

For the Loved Ones of Those Who Served & Died

# T★A★P★S<sup>®</sup>

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MAGAZINE



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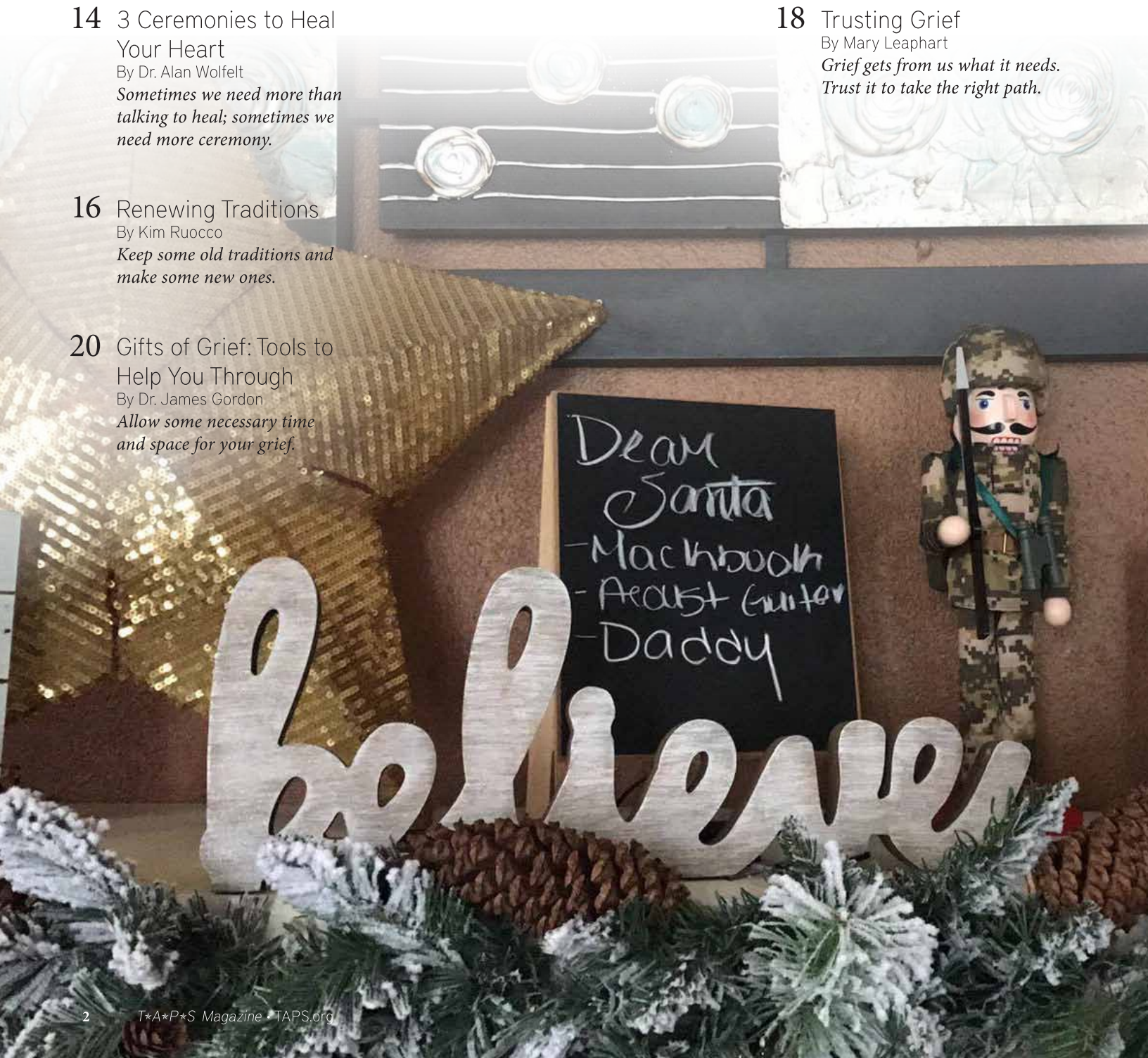
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# Contributors



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Allison Gilbert is one of the most thought-provoking and influential writers on grief and resilience. The author of numerous books including the groundbreaking, "Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive," her work exposes the secret and essential factor for harnessing loss to drive happiness and rebound from adversity. [www.allisongilbert.com](http://www.allisongilbert.com).



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James Gordon, M.D., a psychiatrist, is the Founder and Executive Director of The Center for Mind-Body Medicine, a Georgetown Medical School professor and a TAPS Advisory Board Member. His most recent book is "Unstuck: Your Guide to the Seven-Stage Journey Out of Depression."



Kim Ruocco, MSW is TAPS Chief External Relations Officer for Suicide Prevention and Postvention, partnering with private and public organizations to decrease suicide and increase postvention care for all those grieving the suicide of a loved one. She is the surviving spouse of Marine Maj. John Ruocco, who died by suicide in 2005.



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Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D. serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and has written many books that help people mourn, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death* (co-authored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll). Visit [centerforloss.com](http://centerforloss.com) to learn more about grief and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.



Cheryl Kreutter, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at SUNY Geneseo where she pursues research on the usefulness of reading and writing to open conversations about difficult topics such as grief. She, her husband Paul and children, Jennifer Conrad and Navy Lt. Adam Kreutter, are surviving family members of Navy Lt. Jason P. Kreutter.

## On the Cover

*We find comfort and joy together. Whether you're near or far, connect with your TAPS family this holiday season. TAPS is here for you.*

from the founder

# Home FOR THE *Holidays*



To our TAPS family,

As the holidays approach, we come together as a family to honor our loved ones and find comfort in each other's care. TAPS is our home for the holidays, our soft landing and safe space, an organization created to help us remember the love, celebrate the life and share the journey together.

Whether this is your first holiday without your loved one, or it has been many years, we remember and honor the precious life lived. We cherish traditions and create new memories together. We light a candle in memory of those we love, and we take time to quietly honor the gifts they have given us.

A turning point in my own grief came when a very wise woman asked me if my husband "had enriched my life." Overwhelmed with thoughts of all the ways Tom had truly touched my life, I went on and on about the unconditional love, the laughter, the life lessons, the passion, the patriotism, the purpose... all ways he had "enriched my life." She began to smile as I leaned forward and shared with increasing enthusiasm. When I finally took a breath, she very wisely asked, "Well, then. What are you going to do now with all those riches?"

This holiday season, reflect on the riches we have been blessed to receive from those we love, and take a moment to think about how you are going to embrace the treasures they have given you.

