

BLUE CHRISTMAS

MEDITATION:

HOW SHALL WE REMEMBER

Rev. Robert J. Voyle, Psy.D.
2012

This meditation is based on the understanding of grief presented in *Restoring Hope: Appreciative Strategies to Resolve Grief and Resentment* by Robert J. Voyle. It can be purchased at www.appreciativeway.com

With gratitude to Steve Andreas, www.realpeoplepress.com who taught me how to help people resolve their grief.



The Appreciative Way

ENABLING INNOVATION AT THE *SPEED OF LIFE*

www.appreciativeway.com

BLUE CHRISTMAS MEDITATION: HOW SHALL WE REMEMBER

The following meditation is based on the understanding of grief presented in the book *Restoring Hope: Appreciative Strategies to Resolve Grief and Resentment* by Robert J. Voyle.

How Shall We Remember

One of the basic assumptions of Restoring Hope is that the core issue is not “*what*” we remember but “*how*” we remember. To remember means to “put back together into consciousness.” How we assemble or structure things in consciousness such as pictures or sounds determines our emotional response to these memories.

The Structure Of Memories

We use parallels of our five senses to represent experiences in consciousness.

- We may “see” pictures or visual images of a beloved in our mind.
- We may “hear” their voice or other sounds.
- We may “feel” or “sense” their presence.
Note: feel as a sense is a bodily sensation such as touch, pressure, temperature, rather than an emotion. All the senses contribute to how we feel emotionally about an experience.
- We may “smell” their perfume or other scents we associate with them.
- We may “taste” foods associated with them such as “Gran’s apple pie.”

For most people the visual sense is the most well developed and powerful in its impact on our emotions. We have the ability to process montages of pictures but we are typically not very skilled in processing montages of sounds or feelings. Because it is typically the best developed, we will use visual imaging as the core part of this process.

Within the visual modality we also have sub modalities such as color, intensity, size, and location that play a big part in the emotion each picture evokes. By location we are referring to “where in our mental space” the image is located and not where was the original scene located such as at the beach or eating at a restaurant.

To help people understand location in their mental space, invite the person to do the following privately in their own mind. You will not

*For I am convinced that
neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers, nor
things present, nor things
to come, nor powers,
nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all
creation, will be able to
separate us from the love
of God in Christ
Jesus our Lord.
— Romans 8:38-39*

*You needn't be trying
to comfort me,
I tell you my dolly is dead!
There's no use in saying
she isn't,
with a crack like that
in her head.
— Margaret Janvier*

*Looking back with
happiness isn't a problem.
Its the inability to look
forward with happiness
that is the problem.*

need to know the content of their memory, what you want to help them discover is the structure of their memory

- Get a picture in your mind of a person you care about...
- Now get a picture of a person you don't care about, (why you don't care about them is irrelevant to this exercise)...
- Now look at both pictures at the same time...
Which picture is on the right and which is on the left?..
- Notice what happens if you switch them...
Most people will either find that they switch right back or that it intuitively feels wrong to have them organized that way.
Invite them to switch the pictures back to how they "should be."

- Which picture seems closer to you?..
Most people will report that the person they care about is closer and they will describe themselves having a "close relationship with the person. They are also likely to have a "distant" relationship with the person they don't care about. A few people will have the picture of the person they don't care about closer than the person they care about. This is invariably because they do not trust this person and as the saying goes: "keep your friends close and your enemies closer." They literally need to keep an eye on this person.

These sub-modalities have a big impact on our emotional response to the death of a loved one. For example, when a person is able to remember a deceased loved one in multiple colorful pictures that are located within an arms reach of the person in their mental space they are likely to feel gratitude and love for this person being in their life. On the other hand when people report "losing" a loved one they are likely to have faded pictures that seem very distant and unclear, to the point that they can barely be seen, and the person may report feeling very sad, empty, or alone.

