

The After Series: When “Happy Holidays” Doesn’t Apply to You

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By Suzanne Boles



My husband, Bob, loved Christmas. Like many dads who see their kids less frequently after a divorce, he wanted to make every holiday a special time. He loved showering his children with gifts, and when our daughter was born the same rule applied: tons of presents, no expense spared.

On Christmas morning, Bob’s face would light up opening those presents with our daughter. Then it was off to his brother’s house to open more presents with the excited grandchildren, followed by yet another Christmas with his children from his first marriage the next day. My story was different until I met him. I was the little Jewish girl who looked out my window on Christmas daydreaming of what it would look like on the inside those houses with the big green trees and shining lights. So when I met Bob, I eagerly embraced the holiday. It wasn’t until after Bob died,

in 2013, that Christmas took on a whole new meaning. Our first holiday without him was Thanksgiving. It was a somber event with his extended family and all our children still aching from the loss of the man who truly embraced family gatherings and lit them up with his endearing smile. That year, my stepson was living in Vancouver; he didn't come for every Christmas, so I suspected this was one year we wouldn't see him. But it was a surprise when my stepdaughter and daughter said they wouldn't be coming either.

"Thanksgiving was too painful for me," said my daughter. "I can't come for Christmas." I felt gutted. I cried for days thinking about how I would be spending my first Christmas morning alone. I told my sister-in-law I would still join them for the afternoon, but I knew it would be with a heavy heart. As the day drew nearer, I dreaded the holiday music in the stores and on the radio. Every time I turned on the TV there was another show about a happy family Christmas. All I could think of was, "be done with it please!"

On Christmas morning I woke up alone and cried in my bed for an hour. I had moved into a new home that I loved, but there was no sign of Christmas in the house. I had no interest in decorating. I shuffled downstairs in my pajamas and slippers with red eyes. While eating breakfast I noticed my new landline phones sitting in the box on the counter. They still needed to be set up. I opened the instructions and read: "You may want to program your phones to indicate which is which. For example, call one Upstairs or you might call one Bob." I'm not making this up. I had to rub my eyes several times to be sure what I was reading was real. Of all the names they chose, why Bob? In a moment, a weight lifted. I felt like he was sending me a message. "It's OK. I'm here." The morning passed quickly. I dressed and drove to my in-laws' house with my usual tray of sweet treats (store bought for the first time), wine, and some presents. I called inside asking if someone could help me bring in all these things and out came my nieces and nephews hugging and welcoming me.

I sat down and the fuss began. "Suzanne, can I get you a drink?" "Oh, look there's a present for Suzanne from Santa." We didn't give presents to the adults so what could that be? It was a lovely set of towels for my new guest bathroom and a perfect match! Then it was time for dinner. "Suzanne, come here and help with the turkey," said my brother-in-law. While we were eating, I heard, "Suzanne, you're awfully quiet down there. Are you enjoying your dinner?" Followed by a few jokes. After dinner, "Suzanne, come play this card game with us!" What I thought would be the longest evening of my life flew by and before it knew it, it was time to go. My niece walked me to my car. She threw her arms around me and said, "I'm so glad you came."

Bob's family was never demonstrative with affection, but at that moment I realized what was happening: they had been planning this special Christmas for me. It was a wonderful conspiracy that lifted my heart and made me thankful that I did have family and they cared about me. This will be my fourth Christmas without Bob. My children are celebrating again with full hearts. I don't have a big tree and my decorations are minimal. This is the "new normal" life after Bob: I will be alone on Christmas morning, except for my two cats. I'm not the only one who spends Christmas morning alone, and that's OK. I hope you'll remember those who have lost a loved one this year. Reach out and call them. If they don't have anywhere to go, invite them over. No matter what faith, it's a time of year for being with others, caring and sharing.