

Few people understand grief the way Harold Ivan Smith understands it, and fewer still have the ability to write about it with such clarity and insight. To suffer loss while others are celebrating is a disorienting experience. This book is a healing gift to those whose pain seems out of place and intrusive. It is a welcome resource.

—Dr. Jesse C. Middendorf

Harold shares perceptive insights in how to deal with every part of the “Holiday” experience when viewed through the lens of grief. His words written with such empathy and realistic understanding eased my own memories of grief. Thank you, Harold, for caring enough to help us shape and create new pathways of meaningful celebration.

—Carolyn Lunn

The holidays and special days are special challenges, and if we let them be, invitations as we wander through the worlds of life and loss. Smith uses the perceptions of a skilled caregiver and author wrapped up in the integrity of his own genuineness from his loss experiences to bring us a good friend and a safe place in *A Decembered Grief*.

—Rev. Dr. Richard B. Gilbert,
executive director, The World Pastoral Care, author and speaker

This book will be an essential handbook for those who must endure holidays with fresh grief. Harold so poignantly provides a wealth of insights to flatten the pain we anticipate at the holidays.

—Barbara Johnson

Harold Ivan Smith is one of the Lord’s true mystics. He takes us place we’ve never been and blesses us as we’ve never been blessed. This book is an absolute must.

—Dr. Charlie Shedd

A
DECEMBERED
Grief

Living with Loss
While Others Are
Celebrating

HAROLD IVAN SMITH



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INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time a great king owned a beautiful diamond.

But there was a problem. The diamond had a flaw—a scratch in the middle. It could never be given, worn, or admired.

So the king, who was used to having his subjects make him happy, sent word throughout his vast kingdom that great riches, position, and prestige would come to any individual who could take away the flaw. Well, they came, the best of jewelers and artists, even magicians—not just from that kingdom, but from across the mountains and the seas. But alas—no one could remove the scratch. The king despaired.

Then one day a young man arrived, somewhat optimistic about his chances for doing what no one else had been able to do. Oh, he heard the doubters and the scoffers. But he asked for a quiet place to work where he would not be disturbed.

Every day the king asked, “Well?”

And the determined young man would answer, “Not yet.”

Days passed. Weeks passed. Then one afternoon the young man handed the diamond to the king. Slowly a smile spread across the king’s face, and then a great “Yes!” ricocheted through the palace. The queen, the courtesans, and the knights crowded in for a closer look.

The scratch was still there! But the young man had carved a rose around it, using the scratch for a stem.

—Adapted from Anne Brener
Mourning and Mitzvah, 231-32

You have had a deep scratch—no, a gash—inflicted on you. While you weep, while you wrestle with the realities of life without the one or ones you love, the world goes right on with the joys, the exuberance, the excitement, the frantic panic of the season. “Joy to the world” and “Ho! Ho! Ho!” Only your “Ho! Ho! Ho!” from previous years has turned into “Oh! Oh! Oh!” You’ve learned that it’s possible as a griever to scream, “Christmas? Bah! Humbug!” in your soul; without a person sitting across from you at dinner or the person at the next workstation hearing a sound. You’re wondering—really wondering—“Just how am I supposed to celebrate Christmas this year?” You may want to fast-forward to January 5 or yank the covers over your head, and snarl, “Wake me up when it’s over.” You, too, may identify with words in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s carol:

*And in despair I bowed my head.
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.”*

Longfellow penned those words during the long anguish called the Civil War. But he wrote a fourth (and fifth) verse. Otherwise, the song would not have become a seasonal favorite.

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, goodwill to men.”*

I write this book as a griever. I, too, have experienced seasonal loss. My grandfather died on Christmas Eve. I once worked as an apprentice embalmer in a funeral home on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. I have led “grief gatherings” during the holidays at Saint Luke’s Hospital in Kansas City. I have buried my father. I have buried friends. While writing this book, I buried my mother.

It is hard to do thorough grief work when there are so many distractions. Friends and family seem to invent ways to use the holiday buzz to detract you from your grief.

