Those sneaky spring holidays

By Kenneth J. Doka

There are some things that may make these holidays different—and perhaps even less difficult. The days are getting longer rather than shorter. More sunlight may affect everyone's mood, especially those who suffer from seasonal affective disorder, brought on by limited sun. As the days get warmer, we spend more time outside, allowing us more opportunities to divert our grief, either by being with others or by working outside in the garden or yard. There may even be fewer reminders—not as many cards or television specials that remind us of our loss. So it is easy to ignore those spring holidays. That is why our reactions can surprise us.

The spring holidays just sneak up on us with little forethought or warning. Despite the differences, they can still be tough. These holidays, too, are invested with memories. They are centering moments when families gather and the losses are all still keenly felt. Some, like Mother's Day or Father's Day, may be especially painful if we are dealing with the loss of a parent or child.

In the roller coaster ride of grief, the spring holidays can be those unexpected plunges—a wild part of the ride that we may never have expected.

We need to prepare for them as carefully as we should have prepared in the winter. We can begin by deciding what holidays might be the most difficult. Which holidays have the most significance? What are the ones where we will feel the absence most? Once we understand the challenges that each event presents, we can begin to anticipate and adjust.

Each year the Jewish observance of Passover and the Christian celebration of Easter fall close to each other in the springtime. While each of these religious holidays has distinct practices within its unique faith tradition, they are similar in that they are celebrations of liberation and new life. For individuals and families still in the midst of active mourning, the typical activities that characterize these religious holidays can be very distressing. It is important and helpful for those grieving to anticipate how emotionally complicated these observances can be so that expectations and plans can be realistic.

Same Seder, Not the Same. Sam, my rabbi colleague, says that since the Seder meal is at the heart of a family’s annual Pesach observance, it likely will bring forward powerful memories of many past Seders shared with the person who died. Just as Elijah is spiritually expected to enter to partake of the Seder, there will be strong longing for the family member no longer present. Since even otherwise non-observant

Grief during Passover and Easter

By Paul Metzler

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Letters

When joy and sorrow co-exist

Q: It would have meant so much to my father to have seen his granddaughter graduate from college this May, but he died suddenly three months ago. I feel heartbroken that he won't be there. I'm afraid to go to the ceremony. I am so happy for my daughter, but what if I can't stop crying.

A: You cannot not grieve. Loss is a nonnegotiable part of life. You mourn deeply because you love deeply. You are experiencing profound sadness at your recent loss, yet at the same time, you feel such joy for your daughter's accomplishments.

Eugen Bleuler, the eminent Swiss psychiatrist, was one of the first academicians to employ the term “ambivalence” to describe the coexistence of conflict-
Times to remember

By Paul Irion

When my wife and I moved to a retirement community, in addition to a shelf full of slide carousels, several large boxes of old family photographs were a problem. There were pictures from our childhood, our graduations, our wedding, and of our children. But there were also stacks of fading browned portrait photos of great-grandparents, girls in high shoes and large hair ribbons, baby boys in long christening dresses. Some of these people were long-gone before I was born, others I had known as a child.

It was so difficult to decide what to do with all those pictures. I had a sentimental attachment to many of them but there was something more than that. I felt a sense of responsibility because I was a custodian of the fading tangible ties to those who were no longer with us. The boxes are now in my den closet. I had to keep them, and I hope my son will keep them when I’m gone.

This experience convinced me of the value, even the necessity, of preserving memories of the past. Dumping these boxes into the trash would have been the loss of tangible reminders of those who have been part of my life, through their DNA, through their nurture, in shared times of pleasure, and in the pain of separation and loss. I would have shrunk as a person because my memories are part of who I am.

This is especially true when a loved one dies. Perhaps when you were preparing for the funeral of a family member who had died, you set up a memory table with pictures and mementos from the life you shared. As people gathered for the memorial service, their memories were reinforced. But the real value of the memory table was that it took you to your box of family pictures and albums. The whole family, including children, can be part of this process. This was a time of reviewing a life and relationships across the years, stirring and reinforcing your memories.

We keep mementos: watches, jewelry, clothing, furniture. As we use them, we recall our loved ones. “This was my dad’s watch.” “Whenever we use the good china, I think about all the great family holiday dinners Mom had.” Every one of these mementos is a link in the chain of memories.

Your faith community offers you some ways to remember. At the funeral service, an obituary may have been read and stories of the life that has been lived told. There may have been a time of remembrance when family and friends could share treasured memories. Many Protestant churches have annual services in which those who have died during the past year are remembered. Roman Catholics participate in memorial masses. Jewish families observe the Jahrzeit marking the anniversary of the death. These are all valuable ritualized paths to remembrance.

