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For a review of the book or an interview with Joni Aldrich, please contact Dottie DeHart, DeHart & Company Public Relations, at (828) 325-4966 or DSDeHart@aol.com.

Facing the (Holiday) Music: Six Helpful Tips to Comfort Grieving Hearts This Holiday Season

If you've faced the loss of a loved one this past year, then a holly jolly Christmas may be the last thing you want to participate in. Author Joni Aldrich offers some heartfelt advice based on her own personal tragedy to help comfort those who are grieving a lost loved one this holiday season.

Winston-Salem, NC (August 2010)—Ready or not, here they come: whether you are ready to face them or not, the holidays are approaching the same as any other year. For most, they represent a time for families to gather, and for Santa to spoil children, and for reflecting on the blessings of the year past. It's a time for special presents to those that you love, and kisses stolen under the mistletoe. Unfortunately, many families across the country will be facing the empty place around the holiday table that was once filled by a beloved spouse, parent, sibling, friend, or child, who was tragically lost to an illness. And what was once a season of warmth and peace is instead filled with sadness, longing, and regret.

Author Joni Aldrich knows that feeling all too well. In 2006, she lost her 45-year-old husband to a rare form of cancer, and found out just how upsetting it could be to face her first holiday without her husband.

“The first holiday season after I lost my husband was awful, because we had so many special traditions that we shared,” explains Aldrich, author of *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm*

Called "Grief" (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1439264935, \$15.95, www.griefbeacon.com). "We had no children together so the holiday traditions we shared essentially stopped without Gordon there. Every Christmas Eve, he waited until I went to bed to fill the stockings and leave presents under the tree," Aldrich remembers fondly. "Without him, Christmas just wasn't the same."

And this year lightning struck again when Aldrich learned the sad news that her 83-year-old mother has terminal lung cancer, and faces yet another season of celebration shadowed by cancer. "The person who filled the void for me after Gordon died was my mother," she explains. "Now, this holiday season my family may face the sorrow of yet another loss—either through anticipatory grief or real grief. One of the pillars that supported me after Gordon died may be leaving me, and from the same killer."

Silver bells and cheery carols can highlight loss just as easily as they can bring good will towards man. Through her own personal experience, Aldrich offers six suggestions for other grieving hearts that might make this holiday season a little easier to navigate.

Make a list (and check it twice). There's no way to avoid it—holiday bliss will smack you in the face at every turn. From the first store decorations in September, until the ball drops on New Year's Day there is no shortage of special occasions to remind you of your loved one. And if each one of these is somewhat painful due to grief, you may find yourself thinking it'll never end. You may wish you could just hide under a rock until the last fruitcake has been thrown away. Unfortunately, it just doesn't work that way. There are others in your family and friends circle—perhaps even children to consider. Aldrich suggests that thinking through the holidays ahead of time will help you to feel more prepared and to cope easier.

"Start preparing early by making a list of the things you may want to keep the same during the season, and those that you want to adjust somewhat—at least for this one holiday season," Aldrich recommends. "Try to dial into your internal comfort gauge ahead of time—what would be too difficult for you this year? Really focus on the answer to that question. For a while, I even dared anyone to give me presents or offer holiday greetings. That was unrealistic and unfair to others. Survival requires looking deep inside yourself to determine what you might do to make this season tolerable, but harmonizing that with reasonable expectations."

Adaptability is your answer for "first" holiday survival. As you start navigating the holiday waters, keep your emotional compass handy. Which way will the wind be blowing today? If you're in a store and feel the need to walk all the way around the back to avoid the holiday decorations, then do it. Yes, you may feel a little silly, but the point is to spare your feelings. If you start writing greeting cards, and find you can't continue—adjust your list of "outs." They're guidelines, not rules. If you're not sure how you feel about an activity, give it a try. If it becomes too painful, alter the scope of what you're doing or just stop it altogether. And don't be hard on yourself about it.

"Think about what you can and can't do in a matter of degrees," explains Aldrich. "Maybe you don't want to put up that 14-foot Frasier fir this year, but can you put up a small fiber optic tree? Will the world stop if you serve lobster instead of turkey at Thanksgiving? The answer is no. Those who love you will completely understand and support your point-of-view—and they may even like changing it up a bit. It's important to stay integrated into the outside world. Never beat yourself up over the 'can't do' list. If it's that important,

ask someone else to do the shopping or cook the goose for you.”

