

New Year's Renewal

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Have you broken any New Year's resolutions? Many people have. Change is hard, so we make promises that we can't keep. We make resolutions because we want to change something, but the death of a loved one brings change that we don't want and can't stop, sort of like an unwelcome extreme makeover. Wanted or unwanted, how we respond to change can influence both our present and our future. For those who are facing the future without a loved one who died recently, I propose that the traditional New Year's resolution be set aside in favor of a new year's renewal.

Renewal is making an old thing like new again. The old is always there, but it takes on a new form. The past blends with the present, and gives new meaning to the future. You probably will have a lot of memories of your loved one during the coming year. You can use those thoughts and feelings to start your renewal if you put your mind to it.

Mourners have taught me a couple of important things about memories:

Memories carry both pain and healing.

Many people try not to remember because they fear that they will feel badly if they do. Probably true, but they also can find healing in them. Others try to live life with only pleasant memories, and in so doing may be delaying acceptance that the person is truly dead, hence prolonging their pain. Avoiding the pain doesn't make it go away.

Mourners feel connected to the deceased when they embrace memories - even the painful ones.

Sometimes people become so aware of this that they fear that they will lose the feeling of connection to the person once the pain stops. Usually, the opposite is true. Embracing the life of the deceased through memorializing, stories, and other healing memories helps mourners feel that their connection to the one who died will never be broken, because the memories become more than just bits of information. In time, they come to represent the person and allow the mourner to move from a place of dreading the loss to a place of cherishing the meaning of the life of the deceased.

Renewal begins with a new way of thinking that allows us to embrace the transformation or makeover that takes place when someone dies. My own makeover is becoming more apparent as we start a new year. When last year began, I had two brothers. Today I have one. The death of my brother Harold has caused me to think about my future without him in the world. I know there are some things that will take time for me to rearrange in my mind and in my soul, such as a new year of birthdays and holidays that must take on new meaning; my children, who saw so much of me in my brother, and who gained perspective on my life that only my brother could provide, have now lost that part of me forever; and I am no longer a little brother - I am now the big brother, and it just doesn't feel right. As I face each of these issues, I can gain a new understanding of Harold and of myself. I don't know how things will turn out. I just know that I am resolved to allow the transformation to take place.

Joyful memories of the past can make the future more bearable in much the same way that fears from the past can make a person dread the future. Pleasant memories of our loved ones

somehow help us to face the future without them. They also provide us with information that can help us redefine ourselves in light of their absence. Memories - keepsakes, stories, sights, sounds and smells - all help us hold our loved ones in our hearts forever. We are not making new cloth, just weaving new strands into the fabric of the lives that we had together. My daughters always marveled at the uncanny physical (and sometimes behavioral) resemblance between my brothers and me. With their uncle Harold gone, I know that my very presence keeps his memory alive for them, as I am sure that my presence reaffirms his life to his children and grandchildren. In a new world in which we must redefine the one who dies, we also must redefine ourselves.

Teachings of my faith exhort me to a transformation that begins with a new way of thinking about things, a way made possible by eternal change. I don't know which changes brought on by the death of a loved one are temporal or eternal, but I do know that the transformation that begins when someone dies can last a lifetime.

May you find joy, hope, and strength as the memory of your loved one transforms you in the New Year.