The lives of those who we love and remember and honor are etched, not just into a granite marker at a gravesite, but carved into our soul, imprinted on our hearts and woven into the fabric of our nation. They enrich our lives, they make us stronger, they inspire us and, in that way, they are eternal.

With love and hope,

*Bonnie Carroll*



# TAPS

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## TAPS is here

24 HOURS A DAY / 7 DAYS A WEEK

- ★ The National Military Survivor Helpline
- ★ National Peer Support Network
- ★ Quarterly *TAPS Magazine*
- ★ Connections to Local Grief Support
  - ★ Casework Assistance
  - ★ Education Support Services
  - ★ TAPS Online Community
  - ★ Grief Education Materials
- ★ Survivor Seminars and Retreats
- ★ Good Grief Camps for Children

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# TAPS

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# Letters *to* TAPS

## Using Grief as a Tool

My first experience with a TAPS event was an Inner Warrior Wellness Weekend and it forever changed my life. It was the turning point in my grief journey where I took control of my debilitating grief and now use it as a tool to achieve wellness.

Sharon Forbes, Virginia  
Surviving fiancée of John McNulty

## Healing with the Support of Others

There just aren't enough words to express my appreciation for all the support I've received since I lost my son. I couldn't have endured the past nine months without your involvement. From the very first point of contact to your most recent support, TAPS goes above and beyond. Your caring assistance floods my heart with hope in human kindness and healing in many ways that I can't describe. Thank you for all that you've done for my family and me. I'm blessed to have the TAPS family as an integral part of my journey.

Laura Bernal, Indiana  
Surviving mother of  
Marine Lance Cpl. Nathaniel Sosa

## Feeling the Warm Embrace of Family

As a TAPS family member, I've personally been welcomed with open arms, allowed to cry with no judgment, laugh out loud, feel like a teenager, have pajama parties and talk about Jason with a smile. I've received the highest level of support humanly possible by women that actually know exactly what I'm feeling.

Angelina Lester, Kentucky  
Surviving spouse of  
Army Veteran Jason Lester



## Making Grief A Little Easier

Reaching to TAPS in my early grief was the best thing I have ever done. I don't know where I would be without the help, support, and love from TAPS. The organization helped me to get counseling with the VA and also helped my mom in Puerto Rico. All this helped make the grieving process smoother. I have attended a few regionals and two National seminars, which helped me connect with other survivors especially siblings. Siblings connection is very special and necessary in this journey. I learned to talk about my brother, share my story, and live while honoring and celebrating his life.

Ideliz Mora-Cruz, South Carolina  
Surviving sister of  
Army Sgt. Geraldo Mora-Cruz

## Setting the Standard

I was familiar with TAPS, but never looked into it. When I received an email about volunteering for the National Military Suicide Survivor Seminar, I researched, talked to past mentees, and knew I needed to be a part. It was a long, exhausting weekend, but I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else. I've met amazing people who have impacted my future. Thank you, USAA, for the opportunity and setting the standard of your employees serving the community. TAPS will forever hold a special place in my heart. I know I belong to another family and I hope to see some of you again soon.

Articia Hunter  
NMSSS Mentor

Please email your Letter to TAPS to [editor@taps.org](mailto:editor@taps.org).

hope

# Slogging in the *Snow*

| By Kelly Griffith

| Surviving sister of Maj. Samuel Griffith

# *Grief is a journey – a long journey. It can so often appear lonely, but there are others on the journey with us.*

Crunch.

Crunch.

Crunch.

As the snow compacted beneath the weight of my heavy boots, I began to cry.

I was tired – exhausted really – covered in layer upon layer of brand name cold weather gear and yet still shivering from the amount of sweat rolling down my back. Ice crystals formed on my eyebrows and lashes. It hadn't stopped snowing since I'd arrived three days earlier for a siblings retreat, and there was no sign of it stopping anytime soon. I started questioning my decision to head out that morning. I wanted it to end so badly.

And I realized – this moment symbolized the grief I felt after losing my brother Sam.

A group of other surviving siblings and I had decided we'd brave the elements that morning and set out in search of what promised to be a beautiful frozen waterfall. With Boy Scouts in the group, I figured we'd be out for an hour, see this picturesque part of the winter scenery and be back in time for some of the finest coffee before the rest of the day's retreat events began.

I was wrong.

We'd been gone three and a half hours. My fingers numb, my nose unable to stop running. I had made myself miserable. I tromped through the knee-high snow, picking my feet up as high as I could get them and fitting them into the places where others had already blazed the trail. Some places I had to twist my feet and ankles to fit. Others, I had to tiptoe to avoid the mounds collapsing around my boots and sending icy cold snow up my pant legs.

And it reminded me of those moments of grief – those ones when you start crying and the tears won't seem to stop, when every part of your being hurts. It feels as if an actual hole exists within your chest. And yet, you're the only one who can see it.

It's as if your world just came to a screeching halt and threw you from a place of safety into some slow motion world of the unknown. It's a totally different place, where every movement feels like slogging through the snow.

As I continued to trudge on, pushing myself with every muscle that hadn't seized up in the cold, I picked my head up just a bit. I stopped in my tracks, making the other siblings behind me stop as well for a welcome break. I saw a beautiful tree – waving its branches in the wind and just waiting for me to notice it.

It had lost all its leaves. It was covered by the same never-ending snowfall. Its branches were whipped to and fro, yet somehow it

stood out as beautiful. The Aspen stood tall with smooth, greenish-white bark and black marks that accented it. How could something stand out in the midst of so much snow and so much slogging? I couldn't get over the stark contrast between its beauty and the ugly cry I had going on at that moment. And then I started to notice the other leafless trees around it. This beautiful tree wasn't alone.

Maybe this could symbolize my grief too.

Maybe I could find strength, not just in myself, but in the others on the journey with me. They knew what it was like to lose someone so crucial to their lives. Maybe I could find a little hope in knowing the footsteps had been laid in the snow already. And with each crunch of my own feet, maybe I could make that next step just a little bit more bearable for someone walking behind me.

Honestly, my revelation didn't magically make the rest of the hike easier. I didn't have a renewed sense of purpose or a second burst of energy rush through me. It still hurt to slog. We never even found the waterfall. But I knew I didn't have to endure it alone, and that made all the difference.

Grief is a journey – a long journey. It can so often appear lonely, but there are others on the journey with us. Sometimes, we need to stop, take notice of what's around us and find comfort in the companionship.