When People Can't Visualize

Some people report that "they don't have pictures" or "don't visualize very clearly." Sometimes this may be simply due to the fact that they have never reflected on how they remember or "put things back together in their consciousness." Rather than get them to try to visualize, which typically is very counter productive, invite them to do the following:

- "I realize that you don't get pictures in your mind, but take a moment and imagine the picture you would have if you were able

*In the night of death,
hope sees a star,
and listening love can
hear the rustle of a wing.*

— Robert Ingersoll

*Only those who avoid love
can avoid grief.
The point is to
learn from grief
and remain vulnerable
to love.*

— John Brantner

*Even if happiness
forgets you a little bit,
never completely forget
about it.*

— Jacques Prévert

*To spare oneself
from grief at all cost
can be achieved
only at the price
of total detachment,
which excludes the ability
to experience happiness.*
— Erich Fromm

*Misery is a
communicable disease.*
— Martha Graham

*If ever there is tomorrow
when we're not together,
there is something you
must always remember.
You are braver
than you believe,
stronger than you seem,
and smarter than you think.
but the
most important thing is,
even if we're apart,
I'll always be with you.*
— Winnie the Pooh
(A. A. Milne)

*Love is something eternal;
the aspect may change,
but not the essence.*
— Vincent van Gogh

to visualize... Tell me about the picture you imagine you would have if you were able to visualize... How big is the picture... Is it in color or black and white... What is the content of the picture... Who is in the picture and what are they doing... etc.

Most people who have difficulty visualizing will easily be able to talk about the picture they imagine they would have if they could visualize, and using the picture they imagine they would have will work in the meditation exercise.

This Is Not How I Want to Remember

When people are watching a loved one suffer a protracted death that involves pain and wasting many will say: "this is not how I want to remember the person." Unfortunately for some people these last painful memories cloud all the other memories of the person. When this happens the person will not be able to access earlier, happy memories of the person. The good news is that they don't have to remember the person this way. We get to choose how we remember.

This is not to deny the person's suffering, however we need to hold the memories of the suffering in the wider context of the person's life and all they have done and represent to us. One devastating picture does not need to obscure many other pictures. In the meditation exercise we will help people regain control over how they remember so that one or two distressing memories do not obscure the helpful memories.

Integrating The Bad

No one is completely good or completely bad. In addition to memories of a loved one suffering, grief can be complicated by "bad" memories or memories that evoke pain and distress because of failures in the relationship. Often at the time of death we will "not speak ill of the dead" and a false representation of the person will be presented. What we want people to be able to do is remember but not relive these difficult times. The ability to painlessly remember difficult times will allow the person to use the experience as a guide for how they want to live in the future. Denying the memory, because it is painful, is likely to cause the person to continue to duplicate these experiences in their future. In the meditation exercise we will integrate these difficult memories into a total understanding of the person.

Dealing with more difficult relationships is beyond the scope of this exercise and the person may need to do the trauma and forgiveness exercises that are outline in ***Restoring Hope***.

To Remember With Love and Gratitude

One of the biggest obstacles to resolving grief is a person's fear of forgetting their loved one. This is especially so for people who have lost children. Their ongoing sorrow is a sign of their love and that they have never forgotten their child. The idea of being happy in this moment or in the future, given that their child is dead, is repulsive.

There are two things we can do to help people through this challenge.

- Reassure the person that they will not forget, the really big question however is "how do they want to remember?"
- Do they want to "remember their loved one with love and gratitude for what they shared," or do they want "to not forget by being miserable?"

For example a person may have introduced their partner to the joys of the symphony. Now that the person is dead going to the symphony is a reminder of who they have lost and is just a place of misery. On the other hand the person can be helped to go to the symphony and not only enjoy the concert but remember with love and gratitude and what a lucky person they are to have known someone who introduced them to this great form of music.

The Blue Christmas Meditation

On the following pages is the script of the meditation, take some time to familiarize yourself with the form and some of the language patterns. Then put it into your language. Here are some specific tips.

- Slow down! Give people time to do the work as indicate by the "...". Watch people's head nods and non verbal cues to sense when to move to the next step.
- You don't need to spend much time explaining why you are going to do the meditation or how it works. Just do it!

Goals for The Meditation

- To be able to freely access our memories of people we have lost with a sense of love and gratitude for the life we shared without having these memories elicit sadness or distress.
- To be able to use our memories as positive resources to create a new preferred future that includes the reality that our loved one will not physically be in that future.