This book is an invitation—an invitation to Christmas and its companion holidays of the season, which compose a grueling triathlon that begins on Thanksgiving and continues unabated until the last of the bowl games on New Year’s Day. The “Merry Christmas!” and “Happy New Year!” greetings will cause you to wince this year. No doubt, in previous years you relished the season, ready to instantly respond, “And merry Christmas to you too.” But not this year.

I hope these quotes, prayers, scriptures, and reflections, plus the experiences of those who have journeyed beyond the shadow and directly into and through “the valley of death,” will offer you some insight into the map of a grief-soaked season.

I cling to a carol phrase by Isaac Watts:

*He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.*

Yes, even *this* grief-filled season, He will come to you and will “make His blessings flow” through moments, through songs, through scents, through kind acts of caring people, through memories, through hopes.

I hope you will not snarl, lips clenched, “I will get through it somehow!” I hope you will turn it into a prayer: *Somehow, kind Jesus, lead me through this season.* I hope that in some distant day, you, too, will tell how you have overcome, that you will come alongside a fresh griever and say, “The holidays. Oh, yes—I’ve been there and survived!”

I would remind you that a widow is part of this Christmas story. How often we give only lip service to her involvement in the drama of Christmas! Try to find her in a carol or seasonal song. Anna was deliberately as much a part of the story as the wise men, the shepherds, the innkeeper, even the angels (Luke 2:36-38). I would remind

you that the same Simeon who likely said, “Oh, what a cute baby!” when the parents presented Jesus in the Temple also said, “A sword will pierce your own soul too” (v. 35). I remind you that we cannot divorce Good Friday from Christmas. The Christmas story makes sense only when paired with the Easter story.

This is not any baby whose birth we celebrate. This is the Boy-child who would defeat our entrenched enemy, Death. This Infant would grow up to be described as Isaiah stated: “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (53:3, KJV), as Handel’s text for a bass soloist reminds us in his well-known classic *Messiah*.

After experiencing grief, loss, and death (my own and the grief of those with whom I work as a grief counselor), I have come to believe in a Christmas that cannot be limited to 24 hours on the 25th of December. I have come to believe in a future Christmas when all of God's children will be home. I have come to believe that in our first moments in heaven we will realize how much He gave up to spend those years among us, to invite us to spend forever with Him. I believe that His coming locked this world into a loving embrace and that *this* December season He would be as close to us as a griever would allow.

ALTER—RATHER THAN ABANDON—TRADITIONS

Tears are a natural seasoning of the season.

* * *

*Life is the garment we continually alter,
but which never seems to fit.*

—David McCord
in *Familiar Quotations*, 839

* * *

*Let the beloved of the LORD rest secure in him,
for he shields him all day long.*

—Deut. 33:12

* * *

*If we can make a place where memories can be found,
again and again; where stories are told and retold; where
the special moments of our lives are visited again and
again; brought out of the closets and dusted off on the
shelves and walls and end tables; then we can make
a place where the Lord can remind us of the ways*

His grace has found us.

—Peggy Benson

Listening for a God Who Whispers: A Woman's Discovery of Quiet Understanding,
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“We always . . .”

Traditions are a great part of the glory of the three holidays: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day. When I was married, we had a tradition of making chili for friends on Thanksgiving eve. That first year alone, as I mulled over plans for a single Thanksgiving and wrestled with the “What to do?” question, I decided the tradition would continue—only in an altered format. So I made my first pot of chili (“Thank you, McCormick’s!”), recruited five brave friends, and celebrated my first Thanksgiving without a spouse.

You may have a signature tradition in your family, something that your loved one dearly loved or perhaps even started. Should you go through with it?

While there are many people who are not deeply afraid of death, there are multitudes who are afraid of being forgotten. One way we actively remember is by including them through memories in our holidays, through keeping the tradition.

Perhaps you’ve always had a big home-cooked family dinner on Christmas Eve. This year the family could still gather, but maybe go to a restaurant. Or do a light meal, eaten on laps in the den or living room rather than at that memory-soaked dining room table. Or do an “everybody bring something.”

The essence of the tradition—the family together on Christmas Eve—will be honored, but the setting altered. *This year.* Next year you can redecide.

One word of warning: Let people know of the change so they have time to get used to the idea of this specific alteration. Otherwise the “but we *always*” will overshadow the gathering.

* * *