# Your Best *Holiday* Playlist

“Music is one of the strongest tethers we have to the past,” Kenneth Bilby, former director of the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago, tells me. “It’s a critically important carrier of memory.”

With this notion in mind, I’ll reveal a story about my family I recently shared publicly for the first time:

My uncle dictated a note to me one day before he died. Richard was my dad’s younger brother and he’d been sick for a while. He was 70 years old and my father had been dead more than a decade by the time I became Richard’s primary caretaker.

Richie, as our family called him, went to the Peabody Conservatory at Johns Hopkins University and was a great lover of music throughout his life. He founded the music label “Grenadilla”, and his company produced acclaimed discographies and was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1978, in the category of Best Arrangement for Voices. He also performed a clarinet recital at Carnegie Hall, the event so large in his memory, he often told my brother and me it was the happiest moment of his life.

The note was my idea. Sitting at his bedside, feeding him cherry Jell-O and urging him to take even a sip of water, I asked my uncle for a list of his favorite pieces of music.

I thought I’d benefit – indeed all his family and friends could benefit – from his deep reservoir of knowledge. And I knew we’d feel closer to Richie after he died if we could enjoy these songs and arrangements knowing he once took pleasure in them too. I was to type up the note and email it to his closest friends and family after he passed away. And I did. It was one of the most important and joyful emails I’ve ever written.

This year, a few years after my uncle’s death, I pass along his expertly curated list to you:

*Music is one of the strongest tethers we have to the past, it’s a critically important carrier of memory.*

By Allison Gilbert

Author of “Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive”





RICHARD ALLEN GILBERT – “Some of My Favorite Listening”

ARTIE SHAW – “Begin the Beguine”

MOZART – “Sinfonia Concertante for Violin/Viola”

MOZART – “Piano Concerto #21”

MOZART AND BRAHMS – “Clarinet Quintet”

BACH – “Brandenburg Concerto”

BEETHOVEN – “Violin Concerto”

SAMUEL BARBER – “Adagio for Strings”

HOAGY CARMICHAEL – “The Nearness of You”

JOAQUIN RODRIGO – “Concierto De Aranjuez”

STAN GETZ – “Focus” (entire album)

JOHN LENNON – “Imagine”

Brahms – “Piano Concerto #2”

MUSICALS – “Fiddler on the Roof,” “Sound of Music,”  
“West Side Story”

This playlist brings back wonderful memories of my uncle and me. You can read more in, “Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive,” where I talk more about the importance of music in remembering.

What music did your loved one enjoy most? Make a playlist and then consider sharing it. A commemorative playlist can make an especially thoughtful holiday gift.

There are many types of playlists you can create: music you listened to together, songs your loved one enjoyed, even a genre of music they liked – classical, hip hop, r&b, country. Update these playlists whenever you think of a new piece of music to add.

The holidays are filled with gatherings and festive music. But maybe you’re thinking, “I don’t want to be festive.” I get it. And I have news that may bring you solace. Holiday festivities don’t have to be shared events. As odd as this may sound, it’s possible to celebrate quietly and privately.

I love the idea of setting aside time, alone, to honor loved ones who’ve died. This could simply mean putting on a favorite radio station and looking through old photos. It could include lighting a candle, taking a bath and listening to a favorite song. You may find that by carving out moments to embrace these cherished memories you’re better prepared to face the headwind of holiday parties. Purposeful commemoration is fortifying.



## A Playlist for Our TAPS Family

TAPS has a playlist of music. Through the Saturday Morning Message, you can find a link to the “Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors Songs of Love and Remembrance,” songs suggested by surviving military loved ones and compiled by surviving father Andy Weiss. The playlist provides an opportunity to connect with your loved one and your TAPS family throughout the holiday season. If you have a song you’d like to submit for consideration, please email [online@taps.org](mailto:online@taps.org).

healing

# Honor THE MEMORIES

By Zakees Baker | Surviving son of Sgt. Jevon Jordan



I choose to celebrate those things that made him smile most – the things that made simple moments into ones of heartfelt memories to cherish.

As the holiday season sets in, I'm reminded of so many special memories of my father, Sgt. Jevon Jordan. I'm reminded of his love of family, sense of duty to serve and that smile on his face when he'd take the first bite of lemon meringue pie. And while the memories can and do bring pain, they're matched by the purest sense of joy as I think about our happiest moments together. Since his death, I've found ways to honor those memories and celebrate his life at the holidays and all year round.

I choose to celebrate those things that made him smile most – the things that made simple moments into ones of heartfelt memories to cherish. We have photos of him all over our family's home – from his time as a civilian, showing off his beard or dressed in his Sunday Best with my mom at church, to his time in the service and the moment when he was headed to the plane for his last deployment. I even keep photos of him on my cell phone, and one in particular gives me goosebumps when I pull it up. Sandwiched between my sister Michelle and me, dad held onto us tight in the photo taken in Virginia Beach when I was much younger. Seeing our smiles brings back memories of him as a prankster – jokey and so funny.

We also choose to cook and eat meals we know he would love. That lemon meringue pie – it's not my favorite by any means. Actually, no one in my family loves it, but every so often you'll catch our family all in the kitchen rolling out pie dough and whipping up the most beautiful meringue peaks. As we sit down to eat my dad's favorite dessert and I let the sugary tartness of it touch my taste buds, I try a little more each time to convince myself that I love it as much as he did. Even though it's still not my favorite, I appreciate every bite. And if only for a moment, it feels like I'm once again sitting across from him at the dinner table at Fort Stewart, Georgia, and watching him laugh and enjoy our family.

Especially at the holidays, we love to watch movies. I'll sink into the couch and feel the warmth of a blanket tucked in tightly all around me. The popping of popcorn and buttery smell that fills the house reminds me of my dad's love for movie nights when we would all huddle on the couch together in our pajamas. Now, we watch Kung Fu movies and comedies, and I imagine him sitting right there with us and quoting parts. I can even hear him saying "Kick rocks" and "Hey, Mo" from the Three Stooges.

I have found solace in social media posts. I let the gratitude of November and Thanksgiving seep into how I share my dad with the world. Sometimes, I may post to Facebook and share my thanks for my dad's service. Other times, I may

I've learned there's nothing wrong with shedding some tears. In fact, it's necessary to my healing. But I match it with a smile to start my next day and a reminder to myself that I'm growing and healing, even in the most difficult moments.

just post a photo with no text. My mom posts on social media as well. She shares her journey and tells us what comments people leave. My family and friends like the pictures and comments. They share how these little reminders bring his humor and personality to life. And often, they in return post about moments they shared with my dad. This kind of connection reminds me our family isn't alone in missing him.