*Teaching people
about grief may
help them feel better
about being miserable,
but they will
still be miserable.*

*At times our own light
goes out and is
rekindled by a spark
from another person.
Each of us has cause
to think with
deep gratitude
of those who have
lighted the flame
within us.*

— Albert Schweitzer

*Death leaves a heartache
no one can heal,
love leaves a memory
no one can steal.*

— From an Irish headstone

Instructions: The following introduction is all that is necessary to lead into the exercise.

I would like to invite you into a meditation to remember your loved one. In the meditation you will be invited to have a picture of them in your mind. Some of you may not visualize very well. If you are like that just imagine you do have a picture in your mind and work with the image that you imagine you would have if you were able to visualize. OK...

1. Invite the people to remember a special time with the person.

Remember a special time with your loved one, the way you would like to remember them...

As you remember them be aware of what you are seeing and what you are hearing... as you remember this special time...

Many of you can probably remember going to a movie theater and in the foyer of the theater there are large posters that have an archetypal scene from the movie... That in one picture the entire essence of the story is portrayed...

And now as you remember this special time with your loved one allow a poster of that special time to form in your mind... as an archetypal picture of your loved one...

2. Optimize their image of the person.

Invite the people to adjust the picture in size and color to create a robust image of the person

Now you can play around with the picture. Is the picture in color or black and white?...

Try changing it to color or to black and white and see what happens to your sense of the person... Most people report that having it in color makes the image feel more real and tangible. Just play with it until the picture looks right to you...

This is all about how you want to remember them...

Now play with the size of the picture, make it slightly bigger and see what happens...

You will want the picture to at least be life size...

3. Deepen the memory by talking of the persons qualities that are reflected in the picture.

Now as you look at the picture, remember what you really loved about them...

Remember their qualities that you really valued and appreciated about them...

And as you remember these qualities remember other times you got to share those qualities...

And notice the good feeling you have as you remember them now...

4. Pixelate or tile the image to add multiple good memories and qualities.

You may recall seeing pictures or posters that when you get up close are actually hundreds if not thousands of little pictures... like a mosaic with hundreds of little tiles... or a quilt with many pieces of material... or a tapestry of many threads...

Take some time to convert the picture of your loved one into a mosaic or a quilt and make each little tile or piece of fabric a picture of the person at many times doing the things that you loved and valued...

Keep adding tiles to the picture as new memories of what you deeply loved and valued comes to mind...

And in this holiday season you may want to add pictures of holidays gone by...

of joyful times of loving and sharing...

And you may like to add sounds to the pictures, such as conversations or shared music..

Now step back from the picture so you can see the image of the person containing all those qualities and assess your memory of the person, how has it changed?...

And notice what happens to your sense of the other person when you do that...

5. Dealing with bad memories or pictures.

No body is totally good or totally bad for that matter... We don't want to ignore or deny that bad things have happened. What we want to do is give you a choice about how and what you remember, and especially to be able to remember in a way that resources you for your future.

Allow your memory to find any pictures of bad or difficult times you may have had with the person... In fact you could think of the worst experience you had the person...

And as you remember the experience be aware of how you are you remembering...

Is it a picture or movie?... and does it have sound?...

Pay attention to the qualities of the images such as size or color rather than the content of the images. What we will do is adjust the "how" you remember rather than "what" you remember...

Actually if we changed the content of what you remember we would be inviting you to become delusional... We can't change the past, but we can change how we remember...

Before we adjust the picture or memory, take a moment and see what you can learn from the experience... Sometimes after a bad experience a person may say "I will never do what they did," but that it isn't always helpful. It is actually more helpful to know what you would do in place of what the other person did, rather than be aware of what you don't want to do...

So take a moment and allow yourself to learn what you will do if you experience something similar in the future... And you can take a moment to be glad that you are smart enough to learn from these difficult experiences...

Now shrink the distressing memory down until it is a very small, still picture, maybe black and white, or sepia toned like really old photos... and allow it to be just one of the many hundreds of pictures you have on your mosaic of the person that you love...

And be aware of what happens to your sense of the other person when you do that...

7. Dealing with other difficult or painful memories.

Often when people die the last few days or weeks of their life can be very painful and distressing... and you may think that 'this is not how you want to remember them...'

The good news is that you can remember them any way you want...

If you have some unpleasant pictures shrink them down until they are small, still pictures, maybe black and white or that old sepia tone...