Embrace a balance. No matter what you do, you are going to be overwhelmed by emotions during your first holiday season after a loss. And it’s okay to let the emotions come. Talk about how you feel with your family and children—they are probably experiencing their own painful feelings of grief as well—but don’t let it be the only topic of conversation around your holiday table. Aldrich says that it’s important to try to find a balance between the two. In other words, don’t force yourself to exclude the remembrance of your loved one, just because you think it might be awkward—but don’t overdo it either.

“Trying to keep your emotions bottled up inside can lead to a major meltdown,” warns Aldrich. “Be alert for overloaded senses and remember that grief never fits into a neat timetable. No matter how prepared you think you are or how much of your life you think you may have rebuilt after suffering a devastating loss, grief can still bowl you over with emotion at any time: And it’ll happen at the oddest time when you don’t expect it. The point is that it’s okay to remember those whom you loved and lost through words, pictures, treasures or a kinship of tears. Just don’t let it be the focus of every holiday celebration.”

Replace the sting of loss with the joy of giving. Despite the festive spirit of the holiday season, you may find yourself focusing on what you don’t have. Instead, Aldrich suggests embracing the season of giving by transferring your love and caring to others that are important in your life, such as your children, grandchildren and friends. It’s helpful to focus on the human gifts of love that are still here with us. And it’s a good time to give to neighbors and friends in need.

“Consider giving a donation to your favorite charity in lieu of gifts to the adults on your shopping list this year,” she says. “Or you can opt to adopt a family and help to provide them with a wonderful holiday. If you can’t afford a donation, consider donating some of your time to the local homeless shelter or soup kitchen. Here’s an added bonus—giving to charity makes you feel good about yourself and you can give in honor of your loved one. It’s a special way to give back and honor the memory of the person you have lost.”

Give yourself the gift of counseling. Depression during the grieving process can often lead to a feeling of hopelessness and despair, especially during the holidays. Individual counseling or a support group can help you get through the rough edges. There is no shame in seeking out support to help you through your grief. Often times the burden is too much for you to bear on your own—and a friend or family member may not be able to provide you with the help you need.

“Grief is not about being mentally challenged—it’s about being emotionally challenged,” Aldrich says. “I went to grief counseling that was offered around the holidays after the loss of my father many years ago. That’s when I found out how vital to the healing process it can be. There was something very comforting about simply interacting with a group of people who had also lost their father. That was my first experience knowing that—even though grief is different for everyone—there are commonalities that every person goes through. Often it simply helps to know that you are not alone—that there are other people that are suffering painful memories, too.”

Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Aldrich’s final point is a difficult one, but one that deserves addressing. The holidays are full of emotion, memories, and gatherings with people you may not have seen for awhile. The combination can be overwhelming for someone who is just starting to come to terms with a loss. Each new milestone after losing a loved one can bring all the feelings you’ve worked hard to deal with rushing back—and Aldrich says that for many the burden is just too much to bear. Grieving families sometimes get into accidents or do harm to themselves because they’re in a fog. Watch out for any conscious or

unconscious harmful tendencies. Above all else, if you feel any suicidal tendencies, get help immediately. Call a friend or family member, your counselor or 9-1-1.

“There’s a treacherous balance between appearing superhuman, but underneath being super-depressed,” Aldrich warns. “I painted on my façade very effectively for several years after Gordon died. You have to come out of the charade sometime, and the holidays can force that on persons who are grieving. Don’t force yourself into emotions that just don’t match what you feel. If you feel as though you are slipping into a dangerous place, ask for help immediately. And keep reminding yourself that your loved one wouldn’t want you to be sad or do anything self-destructive while grieving for them.”

“There is a ray of light at the end of the holiday tunnel,” concludes Aldrich. “Each one that passes will be a little easier. New traditions will become cherished over time, but you should still return to the memories with your loved one. I will always treasure the holidays Gordon and I shared together—the memories are still with me, even though Gordon is not. Life is always a combination of good and bad. We should all appreciate the good, and know that when bad things happen, the only way forward is to take one small step at a time. I think of it like walking on shells barefooted at the beach—you must step down gingerly before applying more pressure, or you might get cut by a broken shell. Either way, the wounds will heal.”

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About the Author:

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* and *The Losing of Gordon* for most of her life. In her professional career, she has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. However, her real motivation for writing these books was two years of crisis in the cancer school of hard knocks. She feels it is her destiny to relay this story to readers in a way that will help them in their own cancer journeys.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight*.

For more information, visit www.thecancerlifeline.com and www.griefbeacon.com.

About the Books:

The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95) and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called “Grief”* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1439264935, \$15.95) are available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.