Most of all, I've found comfort in carrying on the values he taught me. Coming from a military family, we were taught discipline, duty and resilience. And I have carried that with me. I know he would be proud of me.

In late 2015, my little brother's sickle cell anemia diagnoses became dire. It was clear he would need surgery, and we were told

he would need a bone marrow transplant. I knew I had to step up. My other siblings had all left home in pursuit of their dreams, and I knew my dad would have looked to me to support my mother and younger brother. I chose to make my own sacrifices. Just as my dad sacrificed and it set the example for me, I needed to be an example for my little brother to put family and duty first. Over 70 nights in the hospital and 130 days since his surgery, I'm doing my best to hold my head high and support my mother and younger brother through another one of life's most challenging experiences. It has been worth it to see my brother smile and to know that he and I will both look back on these moments and have our own memories to cherish as siblings. And I know deep down there will be better days. Each day that is fraught with frustrations and trials will be the catalyst for even more gratitude down the road.

I've learned there's nothing wrong with shedding some tears. In fact, it's necessary to my healing. But I match it with a smile to start my next day and a reminder to myself that I'm growing and healing, even in the most difficult moments.

TAPS has taught me so much about that healing. Being able to connect with other surviving children – both those who are now adults and the children who are just starting their grief journey in Good Grief Camp – has made such an impact on my life. TAPS has become my family. And it's taught me that I can honor my dad and celebrate his life, even if it requires me to eat another slice of lemon meringue pie.



# TRICARE *Changes* Coming Soon

Those surviving spouses and children eligible for TRICARE can expect to see stories of changes to the military's health care system in the coming months, as mandated by the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act.

The current TRICARE Standard and TRICARE Extra plans will be merged into a single plan, called TRICARE Select. The various TRICARE Prime programs may each experience some changes.

One of the most obvious differences for eligible families on the new TRICARE Select plan is a requirement to enroll, which was formerly the case only for TRICARE Prime. The 2018 year will be considered a transition period. Beneficiaries will be automatically enrolled on Jan. 1 for the 2018 year only if they already have a plan or are eligible as of Dec. 31, 2017. Additionally, changes can be made to the plan selected throughout the 2018 transition year.

Although 2018 is being treated as a transition year, beneficiaries will need to enroll for 2019 and beyond during an open enrollment period each November and December. Changing plans outside of the open enrollment period will only be allowed if you have a qualifying life event. Beginning in 2020, TRICARE Select will also have an enrollment fee.

Because of the new open enrollment period, the plan year now begins on Jan. 1 instead of Oct. 1. This means your deductible will reset on Jan. 1, 2018, and you don't need to meet a new deductible between now and then.

TRICARE Select beneficiaries also will now pay a flat fee for a doctor visit rather than a cost share.

Other changes include combining the North and South regions into a new East Region, changes to regional contractors, expanded coverage and improved access, including extended hours with certain

providers. To prepare for these changes, beneficiaries can:

- Check current information in DEERS and update their records with any new information.
- Update payment information if the beneficiary uses electronic payments.
- Sign up for TRICARE benefit updates via email.

New provider directories are now available, and the new regional contractors' call centers are open to address enrollment questions. For more information on the ways specific changes may affect you, or to sign up for email updates, visit [tricare.mil/about/changes](http://tricare.mil/about/changes).

As always, the TAPS Casework Assistance team is here to help you navigate these waters.

## How TRICARE Changes will Impact Eligible Surviving Spouses and Children:

### **All surviving spouses and children currently on TRICARE**

are included under any "grandfathered" categories referenced in enrollment fees or elsewhere. "Grandfathered" beneficiaries are those whose service member entered the military before Jan. 1, 2018; note this is the date the military member began service and NOT when family members entered survivor status.

**Surviving spouses** remain eligible as a "transitional survivor" for three years following the sponsor's death and will have active-duty family member (ADFM) benefits and costs. After three years, surviving spouses remain eligible as a "survivor" and pay retiree rates under TRICARE Prime or the new TRICARE Select.

**Surviving children** whose sponsor died on or after Oct. 7, 2001 remain eligible for TRICARE benefits as an ADFM. Unlike spouses, eligibility won't change after three years, and children remain covered as ADFMs until eligibility ends due to age limits (an unmarried child under age 21 or under 23 if a full-time college student) or for another reason, such as marriage. Children with disabilities may remain eligible beyond normal age limits.

### **Surviving spouses and eligible children**

of retirees will remain on retiree status as a beneficiary. For now, TRICARE Prime enrollment fees will remain unchanged, but if the beneficiaries have been using TRICARE Standard, they will be subject to the new TRICARE Select rules.

### **TRICARE Young Adult beneficiaries**

will experience no changes if enrolled in TRICARE Prime, but if the beneficiary has been using TRICARE Standard, will be subject to the new TRICARE Select rules.

### **TRICARE For Life beneficiaries**

will experience no changes.

| By Kathy Moakler



## FEBRUARY

Texas Regional Seminar  
February 23-25  
*Fort Hood, Texas*

## MAY

National Military Survivor Seminar  
May 24-28  
*Arlington, Virginia*

For a complete list  
of upcoming TAPS  
events and to register,  
visit [taps.org/events](http://taps.org/events).

## JUNE

California Family Retreat  
June 15-19  
*Julian, California*

★

Mid-Atlantic Family Retreat  
June 22-27  
*North Carolina*

★

California Regional Seminar  
June 29-July 1  
*Los Angeles, California*

## JULY

Tennessee Family Retreat  
July 30-August 1  
*Bolivar, Tennessee*

## SEPTEMBER

Colorado Regional Seminar  
September 7-9  
*Denver, Colorado*

## OCTOBER

National Military Suicide  
Survivor Seminar  
October 5-8  
*Tampa, Florida*

## NOVEMBER

New Jersey Regional Seminar  
November 2-4  
*New Brunswick, New Jersey*



Join your TAPS FAMILY in 2018

# 3 CEREMONIES TO HEAL YOUR HEART

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

When a death is sudden and unexpected, as is typically the case with a military death, it's that much more difficult. Immediately after the death, those affected by traumatic loss typically exhibit psychic numbing. They're present physically, but not necessarily mentally or emotionally. In other words, they're in shock. This protective mechanism is nature's way of protecting them from experiencing the full force of the loss all at once. The reality of their loss was so overwhelming that they simply couldn't fully absorb what was happening. Did you experience this?

If so, this means, of course, that you also may not have been able to fully absorb the funeral. The normal and necessary shock may have buffered you from both the horrible reality of the death and the funeral's healing functions.