When they are really small add them as a tile to the mosaic of the person...

So these experiences are just one small part of the total way you remember the person... and they don't obscure your ability to see all the other experiences and qualities that you deeply love...

Now that you have dealt with these memories, allow your mind to wander over other times with the person that were painful or distressing and do the same thing...

Change the pictures into small pictures and add them to the large image of the person...

Now step back from the picture with all the little pictures and see the person as a complete whole... as you want to remember... containing all their qualities that you love... and without denying anything was not so good...

As you look at the picture remember their qualities that you really enjoyed...

8. How we remember and dealing with death as a liar.

One of the things that often happens when a loved one dies is we can become very afraid that we will forget them...

Well I can assure you that if you have really grieved the death of someone you will never forget them...

But here is the really important question: How do you want to remember them?...

You can remember them with love and gratitude and can consider yourself one of the luckiest people on earth for the privilege of knowing them and sharing life with them or you can not forget them by being miserable...

Remembering is how we put somebody back together in our mind...

Jesus gave us communion to remember or put him back together in our minds...

One of the things we know is that death is robber, it steals our loved ones away from us, but death is also a liar, because it says I have stolen their love from us as well...

Don't believe the lie, love is eternal, it never dies, you haven't stopped loving your loved one... and they haven't stopped loving you... you can live in the presence of that love all the days of your life and beyond, just as the person you love can...

And even though they are gone from this world, you can remember them anytime you want...

And you can remember and put back together their love in your heart any time you want...

And you can remember and put back together any other quality they have that you want to remember.

9. Storing the picture.

Now that we have created this picture we need to store it somewhere, where you can access it any time you want to...

It makes sense to keep it somewhere in your body, because then it will be with you wherever you go...

Allow your inner wisdom help you to decide where you want to store that picture so that is always accessible to you...

Take a moment and let the picture go into that place...

10. Imaging the future.

Take some time now to think of some possible times in the future when you will "catch" yourself doing something that reminds you of the person...

Or seeing someone doing something that reminds you of them...

And allow that warm feeling of fondness and gratitude to come into your mind...

and into your body...

And you get that twinkle in your eye and remember, 'I know who introduced me to that'...

or 'showed me how to do that'...

and see the picture of the person...

and remember that feeling of being loved...

And now take a moment to imagine what it will be like stepping into your future with this awareness of being loved and of loving...

And with this ability to remember and put back together in your mind your loved one, any time you want...

any way you want...

any where you want...

And now in your own time let your attention come back into the room...

and as your attention comes back to the room, allow your attention to bring back with it that sense of your loved and be grateful that you can remember them...

Additional Steps.

If you were using this with an individual to help resolve their grief rather than as a group meditation you may want to specifically check the outcome of the process. This process has proven effective for integrating "difficult deaths" into the entire memory of a person, rather than allowing the difficult memory to overwhelm all other memories.

11. Check the outcome.

Take a moment and remember your loved one and see if you can get the feeling of distress back...

When they can't get the feelings back:

I want you to try really hard to get the feelings back...

12. If they can still feel the distress.

If they do get the feelings back or there is still some distress, go back through the steps to find what aspect of the distress still remains, for example:

- Are there other objections to adjusting the pictures and changing how they are remembering?
- Are there other aspects of the memories, such as sounds, that are evoking distress. If so convert the sounds to "silent" black and white pictures.
- Are they still feeling of loss rather than distress over a painful memory. If so that will require the "Resolving Grief" exercise in **Restoring Hope**.
- Does the person need to forgive the person. See **Restoring Hope** for strategies to forgive.
- Does the person need to do the resolution of traumatic memories exercise. See **Restoring Hope** for strategies to resolve traumatic or distressing memories.
- Continue to check the outcome after doing these possible steps until the person is able to Remember the person the way they want to remember them.

Postlude: Living and Loving: Finding a Way Forward

My sister Marilyn, her husband Don, and their daughter Brie are my heroes when it comes to grieving. Marilyn and Don's son, Zaan, died when he was 8 years old after he had lived with a brain tumor that was first diagnosed when he was 18 months old. Zaan was an amazing person who somehow seemed to know his life on this earth was short and that he needed to seize each day and take from it everything it had to offer. He had no time for the petty trivialities that distract both children and adults alike from the richness life has to offer in this present moment.

