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All I Want for Christmas is My Son Back

By Susan Dunn

All I Want for Christmas is My Son Back by Susan Dunn, The EQ Coach

The holidays are upon us ... and how they churn up our emotions. The expectations ... the memories ... the empty chairs ... Somewhere there's the Norman Rockwell family celebrating, but it was never at my house. Was it at yours?

A client and I have in common the loss of beautiful young men on the cusp of adulthood — my youngest son, who died at 21, 3 years ago; her younger brother, who died at 17, much longer ago than that, and yet it was only yesterday. I share with her my poem saying it is the hardest time to lose a child ... "and the world never knew him at all," it ends — and she says she knows what I mean.

My mother used to tell me when I was young and tragedy occurred to others, never to speak of "luck" or "dessert," but to say, "There but for the grace of God, go I," and my first Thanksgiving after my son's death, I hoped the church-goers would pray for someone who had lacked the grace of God.

My client says she is going to have everyone share their gratitude this year and she knows it will be emotional. "There are too many empty chairs," she says. She lost her older brother as well, and her father.

She says my grief is still "raw," and she's right, but hers is too, around Christmas. We agree that all emotions will be welcome at the holiday table. We're working on emotional intelligence together. I'm The EQ Coach.

I tell her that my family is still in the early recovery stages - there are conversations my older son and I haven't had yet about the death of his younger brother. She says she knows what I mean. We talk about the importance of `saying their name' - the names of the ones who are dead. I tell her that my grand-daughter speaks Chester's name all the time She asks me at the dinner table if Chettie liked yogurt when he was 5. She catches me on the patio at night and tells me that Chettie Chettie Bang Bang is dancing with the stars.

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"I want you to die when you are very, very old, Nana," she says to me.

"Yes," I say, with tears in my eyes. "That's the way it's supposed to be."

"Your grand-daughter knows," says my client. We share a silent moment of Empathy.

Some years ago I worked for a church. I `worked' the Christmas Eve service. Other services were filled with loudness, but the Christmas Eve service is silent. My job was to meet and greet, to `be a presence,' but the holy silence at the Christmas Eve service was so palpable, so pregnant with meaning, mostly I just stood there. No one was looking for `a presence.' Every person seemed to have a person sitting on either side of them in memory only. Especially the old women.

Some of them would hug me with tears in their eyes and say a name ... "Paul," a dead husband ... or "Missy", a lost child ... Ghosts from Christmasses past.

Those of us who worked the church service held one another together. Meanwhile the children ran around screaming, high on sugar and excitement, dressed in their party clothes, the sound of their laughter and their bright and noisy dress shoes echoing down the halls.

Do you have memories of Christmas like I do?

Kids throwing up, the first one in the new home, the canceled flights, the gift that pleased or didn't, the first Christmas as "the mother-in-law," the last one with a loved one, the first one with the new baby, someone drunk, someone newly married, someone away from home for the first time, the first Christmas after my divorce, the time the table caught fire, the time everyone got along, the time everyone fought, the snow, the heat wave, the beautiful red satin skirt, the peace, the chaos, the curdled crème Anglais, my dad peeling a tangerine, the kiss under the mistletoe, the Hallelujah chorus

...

I remember the time our kids were with their fathers, hers for the first time, and I found my friend crying in the church restroom and took her out for dinner, saying, "Come on. I'll show you how to do this."

The time I listened to a psychologist friend of mine talk of his exhaustion from "all the people who need to be heard this time of year".

The worst Christmas Eve? There wasn't one. They were all good in their own way. The best Christmas Eve? All of them, and this one coming up! One in particular though, a lesson in `you never know.' The best adult Christmas Eve - my second and last date with a man named Chris, but it turned out we had exactly the same idea of how Christmas Eve should be and we accomplished it together. Sometimes the butterfly of happiness comes and lights on your shoulder if you don't go after it.

Perhaps your memories are as mixed and full as mine. I have good and bad memories, and none of them like the Norman Rockwell Christmas.