Those customs – the eulogy, the music, the readings, the reception – all the ceremonial elements help us transition from life before to life after the death. What's more, the funeral's structure holds us up when we might otherwise collapse. It gives us a meaningful process to step through, tasks to accomplish, rites to follow, places to go and people to support us.

Funerals are not really rites of closure but rather initiation. Good ones help us get started. I hope the funeral for your loved one met your needs and helped you on the

path to healthy mourning. Regardless, perhaps you might consider that sometimes, one funeral – no matter how personalized and meaningful to family and friends – is simply not enough.

*Ceremonies* help us acknowledge the reality of death, remember the person who died and provide a time of social support. They can help us search for life's meaning and our own continued existence.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDITIONAL CEREMONIES

The funeral has long since passed. What can we do now? I trained for 13 years as a talk therapist, and over the decades I've counseled those in mourning who've been waylaid in the months and years after a traumatic loss. Talk therapy is helpful, but I've learned it's often not talk therapy that traumatized mourners need most. Instead, it's more ceremony.

Ceremonies help us acknowledge the reality of death, remember the person who died and provide a time of social support. They can help us search for life's meaning and our own continued existence.

I usually recommend that families affected by traumatic death hold three ceremonies spaced out over a period of about two years. If more than two years have already elapsed, that's OK. Additional ceremonies will still help. Time alone does not heal grief; active mourning does. But psychic numbing does dissipate over time, allowing you and your family to engage more and more deeply with your grief as time elapses.

## A SIMPLE GATHERING

I invite you to consider having a second ceremony about six to eight months after the death. If more time than that has already gone by, simply hold the second ceremony soon. Sometimes a significant date makes sense, such as the birthday of your loved one or the anniversary of the death.

For the second ceremony, I often recommend a simple candle-lighting ceremony in your home. Invite close friends and family to gather around a table on which you've placed photos and memorabilia of the person who died. You might begin your ceremony with a piece of music and read one or two short prayers or poems. Each guest can hold a small candle and



*I hope you*  
will try having one,  
two or even  
more additional  
ceremonies in  
honor of your  
loved one  
who died.  
The ceremonies  
can be as  
elaborate or as  
simple as you want.

light it as he or she shares a memory or thought. A prayer, song or piece of music makes a good close.

There are no set rules. Your ceremony can be religious or secular, in keeping with your beliefs. As long as the ceremony helps you explore all the healing functions of the funeral, it will foster continued movement toward reconciling your grief.

#### A RESTING-PLACE CEREMONY

The third ceremony is often best held somewhere between 18 and 24 months after the death – or, if more time has already elapsed, about a year after the second ceremony. I often recommend a gathering at the gravesite or place of permanent memorialization. Again, readings, music and memory-sharing

turn a gathering into a meaningful ritual. Re-dosing yourself with the purposes of the funeral – reality, recall, support, expression, meaning and transcendence – is a powerful healing elixir.

I hope you will try having one, two or even more additional ceremonies in honor of your loved one who died. The ceremonies can be as elaborate or as simple as you want. I hope you'll continue to participate in community ceremonies on holidays, like Memorial Day, Flag Day and Veterans Day.

I have found that such rituals help people who feel stuck in their grief get unstuck, and for those already on a healthy mourning path, it provides them with continued divine momentum toward healing.

# Renewing Traditions

By Kim Ruocco  
Surviving spouse of  
Maj. John Ruocco



As the holidays approach I am flooded with memories of Christmases filled with laughter, love and special family togetherness. My husband John always took the holidays seriously, and his enthusiasm was infectious.

One of my favorite memories is from when the children were little, maybe 3 and 5 years old. We couldn't get the boys to sleep and we had a lot of wrapping and toys to put together. John had a Santa suit – because you never know when you'll need one. He decided to put the suit on and stomp on the roof so I could tell the boys Santa was here and they better get in bed. As I was shooing the boys to their rooms I heard stomp, stomp, stomp and then bang, I glimpsed on the gutter of our two-story home in Virginia. I tried to shield the boys as they started screaming and running to their beds. I got them in bed and ran out front to find John in a disheveled state in the bushes. He looked up at me and said, "Did it work?" and I replied, "Yup, get out of the bushes. We have a lot of work to do."

I miss those days of teamwork, mischief and traditions. When John died, I was left with a huge legacy to continue and the fear that Christmas would never be as special as it once was.

John's absence made it difficult to celebrate Christmas, Thanksgiving and Halloween. For our family, he was a larger than life figure that embodied a massive part of our holiday spirit. Moving forward, it was tough to balance incorporating John's memory as we strove to honor old traditions and develop new ones. Family members and friends lent support and enabled us to find a creative balance as we sought to reignite our holiday spirit.

Quite honestly, that first year, I just wanted to cancel it all. I couldn't imagine facing it with out him and I didn't have the energy or desire to try. I relied heavily on my family and just went through the motions in a numb state.

The second year, I unpacked the Christmas boxes with the support of my family. Each bulb and each decoration held a cherished memory. It was both painful and cathartic. I got to his stocking. The one his mother knitted. It had his name across the top – John. I looked at it and cried. What would I do with it? How could I use



it? I looked at the other stockings pinned across the fireplace – Joey, Billy, Kim.

This was us, our new little family. Where did John belong now? It felt like a pivotal decision. He will always be part of us, but it's different. I carried the stocking around the room, trying to put it in different spots – the wall, the door. Finally, Joey said, "Put it up with ours, Mom. We will just put different things in it now."

"Like what?" I asked. And Billy said, "I don't know. Anything. Notes to him, drawings. It will be a place to remember him."

I put the stocking next to the rest and this is how it began, the balance of our old life and our new. After 12 years, we seem to have found ways to survive the loss and honor the life. Every family is different, but for us, there are five principles we follow:

### 1. Incorporate Some Old Traditions

If you have particular rituals or traditions at the holidays, it's important to keep some of them. When we lose a loved one, we often wonder how the world can keep going on without them. We are tempted to cancel everything because they will not physically be there. Part of moving forward is figuring out how to take them with you. Traditions are one way to do that. One of our traditions was to open one gift on Christmas Eve. We didn't do that the first year, and the boys missed it. The second year, we started doing it again and it felt good! Another tradition, started by John, was to hide a baby Jesus in the Christmas tree and the boys had to find it before they could open gifts. The boys and I talked about this and they didn't want to keep it, but every year, on Christmas morning, someone will say, "Remember when Dad used to make us find baby Jesus?"