Why is memory so important? We know that memory is a critical part of the grieving process. After the death of a loved one, mourners move slowly from experiencing a living relationship to a relationship of memory. So one of can prepare.

We will need to decide how we want to spend the holidays and with whom we wish to spend them. However difficult these holidays are, we must be careful not to isolate ourselves. Even spending a little time with others who care about us is useful. Yet it is appropriate, if we wish, to spend a little time alone. Jane does that. Her adult son, Ivan, died a number of years ago. Every Mother’s Day, she takes great solace in the hour or two it takes to bake his favorite cake. Later in the day she brings it over to share with Ivan’s widow and children. “I need to miss him alone,” she says, “and then miss him together.”

Rituals can sometimes help. When I was a child, one of our rituals on Mother’s and Father’s Day was for my parents to place flowers on the graves of their parents. After that, we would have a family meal—a celebration of our parents. As I look back, I think it was an effective model for us to handle our loss—looking backward to what is lost while still looking forward to the present and future.

While the spring holidays can be difficult, perhaps the very nature of spring helps. Spring reminds us of renewal, offering a metaphor for the life that will one day emerge from the desolate winter of our grief.

Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv, is Senior Consultant to HFA and a Professor of Gerontology at the College of New Rochelle in New York.
Ten secrets to healing well from grief

By Judy Tatelbaum

Although we would rather never have to confront the ordeals of life’s painful situations like loss, the death of a loved one, facing a life threatening illness, or danger in the world, sometimes we must. Each of us needs as many tools as possible for dealing with difficult times. Following are ten secrets for facing painful events as best we can.

1. Don’t run away. It’s when we stay and face what’s happening that we cope best and heal most quickly. Facing pain empowers us and strengthens us. Denying it or running away does not.

2. Allow your feelings. We don’t want to feel what we feel—sadness, anger, resentment, regret, or fear—but owning our feelings and expressing them aloud can free us from them.

3. Seek the help of other people. Life is harder when we force ourselves to cope with pain alone. The support of others adds to our strength, energy, and insight in facing distress.

4. Do not hold yourself a victim. Whenever we feel like a victim, we are powerless. No matter what happened, alter your view so you don’t put yourself in this “one down” position. Even when the circumstances were awful, acknowledge how terrible things were, but don’t add victim to the awfulness.

5. Have an “I can” attitude. Realize you can cope, even if you don’t know how. When we give ourselves positive reinforcement like “I will survive,” we empower ourselves and our future.

6. Know you are not the only one. Be inspired by the fact that other people make it through rough times like yours. Others recover and so can you.

7. Ask yourself—what can I learn from this? If we saw pain as a natural teacher, maybe then pain wouldn’t be our enemy. We can learn how to face something seemingly impossible. We can develop healing tools and a deeper understanding of life.

8. Ask yourself—How can I be powerful in the face of this trauma? We usually don’t think about what it means to have power over life until we feel overwhelmed or powerless in the face of pain or loss. Traumatic experiences offer us a chance to learn to empower ourselves and overcome adversity.

9. Ask yourself—What could be a great outcome? What if we considered who we might become because we are facing this loss? A great outcome might be to become more confident about your abilities, or to help others with their pain.

10. Be willing to recover and go on with your life—no matter what. This may be the toughest, but also the most important step you can take. It’s not unusual to want to quit because you hurt. Personal power comes from having the courage to go on with life, even when someone or something important is missing.

We may not be able to control life’s adversities, but we can have power over how we confront the painful times in our lives. Use these secrets to heal yourself, to recover, and to live a wonderful life.

Judy Tatelbaum, MSW, is a psychotherapist, public speaker, and author of The Courage to Grieve, and You Don’t Have to Suffer, as well as videos The Courage to Grieve and The Courage to Grow. She trains people in dealing with catastrophic illness, grief, death, and dying.

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Jews are likely to attend or host a Seder, this celebratory meal is a profound occasion within the family and community to reminisce about what is the same and what has changed since the last Seder. For those experiencing their first, second, or even further-along-in-time Seder since a death, the absence of a loved one may be one of the most dominant realities, even if the griever keeps this awareness internalized and private.

Also, the Yizkor service at the end of Passover, with its memorial prayers in synagogue and Yahrzeit candle at home will also be a mixture of solace and sad remembrance for observant Jews in the midst of a holy time.

**The Easter Blues.** The liturgical color for Easter is brilliant white, since it is a joyful celebration of resurrection and new life in Jesus. Yet the actively grieving Christian may find their emotional color to actually be quite “blue,” with sadness overriding the themes of joy that characterize the Easter message.