The holidays are particularly difficult for those of us with alcohol problems in the family. The memories

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- or the reality — of someone drunk or passed out, the fighting, the fear, the anger, the unpredictability and the denial.

The holidays are particularly hard for those of us far from home.

And the holidays are particularly hard for single people, who must go and "sit at the end of the couch" at other people's houses.

And the holidays are particularly hard for young folks with babies. The kids are always sick, there's too much to do, too little time, maybe too little money.

But the holidays are no less hard for those of us with no family, too little to do, too much time, too much money.

The EQ Coach reminds herself that

·It's our expectations that cause us misery; keep them realistic. Better yet, don't have any.

·If you don't go looking, it could be your year for the Christmas butterfly.

·That exhaustion and stress aren't good this time of year. Take care of yourself!

·All emotions are welcome; our grief is the price we pay for the exquisite joy in the same proportion - that's the deal, that's the way it is. If we won't allow grief, we can't have joy.

·That some people aren't able to be present at Christmas - some are dead, some are locked in the past, and some are off in the future, and that's okay.

·That Optimism is a good option - how we attribute bad things that happen. If the turkey burns - not a small thing if you're the daughter-in-law fixing the meal for the first time — that it means the thermostat didn't work, not that you can't cook.

·That Flexibility is wise - people get sick, plans change, gifts don't arrive, but the celebration can still occur - there are many ways to skin a cat.

·That Resilience is earned not given, and it's earned by processing hard times and learning from them. GROWING through them, not just GOING through them.

·That nothing's perfect and you'll only exhaust yourself and make yourself and everyone else miserable if that's your goal.

·That we have Personal Power and choices - it's your holiday to spend as you wish. Christmas has a knob - turn it on, turn it up, turn it down, turn it off.

·And that if it's good, it will change, and if it's bad, it will change.

Ask yourself and those around you, "How do you feel about Christmas?" There are lots of people who need to be heard this time of year.

My client tells me she's going to start a new tradition this year. She'll invite everyone over for a Christmas brunch. I tell her I think this is a great idea, and I make a note to send her some of my cardamom bread. It mails well and has the virtue of containing no candied fruit!

I have new traditions, too. I have a little cap for my dog that says "Chimney Watch: Santa Patrol" on it. I'll have it on her when the kids walk in the door, and there will be jingle bells on the door knob and a

motion-sensored wreath on the door with eyeballs from K-Mart that says "Ho Ho Ho".

I have an ineffable desire to enjoy myself and my life. I hope you do too!

Chettie would approve.

Susan Dunn is a personal and professional development coach specializing in emotional intelligence, transitions, midlife, and womens issues. <http://www.susandunn.cc> and <mailto:sdunn@susandunn.cc> for FREE ezine.

What Do You Want This Year?

By Angie Dixon

Christmas is all around us, and many people are making up wish lists. Those who aren't doing that are busy setting down their New Year's Resolutions already. But this is a good time to sit down and do some serious introspection.

What do you want from the holidays this year? Do you want to rush around, spend a lot of money you don't have, and yell at the kids for not playing with all twenty of the toys they asked for—at the same time? Is that really how you want to spend Christmas?

We talk about "Christmas spirit," and mostly we mean giving. Giving of ourselves, giving to people who need it. That's great, that's Christmas spirit.

But I think there's another aspect to "Christmas spirit." I think it's spiritual. And don't close your screen on me because I said spiritual. I didn't say religious, because it's not. I think it comes from our souls.

I think deep down, each of us has a spirit that wants to be expressed. And I think at Christmas, when we're naturally thinking of others, that spirit is more easily expressed. I think if you want to, you can have a spiritual Christmas. You can feel loving, caring, generous. You can feel like a kid at Christmas, just by opening up to your spirit.

So what do you want this year?

Angie Dixon helps small business owners get their acts together. She is a personal development coach specializing in helping people integrate their home and work lives so they feel less stretched and more balanced. Get her FREE EBOOK on balance at

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to discover how coaching can change your life, contact Angie at

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What Do You Want This Year?

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