THEY PERFORMED,
AND IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE
WHO CHERISH THEIR MEMORY.
MAY THE BEAUTY OF THEIR LIVES
ABIDE AMONG US A LOVING BENEDICTION

Brother Toby

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