



Perspective / Opinion

The Holidays: Let Your Heart be Light?

By Wendy Peltier, MD

Like many, I struggle to find time to restore and reflect these days. Pre-pandemic, my usual early-morning routine driving to work included listening to *Today* or *CNN News* on the radio, hoping to stay informed as I bridged my home- to- work mind frame. During the holiday season, my favorite time of year, I always replaced the news with Sirius Radio's 24/7 Christmas Tunes channel, filling up with holiday spirit on my way in. Time alone in my car to and from work was, and continues to be, my safe haven.

In the last year-and-a-half, however, my routines have changed. It has been hard to listen to the news. In the early days of the pandemic, I often needed total silence, and depended on the steady hum of my engine to clear my head. There have been other days, in times of anger and despair, that I reach for an escape into music, transporting me to happier, more carefree times with Stevie Wonder, Queen, or Earth, Wind, and Fire; of course, I always sing along. When processing the death of yet another COVID-19 patient dying alone, without family by their side, I did not hesitate to make a quick Bluetooth call to my parents or a close friend, to check in, and share an "I love you." The next time together did not seem guaranteed.

As 2021 comes to a close, there are some rays of hope that the pandemic might end. My family has eagerly anticipated the holidays. The tree went up early, and plans for the dearly missed, large gatherings are underway. I had started to take a breath, and revel in a bit of nostalgia and normalcy. My car radio found holiday music again.

Then, two weeks ago, there was the unimaginable news of the Waukesha Holiday Parade tragedy. How was it possible that so many people, also welcoming the season with a cherished community tradition, could be killed or seriously injured? It hit me in the gut. I agonized for the injured, their families, the witnesses, the first responders, and my colleagues in the ER and ICUs. It did not seem real that something so tragic, and garnering intense national media attention, could happen so close to my home. As I headed to work on that Monday, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" echoed through my car.

How can we "let our hearts be light" when, for many of us, our hearts are broken?

I cried as I listened to the song, and it stayed with me as I made my way from the parking lot to the hospital floor. My shock and despair were eased a bit by the moments of silence and shared reflection we created during our Palliative Medicine interdisciplinary team rounds.

Over the next days, waves of news continued to emerge about those injured and the countless people traumatized by the event. I soon learned that some of my friends and their extended families had been watching the parade with their young children; thankfully, none of them injured. Colleagues and co-workers with connections to Waukesha shared their experiences, including nostalgic memories of attending the parade as children themselves. Being part of the medical community, already tired and torn from the turmoil of the pandemic, it felt insurmountable. As we learned more, we wondered, *Will we ever be safe in this world?*

It is so important to share our thoughts and fears with others, who are also undergoing collective trauma

What we have been experiencing from the Waukesha tragedy and, in essence, the entire COVID-19 pandemic, is collective trauma. In a [paper](#) in *Qualitative Health Research*, Liahna Stanley and her co-authors explore this concept with an analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews during the pandemic, which used metaphor to explore mental models and primary emotions. She emphasizes the importance of honoring negative emotions in order to constructively cope. She writes:

In relation to collective trauma and emotion, being vulnerable and showing one's upset, failure, uncertainty or fear is likely to prompt others to feel more comfortable in doing so as well. Indeed, when people share their fear and upset, they are also more likely to be able to problem-solve, find collective hope, and brave challenges.

Did you see what she said? We will heal and find hope most easily if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and share, and sharing negative emotions is important. That's not something our medical training has traditionally encouraged. Our white coats are thought to shield us from showing emotion and keep us standing strong.

Living through these experiences, compounded by grief, presents challenges and questions for each of us. What tools can we use to survive and still be effective teachers for our students? We must lean on each other's strengths and learn from our community. As we fulfill our professional roles as health care providers and educators during times of public tragedy, how do we best accompany our students and young colleagues? What do future health care providers and doctors in training, need most at these moments? What is in our toolbox for this?

How do we best support our patients, families, and colleagues?

As a palliative care physician, my coping strategies for helping the dying are centered around bringing comfort, facilitating connections, and providing anticipatory guidance. Over the years, I have noted that when death occurs as the consequence of medical illness—and there is time for acceptance, comfort, and connection—it is somehow easier to process both for the family and for me. Navigating sudden and catastrophic loss, however, feels very different. For me, processing sudden and violent death amplifies and heightens my own grief response to tragedy. Taking time to understand this phenomenon, and reaching out to colleagues for support, has been a welcome tool in my toolbox in the past few weeks.

We are better together. Since the Holiday Parade tragedy, Waukesha has united in extraordinary ways. There have been community gatherings, tributes, moments of silence in many community and sporting events, and heartwarming events such as “Jerseys for Jackson.” If the Dancing Grannies can come together and march again, perhaps the rest of us, continuing to serve in the pandemic, can unite and march on as well.

My wishes for you this holiday season

As we continue to reel from the pandemic, political turmoil around masking and vaccines, and collective grief from violence and public tragedy, I wish for you, my students, colleagues, and friends:

- **Time** to sit in a safe haven with your grief in the company of a colleague or friend
- **Strength** to dig deeply and stay true to your passion as a healer
- **Connections** that encourage a deeper involvement with communities inside and outside of MCW, particularly those further marginalized by the pandemic
- **Safety** that allows you to flourish in a world free from threats of personal and emotional violence
- **Inspiration** for you to teach the next generation of healthcare workers what it means to be healthy, compassionate, and caring

As the song says, “Through the years, we'll always be together, if the Fates allow.” So, find ways to reach out, build bridges, and focus on healing the little patch of the world where you find yourself. And let’s do it together.

For further reading:

1. Stanley BL, Zanin AC, Avalos BL, Tracy SJ and Town S. *Collective Emotion during Collective Trauma: A Metaphor Analysis of the COVID 19 Pandemic*. Qualitative Health Research 2021; Vol 3(10): 1890-1903.

2. Riordan PA, Price M, Robbins-Welty GA, Leff V, Jones CA, Prigerson HG, Galanos A. *Top Ten Tips Palliative Care Clinicians Should Know About Bereavement and Grief*. Journal of Palliative Medicine 2020; Vol 23 (8): 1098-1103.

Practical resources in navigating grief during the Holiday Season:

[Hospice Foundation Of America - Three C's for Holiday Grief Blog - Whats your Grief](#)

Specifically for Children:

Dougy Center for Grieving: <https://www.dougy.org/>
Getting through the Holidays: <https://www.dougy.org/resource-articles/getting-through-the-holidays>



Wendy Peltier, MD, is an Associate Professor of Neurology and Palliative Care in the Department of Medicine (Geriatric and Palliative Medicine) at MCW. She serves on the Faculty Pillar for the Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Institute for the Transformation of Medical Education. She would like to extend special thanks to Drs. Bruce Campbell and Maria Olex, Sue Berg, and George Ontko in preparation of this essay.