### 2. Make New Traditions

Making new traditions slowly helps us understand that life does keep going and we are going to be OK. Some new tradi-

tions come out of necessity. For our family, getting a Christmas tree seemed like an overwhelming task after John's death. John's Brother Neil and my sister-in-law Blair offered to come with us to pick it out and to help us put it up, and I was so grateful for their help. We had so much fun doing it together that it became a tradition that the boys and I looked forward to every year. Another new tradition resolved the long-time struggle over what Christmas lights to put on the tree. John always loved the big colored lights, and I always wanted the small white lights. In memory of John, we bought strings of big colored lights and every year put them on the Douglas Fir in our backyard. Every time I look at that brightly lit tree I think of him and smile.

Making new traditions slowly helps us understand that life does keep going and we are going to be OK. Some new traditions come out of necessity.

### 3. Honor And Remember Your Loved One

There is an empty seat at the table – a sad and painful reminder of what's been lost. You want to acknowledge it, but you're not sure if you should. I have found that planning a specific remembrance really helps decrease anxiety and incorporates John into the day. Whether we light a candle, say a prayer, tell a funny story or just say his name out loud, we remember John on special days. And that has been an important part of our healing.

### 4. Respect Each Other's Grief Journey

If there is one thing I have learned, it's that everyone grieves differently and respecting that is a crucial part of rebuilding. Some people may be ready to participate in a remembrance and others may not. The key is to be patient and supportive with each other. I can remember a time when I wanted everyone at the table to tell a funny story about John. A couple people didn't want to participate. At first, I was insulted

and thought they were being selfish. In my mind it was important for my boys to hear these stories and for us to talk about John on this special day. What I discovered was that one person who didn't participate was afraid he would cry and didn't want to do that in front of others. Grief is a funny thing, it comes in waves and changes over time. Joining together in acceptance and understanding that each of us is on our own path helps decrease bad feelings and increase bonds with one another.

### 5. Be Gentle with Yourself

One of the most challenging parts of the holidays after loss is the expectations we put on ourselves. I couldn't imagine how

I was going to recreate the holidays my children had come to love. The pressure I put on myself made me anxious and overwhelmed. I started to see that this anxiety trickling down to everyone in my family. And I realized the people around me just wanted me to be OK. They didn't expect a fancy, over-the-top holiday; they were worried about me, and seeing me stressed was

causing stress in them. So, I stopped trying to wrap all the presents, and I just put a tag on them. I bought pies instead of making them from scratch. I decided not to send Christmas cards, and I spent that extra time watching "ELF" with my children – over and over again. The laughter we shared while watching that movie in our pajamas, my long list thrown aside, gave me hope that we will be OK.

Suffering a loss is devastating and the approaching holidays can feel overwhelming. Having a plan can ease anxiety and provide a road map for the way forward. There isn't a "right" way to heal. We must each find our rhythm and take one step at a time. In my family's experience, following the five guidelines of incorporating old traditions, making new traditions, honoring and remembering loved ones, respecting each other's grief journey and being gentle to oneself has been a great place to start.

# Trusting Grief

By Mary Leaphart | Surviving daughter of Col. Daniel Leaphart

Growing up, my family treasured spending time together during the holiday season. Even as my siblings and I headed off to college one-by-one, we were all expected home for the holidays and our traditions were preserved. But, when my brother joined the Army and received an assignment in Germany, our tradition became harder to keep.

One Christmas Eve, Mom, Dad, my two sisters and I prepared to celebrate Christmas without my brother. He had been stationed in Germany for a while, so we had grown accustomed to having an empty seat at the table during other holidays, but his absence at Christmas was a new experience and sure to leave a big hole in our celebration.

My sisters and I decided to make stained glass cookies, using Life Saver candies as the “glass” in the middle of each one, but soon discovered we didn’t have enough Life Savers. Undeterred, we continued our holiday baking with a different cookie, but our dad insisted on going to the store to purchase more Life Savers. This was Christmas Eve; most shops were closed and we had other cookies we could bake,

but he was adamant about getting more Life Savers – as if the fate of Christmas depended on those stained glass cookies.

Much to our confusion, he grabbed his winter coat and rushed out the door. Our confusion only grew as the hours passed with no sign of Dad and when he did finally arrive, he returned without any Life Savers. Instead, he returned with my brother following behind him as a Christmas surprise. Little did we know the fate of Christmas did depend on those Life Savers. Over the years, our special Christmas surprise has turned into a lasting family joke about “that time Dad went searching for Life Savers.”

## *When plans don’t work out*

Last December, we prepared to face another Christmas with an empty seat at the table – this time without Dad. He passed away six months earlier and we were preparing to celebrate our first Christmas without him. I struggled to think of a way to honor him. Doing something sappy wasn’t representative of our dad – while he was so kind and loving, he often wasn’t one for big public displays

of emotion. And, honestly, I wasn’t sure our family could take another blow of reopening those wounds – sending us each spiraling into our raw emotions.

Then I remembered that Christmas long ago and Dad’s hunt for Life Savers. I decided we could all make those stained glass cookies together on Christmas Eve and remember our dad and the great lengths he went to demonstrate his love for us.

I bought plenty of Life Savers. I made sure we had the proper cooking supplies. I even discussed the plan with my family. And then Christmas Eve arrived.

We had dinner together; the adults opened their one Christmas Eve present, while the kids opened all the gifts from their aunts and uncles. We got dressed in our best and piled into cars to attend Christmas Eve service at my sister’s church. As I sat down in the pew next to my niece and brother-in-law, I prepared to enjoy my favorite of our family traditions.

But, as the choir began singing the first song, I started to cry. And I didn’t stop. I

didn't stop when the carols finished. I didn't stop when the service began. I cried even harder when the pastor read the Christmas story from the same passage my dad would read every year on Christmas Eve. I kept crying as the service ended and on the 30-minute drive home. I continued crying when we got home and I took my dog KC for a walk.

The ache of dad's absence was simply more than I could bear and it felt as if all the anger, sadness, anguish, grief, confusion and sheer pain I had bottled up for the last six months came rushing out of me like a tidal wave I couldn't control.

walked with KC slowly through the silent chill of the dark night to a small dog park. I sat down to let her sniff around the park, but she quickly returned to lay down at my feet – staying until I was done “letting it out.” She knew I needed her comforting presence beside me. We sat there together and for the first time, I allowed myself to cry until my tear ducts could no longer translate my pain into tears.