Further, the 40-day period of Lent that precedes Easter has a strong focus on events leading to the death of Jesus, especially during the final week known as Holy Week. These powerful stories and images can be challenging to someone actively coping with the story of a recent death of their own. Easter Sunday is typically a time, even for those who do not go to church services, for a festive family meal. For those in mourning, such traditional gatherings can be very difficult.

**Anticipatory Realism.** Each individual and family needs to anticipate, as best they can, what is possible and desirable as the religious holidays approach. Passover and Easter offer strong messages of comfort and hope that have consoled millions over the centuries. Each tradition offers prayers, ceremonies and customs that are known to surround griev-
**When mother’s and father’s day heighten loss**

**By Charles Corr and Donna Corr**

The day after Grace went to her third support group meeting for bereaved parents, she called her friend, Barbara. “Oh, Barb,” she said, “I think you really would have benefited from the discussion at the meeting.

“The topic for the group was how to cope with special days, like Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. I know those days are coming around again soon and this will be the first time for you and Mike since the death of your child.

“Even my Dave was impressed by the discussion. When we got home last night he wrote out a list of the things that most impressed him in the discussion. Can I share his list with you?”

“Sure. Mike and I have been a little anxious about these days. We’d welcome any helpful ideas that you picked up,” Barb said.

“Well, the first thing Dave noted was how people agreed that while other people enjoy special days like Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, it just seems to remind us of our loss. Everyone agreed that special days for parents seem to heighten the sense of loss when your child is gone. One woman even said, ‘I wish they didn’t print these days on the calendar! Then we could just ignore them!’ So it’s not unusual to experience the concerns you’re mentioning.

“Another member of the group commented, ‘I want to carry that thought a step further. I still love my child, even though she died three years ago. It isn’t just that I loved her in the past. I loved her before she was born, and I loved her while she was alive, and I still love her even now that she’s gone. Things certainly are different. She isn’t physically present, but she remains in my heart, my thoughts, and my prayers.’

“When it came to what we might do to take care of ourselves on these special days, Dave noted a variety of comments. Several people said that they changed their routines. While these holidays used to be more joyful, now they are more serious. One man goes to church and says a prayer for his child. Another person visits her daughter’s gravesite. A

**continued on page 6**

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**Grief during Passover... continued from page 4**

ing persons with assurance of continuity from the past to the present and into the future.

Yet, those who are grieving need to treat themselves tenderly. Just as someone bruised from an accident, they need to realistically choose what they are able to do when it comes to the traditions of a religious holiday season. Seeking guidance from a rabbi, priest or minister can help decide what observances to maintain or modify. Those in mourning may need to only do some of what is typical; participate in a gathering only for a short time, or go to religious services only when they feel emotionally strong enough. This type of anticipatory planning can help everyone be realistic about the religious holiday.

Finally, one of the blessings of a “holy day” is the opportunity to reach out to others. Many bereaved are surprised to find their greatest solace comes in thinking of others who are also dealing with loss and sadness. Reaching out by sending a note, making a phone call or arranging a visit may be a way to “act” that will bring a real sense of holiday blessing.

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**Paying It Forward**

**Journeys** occasionally prints firsthand accounts of those who grieve. Please send your submission (150-250 words) and the best way to contact you, to: journeys@hospicefoundation.org or mail to:

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**Spring Holidays**
the major goals of grieving is to hold a memory of the person who has died. This is the way in which we maintain some connection to him or her. We are painfully aware that the kind of relationship we had in life came to an end when our loved one died. However, those who died did not simply disappear into oblivion. They are still part of our lives, but now in the realm of memory.

This is not unhealthy or morbid. A generation ago there was an expression used when talking about someone who had died: “______, of blessed memory.” This was recognition that our memories are indeed a blessing. Although memories may make us feel temporarily lonely, they are also a connection, a form of relatedness. Memories are the way by which we never lose our loved ones.

Paul E. Irion is Emeritus professor of Pastoral Theology at Lancaster Theology Seminary of the United Church of Christ, and was the Founding President of Hospice of Lancaster County.

When mother’s and... continued from page 5
third person donates to children’s charities, while another volunteers at a child care center.

“I think Dave’s list captured many key points in the discussion. But for me the central lesson that I came home with was that each of us has to do what’s best for us. Each of us grieves differently. Different people do different things to cope with the challenges that arise from these special days, but we can all be proactive in deciding how to go on with our lives.”

Charles A. Corr, PhD, is a volunteer with Suncoast Hospice and formerly chaired the International Work Group on Health, Dying, and Bereavement. Donna McCorr is a retired professor of nursing and a member of the International Work Group on Health, Dying, and Bereavement.