

Blue Christmas: Grieving through the holidays

by [Mary Jo Cartledgehayes](#) in the [December 27, 2003](#) issue

A few years ago, if I'd had my druthers for Christmas, I would have put a paper bag over my head on December 1, crawled under the bed and hidden out until Christmas was over—perhaps until Christmas 2007.

Fred, my husband of 17 years, had died in April, and I could hardly stand the thought of Advent, with its talk about hope and expectation, let alone the holly-jolly, joy-to-the-world celebration of Christmas. Grief can debilitate a person in ordinary times. In extraordinary times, such as the holidays, it can obliterate.

I couldn't afford to be obliterated. I have two daughters, each of whom has gone forth and multiplied. However deep my despair, I wanted my grandchildren to observe and understand that life and people do go on, even in the midst of grief. Children aren't much interested in nuance, but they know that if Grandma doesn't put up a Christmas tree, the world has ended. I had no choice.

I didn't have the energy to hunt down a live tree, and I'd given away the sculpted blue spruce we'd used after Fred's stem cell transplant, to protect him from the killer molds and fungi that lurk in real trees. I was at a standstill until, wandering in Kmart, I came upon a ghastly six-foot-tall Christmas tree painted a shade of white that sucked the color from everything around it. This tree had no pretensions: it was perfectly ugly. Somehow its ugliness soothed me. Unable to face the boxes of ornaments Fred and I had acquired over the years, I searched out and bought four boxes of deep-blue, shiny balls.

Decorated, the tree darkened the entire living room. When my piano teacher, Brian, came by that afternoon, he peered at it for a long moment and said, "I think I can help make it look better. I'll be back in a little while." An hour later he returned with three boxes of miniature blue lights. I went off to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee and work on that day's allotment of crying. When I returned, the 300 lights were burning brightly. The tree still looked like hell, but at least it looked like my

own personal brand of hell: brittle, pallid and cold.

That year we held our family gathering on the Saturday before Christmas. Going to Grandma's on Christmas morning felt too harsh with Fred gone, though each of us, all the way down to five-year-old Joe, was clear that Fred was absolutely dead. Our former rituals wouldn't work any longer; we groped to find some other way of being.

Tara, my older daughter, was concerned that my stack of gifts would appear sparse that year, so she cast a wide net to make up the difference. After giving her three presents, her children, Joe and Elizabeth, each gave me two. Elizabeth's eyes sparkled as she handed me my present from their dog, Tiger. Giggling, Joe handed me the one from his best friend, their neighbor-dog, Chip. Even the lop-eared bunny that lived at the elementary school but was visiting for the holidays had sent along a present. I unwrapped for a very long time, and as present after present appeared in my lap, my numbness eased just a bit.

My younger daughter, Jennifer, and her two sons offered a different kind of abundance. When I picked up a hefty oblong box, Devin leaned in close and Bradley peered over his shoulder. Ripping off a swath of giftwrap, I saw a two-pound box of Whitman's chocolates. For 18 years, Fred had given me an identical box every Valentine's Day and every Mother's Day. I teetered on the edge of tears and shot Jennifer a "you've pushed me out on thin ice here" look. She spread her hands wide, palms open. "Mama, it wasn't me." She said Bradley had come barreling through the front door one day, demanding that they go to the store at once. When he'd explained why—"Grandpa always bought Grandma candy, and she'll be sad if she doesn't get any"—they piled into the car.

After all the presents were opened, my grandchildren were aglow with contentment. I was grateful for the kindness, but contented? No. Happy? No. Some friends were disappointed when I couldn't tell them later that I'd enjoyed myself. Yes, they knew Fred was dead, but couldn't I rise above it? Couldn't I enter into the spirit of the season? After all, we were celebrating the birth of Jesus. Didn't that matter to me?

Frankly, on that particular Christmas, little mattered to me. I didn't want to hear carols. I didn't want to be cheered up. I didn't want to look at perky Christmas cards. I wanted the same thing I'd wanted every day for eight months: the strength to force myself out of bed in the morning, to brush my teeth and to eat. I knew, even if nobody else did, that it wasn't my Christian duty to be happy during the holidays. It

was enough for me to remember, as best I could, that God loves us in our pain.

That Christmas was the simplest of our lives and also the most honest. Everything false or contrived had fallen away. Worries about what to wear or eat and whether people would like their presents carried no weight. There was no hurry, no artifice, no attempt to force happiness. God doesn't require smiles from us, not even at Christmas. God doesn't begrudge sadness; God honors it. Maybe that's why in my memory of that day my children and grandchildren and I are a still life bathed in cool blue light. In our offering and receiving of memories and mercy, our souls were, at least for a few hours, restored.