

Holiday grief: Remembering the children we loved and lost too soon



The holiday season is particularly tough for those who are in mourning. With an emphasis on families and togetherness, while being bright and merry, this time of year is often dreaded by those who suffer from grief, sickness, loneliness, and heartache.

Last week I shared reflections and advice for the holiday season from a few families who have lost adult loved ones.

Read more in “Grief and mourning during the holidays: How to cope when you aren’t feeling jolly.”

Today, in Part 2, I share about one of my former students who died at age 15, as well as the sad stories of two other families who mourn the loss of children. They offer insights on how they cope and find hope, while they honor these young lives taken too soon.

Remembering Xavia:

My Facebook memories this week reminded me that just four years ago we were praying for a bone marrow match to be found for sweet Xavia Pirozzi, my then-John Carroll sophomore student. St. Joseph Church in Fullerton had sponsored a marrow registry drive and over 900 persons showed up to be screened, hoping to give the gift of life to this young girl who was battling lymphoma.

Sometimes our best laid efforts to help during times of need just don’t work out according to our plan.

Xavia passed on to Eternal Life three months later on March 21, 2012 at the age of 15. Her death saddened the hearts of the entire John Carroll community. As their campus minister, I helped our students come together to find ways to honor her memory and keep her legacy alive in the heart of our school.

When children die:

As we know, it is unnatural for parents to bury their children. The process of mourning and grief is much more intense since we place a lot of hope in our children and the yet-unfolding lives that they might enjoy in the years to come.

And when the holidays roll around, especially Christmas with so much focus on children and Santa and the Holy Infant who changed the world forever, the process

of bereavement often intensifies, even if years have passed since a child has gone Home to Heaven ahead of us.

Two families' stories:

Delivery into Eternal Life:

My friend Abigail and her husband lost two sons during late miscarriages, Francisco in 2006 and Leo in 2013. Already parents, they were taken completely off-guard by these unexpected losses.

And Abigail had to go through the heart-wrenching process of labor and delivery with Leo in October of 2013. She shares that the support and compassion of the nurses at Holy Cross Hospital in Silver Spring helped them get through two very long days.

The labor and delivery unit at Holy Cross, a Catholic hospital, has the practice of placing a black butterfly on the doors of mothers whose baby has died. This symbol alerts everyone who enters the room that the mother and family are in mourning. Abigail told me that she had "one of the best conversations about grief with a housekeeper who came to take out my trash."

The timing of Leo's delivery into Eternal Life meant that the family buried him the weekend before All Souls Day. Abigail recalls that Halloween and All Souls Day were traumatic for them that year, much more than that upcoming Christmas.

One of Abigail's pregnancy traditions has been to make her unborn children a needlepoint Christmas stocking during the months before their births. Since she had not yet fashioned stockings for Francisco and Leo before her miscarriages, she sewed them after their deaths.

Abigail shares, "It was sad work and healing at the same time. When I put up the stockings with the boys' names on them, it is a good time to answer questions for the really little kids (her youngest children), "Who is this?" I know that it does my heart good to see everyone's names all together. It's like they counted (Francisco and Leo) as children too."

When tragedy takes children:

Allison, my former student from the John Carroll Class of 2012, now a student at the University of Delaware, is no stranger to mourning the loss of children. Tragically, her two step-brothers, Mikey and Eric, along with their mother, perished in a house fire in 2005. The boys were 10 and 8 years old. Allison was just 11 at the time of their deaths and shares, "My family is always affected by the loss of my brothers. Their death came as a complete surprise."

Allison has shared her wisdom on grief many times over the years, including with her John Carroll classmates on their senior retreat. In some ways, she reflects, time heals and helps.

"You never learn to truly get over the loss. You can only learn to get through it with the help of God and the support of the people He provides in your time of need. For my family, it has always been each other.

"During the holidays, the grief we feel all year long is intensified. Holidays have such a huge emphasis on family, and unfortunately, because of our loss, it's easy to focus on what, or more importantly who our family doesn't have, rather than being grateful for all those we do have. We grieve for the moments we will never have with the people we always thought we would."

Getting through the holidays:

Allison shares that in years past her family had always travelled during the holidays, visiting relatives and friends. Since the boys' deaths, her family usually sticks closer to home, cherishing their time with the immediate family. They always hang stockings on the mantle with stuffed animals and photos of Mikey and Eric.

"The hardest holiday for us—although they are all hard—is Christmas. The grief can be so crippling and comes in unexpected waves."

"My stepfather usually visits the boys' gravesite—which our family calls the chapel—on special holidays like Christmas, as well on as their birthdays and the day they passed away. Every year, with the small amount of pictures that we have, we try to make a gift for my stepfather acknowledging Mikey and Eric in some way. In the past, we have made canvases of pictures, written poems, and other kind gestures to keep their memory alive."

"Writing poems and creating the canvases are definitely tools that I have used to cope with the loss of my brothers. It helps to confront your feelings in a way that is constructive.

"Also, it helps us as a family to reflect on the funny memories we had with them. There are so many priceless stories and memories that we will always hold onto. Talking about the boys keeps their memory alive.

"Sometimes, personally, what doesn't help for me is pondering who they would be today. For some reason, only known to God, their book was complete in His eyes when we thought they'd still be writing new chapters. Thinking about what could have been and what my life might be like now (with them) invites pain and confusion."

Where to turn when your heart hurts:

Abigail shares:

"The best grief group I went to was Compassionate Friends. They told me that grief is work and to be flexible.

"It felt very hard to lose a baby before I knew him. Like I wasn't even sure who I lost... I just knew that we would have been so linked at the heart. I hung out in a

room where people had lost adult children in car accidents and children to suicide and heroin. A few Moms told me my grief was harder, because it was invisible to the world and there was no one to say "I remember Leo..."

"That felt so generous to me. Taking my grief seriously helped me to heal. And talking about my grief with strangers helped me to heal, especially because my husband and I were processing the miscarriage in different ways.

Advice for those mourning during the holidays (and anytime):

Abigail reflects:

"Grief is work. Don't worry about impressing other people.

"Do the work that God has given you this season so that you can be truly free and authentic. The complicated, 'stuffed' grief comes from not wanting to work through your feelings."

Let God show you how to swim:

Allison shares:

"The round of firsts are the hardest parts of grief's endless cycle that you will have to endure. Let God be your comfort in these times.

"There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Do not set your grief to a timetable. Your love for the one you lost has no deadline, and neither does your grief. Grief will always come in waves, but let God show you how to swim."

Compassionate Friends:

"Time has proven that in caring and sharing comes healing."

Compassionate Friends is a national nonprofit, self-help support organization that offers friendship and understanding to bereaved parents, grandparents, and siblings. Founded in 1969, they have more than 650 local chapters across the country where regular meetings provide a caring environment for parents and families to work through their grief with the help of others who have "been there."

To contact them, call: 877-969-0010 or visit their web site.

Do you have a story of grief and hope that you would like to share?

Please write to me:

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Read more about how Xavia Pirozzi's classmates of the John Carroll Class of 2014 honored her memory:

1. John Carroll sophomore remembered as "saintly"
 2. On the first anniversary of her death: Junior year for the Class of 2014:
- Remembering Xavia: John Carroll Juniors Honor Friend and Classmate on First

Anniversary of her Death

3. On the second anniversary of her death: Senior year for the Class of 2014:

Remembering Xavia: Honoring her memory by living lives of peace