I walked back and silently joined the rest of my family back inside. We never talked about it, and we never baked the cookies.

about it, and we never baked the cookies. I think each of us, processed our grief in our own way that day – it seemed all too individual. It was as if talking with the group about missing Dad might shatter our family like the thin layer of candy glass that once decorated the tops of our sugar cookies. And yet, I don't regret leaving the cookie project behind.

I believe we can trust grief – it may not always do what we expect; it may make us feel as if we're losing our minds, and it may take us down paths we don't want to go, but it always knows what it's doing. Even when I have a plan in mind for how I am going to navigate a “first,” an anniversary or any other special day, and it doesn't go the way I planned – I simply trust that grief is taking me where I really need to go. It gives me what I need for that moment, and I give myself grace to trust the process.

### *Trusting the grief*

Seven months later, my family – Mom, brother, sisters and their families – gathered in the mountains of Tennessee for a week-long vacation together and the first anniversary of Dad's death. I had another plan to honor Dad, but after the failed attempt at cookie

making, I think my family was skeptical. And honestly, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to follow through when the time came.

But this time, I was ready. My family spent a lovely day exploring a historical site that our dad would have loved. And when we returned to our cabin, I had prepared index cards and three helium balloons with American flags decorated for Independence Day. I invited those who wanted to join me in writing notes to Dad. Some did and some didn't, but everyone joined me as we attached the notes to the balloons and released them. We shared our memories of the man who impacted each of us so much.

We stood in the silence and the weight of the moment for quite some time, as we watched the balloons float away, each of us taking from the experience just what we needed. This time, honoring Dad was what I needed. It was a sweet tribute and a special time that I'll always carry with me.

Through this journey, I'm learning that we can make plans, but sometimes those plans will change. If we trust the process – if we truly trust our grief – to take us where we need to go, our hearts and our minds will start to heal along the way.

*If we trust the process –  
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to heal along the way.*



# Gifts of Grief:

## TOOLS TO HELP YOU THROUGH

By James S. Gordon, M.D.



Grief is part of being human. Sooner or later, it makes its appearance in our lives, no matter how unwanted it is.

Attending the National Military Suicide Survivor Seminar, I was struck even more by how important it is for us to honor the process of grief. We have to see it as a part of life and let it take its course. There are no shortcuts; there's no getting around it. There are gifts we must give ourselves after we've faced a loss: time and space to grieve and support from others.

### Give Yourself Time and Space

Create a time and space when and where you're able to grieve for the loss of your loved one. Societies have created rituals and periods of time in which it was expected that people would grieve. Too often we act like grief is an exceptional event, but it's something that comes to all human beings.

We all need a time and place to talk about those we've lost. This allows us to express sadness and also tell the funny stories. We

need the time and space so the different ways we grieve are all seen as part of the process. For one family, that may mean going to family gatherings less frequently, because extended family members act so anxious and self-conscious around them. At TAPS meetings, by contrast, they feel welcome, without worry or judgement.

### Find Social Support

Build up your social support – a “social embrace” – that honors you as you're

# Physical movement, emotional movement, mental movement, social movement – it's important to let yourself feel movement, and the change it brings, after your loss.

grieving. TAPS helps with this. I've talked to so many of you who've said having a place to come and share – both early on and long after your loss – is so important. Whether it's as part of the online community, in a care group, at a retreat or sitting and reading your TAPS Magazine each quarter, TAPS provides a place to be with others who understand the experience of grief and loss, who don't tell you to get over it. Instead, TAPS brings you into the fold to support you and embrace you through the mourning.

After we give ourselves those gifts, there are other techniques and tools we can use to help us through grief.

## Breathe Slowly and Deeply

Years ago, while working in Israel, I trained those who deal with psychological trauma. I worked closely with a group of ultra-orthodox Jews called the ZAKA, who inform families after there has been a violent death. The recovery of remains oftentimes made them anxious and they wanted to learn to quiet themselves. Today, they use the slow, deep breathing I taught them as well as sharing it with the families they have to inform of a loss.

One of the things that happens when we're grieving is we become anxious and agitated. In the beginning it's fine, but over time we need to be able to relax and quiet ourselves. Otherwise it can get in the way of our healing. Slow, deep breathing allows us to come into a quiet space where we feel the grief but are not overwhelmed by anxiety and agitation. It helps balance the nervous system and allows us to focus. This also can help us get to sleep at night.

## Share Your Feelings

Whether you bring out your feelings with someone you trust, like a grief professional or a peer, or record them in a journal, allowing yourself to acknowledge your own feelings can be powerful. Starting your grief journey, you may feel that nothing will ever change – that all hope is lost. But over time, feelings will change and what's on your mind will change. If you feel things beginning to change little by little, then you're simply going

through the process of mourning. If you write them down, you'll have a record of the change which will help give you hope that other changes are also possible.

## Create Rituals

At the National Military Suicide Survivor Seminar, I was amazed by the ongoing ritual of honoring the loved ones who died – not just after the death, but also throughout the year. Regularly, when families and friends come together many find a way to honor the loved one. Whether it is a candle lighting ceremony or a special planting of a tree, finding a ritual can help the healing.

## Eat Healthy

The kinds of food we eat matter. When we're grieving, we tend to eat for comfort – those fatty, sugary foods that may make us feel better in the moment. But after a while, they can actually create more stress and make us feel more anxious and depressed. Getting our diets in order and eating healthier foods can help us feel better for the long haul.

## Get Moving

When someone suffers a loss, he or she can experience a state of physical or emotional shutdown – a kind of frozenness. You may feel detached or overwhelmed, or you may not feel anything. But over and over, in my time of working with grief, I've seen people thrive through physical activity.

I've taught TAPS family members about shaking and dancing. It may sound crazy, but it can be helpful just getting up and shaking your body from your feet up through your knees and into your chest and shoulders for a couple of minutes, resting and then moving the body again to music. It provides a way to take away

tension and bring life back into your limbs. It also allows you to bring out emotions you may have suppressed. In my book, *Unstuck: Your Guide to the Seven-Stage Journey Out of Depression* I provide a step-by-step description of Shaking and Dancing and the other techniques for moving through grief, relieving your stress, and enhancing your resiliency.

## Try Your Hand at Drawing

At the seminar, I asked participants to draw themselves, their biggest problem and what things looked like with their problem solved. This exercise allows us to mobilize our intuition and imagination, to discover new ways to heal ourselves.

The solution may be meditation or spending time in nature or writing in a journal. We're all different. The idea is to discover what makes you feel better. When I've gone through the process of mourning, I set aside time everyday to cry. For a year, I gave myself 20 minutes each morning to cry and mourn my loss.

