

Beginning New Traditions

By Paul Taylor

Making it through the holiday season after the death of a spouse is indescribable. The sheer loneliness is overwhelming, especially after 32 years of marriage and raising four children. Traditions that had been created and shared change instantly and irrevocably.

With a second holiday season fast approaching, I'm given to pause and to think about how so much has changed in my life since my late wife Judy passed away in July 2007. Judy was finally beaten by a foe that she had fought for more than seven years - cancer. The doctors gave us the news in May 2007 there was nothing more they could do.

While Judy was in her last few weeks of life we had a second jolt. My doctor was concerned about something found during a normal check up and sent me for further tests. The news was devastating. I also had cancer & we decided I should undergo surgery while Judy would still have the ability to care for me.

In early July, I underwent surgery. While the surgeon was optimistic everything went well, I developed complications which kept me in the hospital. I finally made it home, but by then Judy began a rapid slide and was gone six days after my coming home.

My life was in chaos. I was weak and scared. I was lucky to have two of my boys home for the summer and they worked very hard to take care of me. But I was alone in my thoughts about what had happened to a well ordered life full of love and happiness.

Nothing can prepare you for the lonely hours you have and the nights which seem will never end. I was weak and in my children's eyes I saw fear. They had lost their Mom. Was their Dad next?

These days were the hardest of my life.

As time moved on, I began to think of how I should start putting my life back together. I've always been an optimist at heart, and by late fall some of the numbness of Judy's death began to fade. The intense pain was still there and so was the loneliness, but with my health improving I was able to return to work. I threw myself into work so I wouldn't have time to think too much about anything, and for a while I was able to just coast along.

November came, and I knew I would have to think about the coming holidays. Did I want to celebrate Thanksgiving at all?

Over the years, the Thanksgiving tradition was to have a large extended family gathering. I talked it over with my son Jon who was living in Rochester. He felt we should have a Thanksgiving Day dinner and volunteered to make the dressing if I did the Turkey. My son Jeremy said he would drive home from Long Island.

The three of us sat down to a Thanksgiving dinner, and we talked about all the excellent dinners their mom had put together. We laughed because it turned out we had done a pretty good job of pulling off a Thanksgiving dinner, and if Judy had been here she may have wondered why we men couldn't have cooked more dinners in the past!

Now what to do about Christmas? I didn't want to think about it, but when my daughter Jessica called and asked if she and her family could come for Christmas, I couldn't say no. It meant having my two grandchildren here. Jeremy called and said he would be home and so would my oldest son James and his wife.

I began thinking maybe the joy of Christmas had a chance of finding its way into my home. All four of my children were together for the first time in many years. It was a full house in many ways. Laughter and love were in abundance, and I think Judy would have been pleased.

Yet even with the family gathered I felt alone.

The loss of a spouse is indescribable. I know I hadn't fully appreciated how much we had as a couple for 32 years. We had raised a family of four children, established many traditions and spent many a Christmas Eve wrapping presents and putting them under the tree. It was a great life together.

The holiday season is difficult time of the year for those of us who have lost a spouse or any loved one. And I believe it is important to find ways of spending time with others.

One way I have found to be of great help is the support I have received through Lifetime Care and their caring counselors. Their programs as well as the weekly support group have been a lifeline – literally. They provide a safe place where I can both offer and receive support. I have established wonderful friendships which I will draw upon this Christmas season to carry me through the inevitable periods of sadness that are a part of my life.

If I have learned one thing from what I have been through it is this: Savor the time you have with your family and friends because they provide the foundation on which our lives are built.

Paul Taylor, who lives in Rochester, participates in bereavement support programs offered by Lifetime Care. This essay originally appeared in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle's "Your Health" section in November 2008.