

CHRISTMAS AFTER LOSS

A Place at the Table

*Making room for the people
we miss at Christmas*



Matt Ball

A free sample

Thank you for taking a look.

This is the first chapter of *A Place at the Table*.

I hope it gives you a feel for the book, and whether it might be helpful for you this Christmas.

Matt 

Chapter 1: A season built on the people we love

I sit with grieving families all year round, as a celebrant and as a grief coach. Sitting with people in December always feels different.

There are decorated trees around every corner. There are lights in the windows of the houses wherever you turn. Someone in the family has already bought presents, and now one of them will never be opened. Every December, I watch families step out into a world that's getting ready to celebrate, carrying the heaviest thing they've ever carried.

I feel the weight they carry, and I think of my dad.

Because Christmas was a season he loved. He loved it for his faith, and he loved it for family. When I picture him at Christmas, I see him singing the carols with all his heart, lost in the moment. That picture is a gift. It's also the reason December can catch me off guard. One carol in a supermarket and there he is.

I also see him chatting to everyone around him, enjoying the joy in the room, enjoying being with the people he loved. But now his presence is missing from those rooms at Christmas. And that catches me off guard too.

If you're holding this book, I'm guessing you know the feeling too.

Everything points to togetherness

Christmas is the one time of year when the whole world seems to agree on what matters. Every advert. Every song. Every film. They all say the same thing. Be with the people you love.

The songs are pumped out in the shops, on the radio, in the adverts. The adverts show people sharing happy times, sharing meals, opening presents, rejoicing together. The TV plays Christmas specials and films, new and old. There seems no getting away from Christmas and its message of love and family.

So of course it hurts.

You're being told, everywhere you turn, to gather round with the people you love. And one of the people you love isn't here. So everywhere you turn becomes a reminder that the one you'd want to share the season of goodwill with is no longer with you.

It isn't that you've forgotten them the rest of the year. Grief is there in March and in July too. But Christmas turns the volume up. It takes the gap they've left and puts a spotlight on it.

You're far from alone in feeling this. In a YouGov survey of more than 30,000 people in the UK, one in five said Christmas is the hardest time of year to deal with losing someone they love.

And unlike a birthday or an anniversary, which most people around you won't even know about, Christmas is everywhere. There's nowhere for grief to hide.

Your brain is still expecting them

Mary-Frances O'Connor is a grief researcher. Her work helped me understand something I'd seen in hundreds of families, and in myself.

Our brains build a kind of map of the people we love. Where they are. When we'll see them. What they'll do. That map is how we know, without thinking, that Mum will ring on Sunday, or that he'll be in his chair when we get home.

For years, your brain has been learning that they'll be there at Christmas. Their voice in the kitchen. Their present under the tree. Their seat at the table. Their laugh when the crackers are pulled. All the traditions they were always a part of.

That learning runs deep. It doesn't undo itself in a year, or even in several. So when Christmas comes round, part of you is still reaching for them. You might set out one plate too many. You might pick up a card in the shop and then remember. You might hear a song and turn to tell them.

That isn't you being stuck in the past, or failing to accept what's happened. It's your brain doing exactly what brains do. It loved them, and it learned them, and it's still catching up.

Traditions are where love gets stored

Think about the things that made Christmas *your* Christmas.

Maybe it was the stuffing they always made, and nobody else's was quite right. Maybe it was the film they insisted on watching every year, even though everyone knew the ending. Or maybe it was the way they hung the decorations, everything in the same spot, every single year. The song they sang a bit too loudly. Their favourite Christmas tippie, and the one too many they'd have on Christmas Day.

Traditions are where love gets stored. Year after year, we put a little more of ourselves into them. That's what makes them precious, and something we look forward to every year.

It's also why they can feel unbearable now. When you open the box of decorations, you're not just opening a box. You're opening years spent with them.

But I've come to believe, from my own Christmases and from sitting with so many grieving people, that the same traditions that hurt so much now can, in time, become one of the ways you keep them close. The love stored in them doesn't go anywhere. It waits for you.

It waits to remind you of all the joy you shared over the years. All the times you sat and laughed at the ridiculous cracker jokes. The afternoons you snoozed on the sofa together after the turkey. All the little moments that were just yours.

The world wants you to be happy

Christmas comes with expectations. Be merry. Be grateful. Be together. Join in.

The cards say it. The jumpers say it. The office party, the school nativity, the neighbours with the lights on the roof. Everyone seems to be counting down, and everyone seems to expect you to be counting down with them.

When you're grieving, those expectations can feel like a weight on your chest. You might feel you have to put a brave face on for everyone else. For the children or grandchildren, so their Christmas isn't spoiled. For the family who are trying so hard to make it nice for you. For the friends who ask how you're doing and look relieved when you say "fine".

You might feel guilty for not enjoying it. And then, if you do laugh at something, or find yourself enjoying a moment, you might feel guilty for that too. As if being happy for a minute means you've forgotten them.

If that's you, you don't have to be merry. You don't have to pretend. Christmas is allowed to be hard. And if a good moment comes, you're allowed to have that too. A laugh at the dinner table doesn't mean you loved them any less. Tears in the middle of the carols don't mean you're falling apart. Both are part of loving someone who isn't here.

None of this means you're doing grief wrong

People sometimes ask me, often in a whisper, whether it's normal to feel this bad at Christmas. Whether they should be further along by now. Whether there's something wrong with them because everyone else seems to be coping.

There's nothing wrong with you.

Grief doesn't keep to a calendar. And Christmas isn't an ordinary few weeks. It's a season built on love, full of memories, and played on repeat in every shop, on every radio and on every screen. Of course it stirs everything up.

So if it hurts, it's because you loved someone, and Christmas is a season built on love.

That isn't a problem to fix. But I don't believe the answer is to grit your teeth and get through it either. Or to shut Christmas out altogether and hope it passes quickly.

There's another way. A Christmas where the people we miss aren't ignored, and aren't the whole of it either. Where they still have a place. Where we remember them, talk about them, and show our love for them, while still enjoying the people who are here with us. Where nobody minds if there's a tear at the table, and nobody minds if there's laughter too.

You don't have to work out how on your own. We'll find our way there together, one chapter at a time.

Something to try

Notice where they are.

Over the next few days, keep a note on your phone or in a notebook. Each time something about Christmas makes you think of them, write it down.

A song on the radio. Their favourite chocolates on the shelf in the supermarket. The smell of mince pies. A film on the TV guide. A phrase someone uses that they always used to say.

Don't try to change anything. Don't judge yourself for how often it happens. Just notice, and write it down.

By the end of the week, you'll have a list. It might be longer than you expected. Rather than a list of things to avoid, think of it as a map of all the places your love for them still lives. We'll come back to it later in the book.

For you

What made Christmas feel like Christmas when they were here?

The rest of the book

The full book goes on to cover:

- Not the elephant in the room: giving them a place without it taking over
- Ways to remember them, express your love, and honour them at Christmas
- How to talk to your family before the day, so nobody is left guessing
- The cards, the presents, the decorations and the empty chair
- Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and the moments that catch you
- If you're on your own this Christmas
- What to say when other people don't get it
- The days after, New Year and January

A Place at the Table is an ebook, £5.99. You'll get it straight away by email, and it opens on your phone, tablet or laptop.

You can get the full book at **grievewell.uk/christmas**

If things ever feel like too much, Samaritans are there day and night on 116 123.

Grieve well, live well. Matt 