## Feel the Movement

Physical movement, emotional movement, mental movement, social movement – it's important to let yourself feel movement, and the change it brings, after your loss. All the techniques you use should encourage this process. The movement may feel slow, but progress is progress. Sadness may still show up, when memories come, or at times when you're alone, or on the anniversary of your loved one's death, or at the holidays. You may cry; you may feel overwhelmed at times. But little by little, you can feel yourself move through the grief. Though feeling these emotions is painful, allowing yourself to feel them is part of a natural healing process.

# Surviving the Holidays Without You

## NAVIGATING GRIEF DURING SPECIAL SEASONS

By Gary Roe

Reviewed by Cheryl A. Kreutter, Ph.D.

The holidays may be particularly difficult for those grieving a loss of a loved one. Hospice chaplain Gary Roe's "Surviving the Holidays Without You: Navigating Grief During Special Seasons" offers readers ways to cope by sharing insights he has gained during his own grief journey. In simple narrative form, Roe recounts the special days such as birthdays, Thanksgivings, Christmases, wedding days and anniversaries when his grief was especially sharp. He acknowledges there were times when he felt isolated, lonely, vulnerable and deeply sad. From these experiences and his 30-year work history in ministry, he has developed insights about surviving the holidays that may offer hope to his readers.

HE PROVIDES READERS A ROADMAP TO THE TEXT WITH THESE "GRIEF TRUTHS AND TOOLS":

- **HOLIDAYS ARE HARD. PERIOD.**
- **THIS YEAR'S HOLIDAYS WILL BE DIFFERENT, BUT THEY CAN STILL BE GOOD.**
- **ALONE TIME IS GOOD. ISOLATION CAN BE DANGEROUS.**
- **FOR THE HOLIDAYS TO GO WELL, YOU MUST TAKE YOUR HEART SERIOUSLY.**
- **YOU GET TO CHOOSE WHAT YOU DO, WHEN AND WITH WHOM.**

Building on these "truths and tools," each chapter starts with a line or two meant to

encourage readers to take an active role in managing their grief by voicing or writing ways they can approach the holidays. Chapter one begins with "Even with my loss, this holiday can still be good. I'll begin by managing my own and others' expectation." Chapter two offers, "Safe people will help me stay grounded and sane. I will find and treasure them." These remarks set the stage for deeper exploration of how one might approach surviving the holidays. Throughout the text are other adages that readers may embrace. One that stands out is "The grief you feel is part of saying 'I love you' to the one you've lost."

Thought-provoking questions are included at the end of each chapter with space to jot responses. These are useful for reflecting on the past chapter and developing a mindset for upcoming chapters. In "How to Make Wise Choices," chapter five, the author asks the reader to "Make a list of your typical holiday activities. Label them according to whether they are traditions, obligations, habits or want-tos. Does anything strike you about your list?" These questions encourage readers to categorize and examine what can be realistic expectations of themselves. Roe also cautions readers to avoid "The Santa Syndrome;" that is, believing that "perhaps if you give, give, give, you can escape the pain." He offers this advice instead: "Guard your heart and don't get

**SURVIVING  
THE HOLIDAYS  
WITHOUT  
YOU**  
NAVIGATING GRIEF  
DURING SPECIAL SEASONS



GARY ROE

sucked into attitudes and activities that are not healthy for you right now." Finally, honoring loved ones during the holidays starts with identifying what they loved and what you loved about them. Making adjustments to holiday traditions does not mean you are leaving loved ones behind. Rather you are taking the power into your hands by finding creative and healthy ways to move on with them.

While there are religious references near the very end of the text, they are minimal and nonintrusive. The sage advice of the author, his open and easy-to-read style, and his gentle reminders to take care of oneself will be applicable to any audience.

# The Gift of Mentorship

| Pete Doty |

We can all remember that special gift - the one we were excited to buy for another. We went to the store with a smile, imagining its recipient's expression as he or she opened the package.

In the first two years as a TAPS Military Mentor, Air Force Col. Peter Doty had that experience. He came into the TAPS fold after losing a close friend in the spring of 2010, hoping to carry out the battlefield promise of taking care of fallen battle buddies' families. His very first mentee, Libby, was the surviving niece of a Marine, but she saw her loved one more as a big brother.

"She was just a sweet kid who cared so much about her uncle and was trying to cope in her own way," Pete said.

Pete and Libby just clicked. It was a huge eye opener that first Good Grief Camp for Pete to see the incredible amount of both

strength and compassion Libby had. And while she has special needs, Pete said Libby had so much to give.

"There was an eagerness there to connect - whether it was with me or with other kids."

Pete was inspired by Libby. Even more than giving back to her, he felt like he was gaining so much from the experience.

"There's an amazing click that goes above and beyond between a mentor and mentee; they really mean so much to each other," he said. "And the holidays can reinforce that."

That Christmas, Pete wanted Libby and her family to continue to feel connected with

him and their military family. And, Pete admits, he wanted them all to enjoy a little friendly competition between the military branches too.

From northern Virginia, where he is stationed on active duty, Pete drove to Quantico to buy his mentee and her sister Marine Corps shirts, but he made sure to include a couple Air Force t-shirts in the package he sent them as well.

Humble, he feels like his holiday gift may not have been that special. But the "TAPS magic" of the relationship between mentor and mentee has lived on through that gift and special text messages. He still maintains the greatest gifts are the kids he gets to see come to TAPS and grow in the care of grief professionals and TAPS Military Mentors.

"To be able to spend a weekend, or a long weekend, with the mix of incredible kids who've gone through extraordinarily difficult situations but continue to be resilient and caring to each other...it's really fulfilling."

To find out how you can volunteer with TAPS, visit us at [taps.org/volunteer](http://taps.org/volunteer), or email [volunteer@taps.org](mailto:volunteer@taps.org).

## We want the **TAPS MAGAZINE** to reflect

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The *TAPS Magazine* is our family publication, written by survivors and grief professionals with the goal of offering help, hope and healing. We'd love to hear from you so we can continue to make this magazine as helpful as it can possibly be, and we hope you'll take a moment to share your thoughts through a short survey. It will only take about 10 minutes.

Thank you for helping us ensure the *TAPS Magazine* meets the needs of you and your family.

Go to [taps.org/magazinesurvey](http://taps.org/magazinesurvey) to take the survey and help us make the *TAPS Magazine* all about you.

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*Light a candle this season for remembrance and hope. Let its glow stand as a reminder of the precious light given by our loved ones and the warmth and care of your TAPS family.*