In the following story my brother-in-law Don describes how he not only received his son Zaan's permission, but his admonition, to get on with his life when Zaan died.

It was several weeks after Zaan died and I was locked in an intense grief and almost physical pain wondering how I was ever going to survive. It was here that I asked myself two questions that both were entwined with the other.

The first question was: 'What would Zaan want me to do, how would he like me to live the rest of my life?' I had a mental picture of passing over, having stayed in the frame of mind I was currently in, and being greeted by a very angry son who was yelling at me, 'Dad! Why did you waste the rest of your life! You know life is for the living, I surely showed you that by my example.'

The second question was: 'If Zaan is right (and I had no doubt that he was right, because the mental picture was very vivid) how do I progress forward from this overwhelming grief and hurt?' I decided that the grief would always be there. No matter what I did it was never going to go away. Having accepted that, I then decided I would surround and envelop that grief in love. Love for Zaan, love for Brie, love for Marilyn, love for myself and most importantly Zaan's love for all of us. I would wrap it very carefully and allow myself to visit it whenever I felt like it and to whatever intensity I needed at the time.

Having done that I then decided that I would construct a new life around that love and grief with it being the center of my being, my strength, my integrity, my love for my family, my love for life. I would slowly build a new life in layers, a bit like laminating layers

*Do not shed tears
when I have gone
but smile instead
because I have lived.*

*Do not shut your eyes
and pray to God
that I'll come back
but open your eyes
and see all that
I have left behind.*

*I know your heart
will be empty because
you cannot see me
but still I want you to be
full of the love we shared.*

*You can turn
your back on tomorrow
and live only for yesterday
or you can be happy
for tomorrow because of
what happened between
us yesterday.*

*You can remember me
and grieve that I have gone
or you can cherish my
memory and let it live on.*

*You can cry
and lose yourself,
become distraught
and turn your back
on the world
or you can do
what I want –
smile, wipe away the tears,
learn to love again
and go on.*

— David Harkins

of plywood together. I would take my time and make it strong. I told Marilyn and Brie my thoughts and they adopted the same pattern, even though I suspect Marilyn had already subconsciously been there before me. It enabled us all to function again. It was the beginning of the way forward.

We all still live from that beginning, each in our own way going back to visit that 'love/grief centre' whenever we need to. Nine years on, it is now mostly love in that center, and it still gives us our strength. It still feels like Zaan is part of our living family and we wouldn't want it any other way. It is probably a strange way of coming to terms with the death of a child, but for us it has worked. It has allowed us to survive and thrive and to honor, love, and cherish our son and brother."

Grieving and Resolving Grief is a Process

As Don's story shows, grief is resolved by what we do and not simply by what we understand about the nature of grief. The strategies of resolving grief in **Restoring Hope** are very different from many psycho-educational approaches where the intervention focuses most of its time teaching the person about grief to normalize feelings of loss, anger, or sadness. Educational processes may be somewhat helpful in reducing the self-alienation that follows their self-judgments about being angry or sad and not coping well, but they rarely help the person move from their sense of loss to a place of hope.

To truly help someone move from grief to hope we need to walk with them **through** the process, not teach them **about** the process. We would never teach or tell them that they are miserable because they can't imagine their future and that what they need to do to feel better is imagine a happy future. Rather, we invite them to share stories about what they miss and what they valued, and then help them to discover that these essential values are still accessible.

Within **Restoring Hope** are extensive scripts and strategies to help both individuals and organizations resolve grief. For more information about our book **Restoring Hope** and our training programs that will teach you how to quickly, elegantly and effectively help people resolve and distressing memories, grief, and resentment please see: www.clergyleadership.com.

*What we have
once enjoyed
we can never lose;
All that we love deeply,
becomes a part of us.*

— Helen Keller

*How shall you remember?
Do you want to
not forget them with
misery and sadness
or would you like to
remember them with
love and gratitude?*

*If you want to be really
helpful to grieving people,
don't teach them about
grief, because they are
already experts at grieving.
What we need to do is lead
them through their grief
to the place where they
can imagine a future with
qualities they value.*
