

Setting a Place at the Table

One way to include the voices of those we have lost at the holiday table.



Memory plates created at a recent workshop.

Images: Kerry J. Bickford

By Kerry J. Bickford, VOICES Founding Editor

As the holidays approach, conversations at peer grief support groups often gravitate toward the glaring absence of our loved ones. Although we feel it every day, it becomes much

harder to deal with as we see commercials of families gathered around the holiday table – knowing our own will gather with one less plate. Hmmm. This made us think. What if we created a memorial plate to represent the person or people who are no longer here to gather with us, and set the table with that one symbolic plate, holding space for the people who are missing?

We decided to expand on this idea by using the [morning altar](#) model to create a symbolic place (setting) at the table. We began with an aluminum pie plate and foraged through the yards and woods for greens and flora to embellish the plate. We searched for shells, rocks, berries, leaves, pinecones, and other natural materials to help decorate our plates. Some pulled out old cards, pictures, tickets, and so on to personalize their creations, and each plate looked totally different from the next. Names were spelled out in block letters or handwritten, along with messages of love and remembrance. As we looked around the room at the faces, we saw tears and smiles as each person lovingly attended to the details of their plates.

This led to stories about our loved ones, and each person listened reverently, laughing at the tales told about the antics of past holidays. Participants lovingly tended to their grief – and each other's – by holding space for each other and described how much it meant to them to have this time with “their people.”

Holidays can be challenging, so it is essential to have a plan to get through them. Lighting a candle is often a simple and beautiful way to remind us of those who are not at the table, but there are also other ways to do this. One mom talked about how her family went around the table and each told a story about their daughter/sister who had died a few months earlier. While she said it was hard, she also said it made her feel so much better – like she wasn't leaving her daughter behind or forgetting her.

Another mom described a glass bulb ornament that she passed around with little slips of paper for people to write a word or memory on. It was then dropped into the bulb, sealed, and hung from the tree. Yet another family went out into the woods and gathered greens for wreathmaking – in honor of a brother/son who was an outdoor enthusiast. The possibilities are endless, and it doesn't take much to come up with something that will help you and your family, friends, and colleagues to remember the people who have left footprints in your heart.

I remember seeing a giant bulletin board at a methadone clinic a few years back with photos and papers attached all over it...As I moved in closer to study it, I realized it was a memorial board and people were invited to post a memory or photo to honor someone who had died. It was anonymous, but how beautiful it felt to read the messages of love and

heartbreak and to know that people, including staff, remembered these beautiful souls. If only we could all have our losses witnessed in this way.

But the bottom line is that we CAN. Although I have only described a few ways here, there are numerous possibilities, and creativity paired with love can result in a ritual that might help you and the people you care about dread the holiday season a little less—and embrace the memories of love a little more.

Setting a Place at the Table

You will need:

A plate of some sort – a pie plate, a dinner plate, even a large paper plate

Greens like pine needles, evergreen, boxwood, holly

Dried flowers, silk flowers, or anything colorful to embellish your creation

Stones, shells, beach glass, sand, leaves, berries (cranberries are great)

Block letters like Scrabble pieces (I ordered [these](#) on Amazon)

A battery-operated candle or tea light to place in the center

~Begin by arranging the materials around your plate so that you have an idea of what you want to do; look at some of the photos above and then create your own design.

~You can use a glue gun and place a drop of glue to hold the greens, shells, stones, etc., around the rim of the plate.

~Next, add some color to your greens by adding berries, flowers, or whatever you choose with a drop of hot glue to hold them in place (I use a low-temp glue gun to avoid burns).

~You can also use Modge Podge on the plate to hold the sand and sprinkle off the excess – it makes a beautiful backdrop. See photo above and look closely for the ones with sand.

~Now, work on the center of the plate, remembering to hold a space for your candle...you can make a circle with stones or shells to circle your light if you wish.

~Lastly, think of where you want to put your loved one's name (names).

This is just a blueprint to help get you started, but this is YOUR creation, and there are NO RULES. This is a uniquely personal way to help you and your family cope.

If you do make a place setting, please send us a photo so we can include it in a future newsletter or in [Visions and Voices](#). Send to kerry@pscpllc.net. Wishing you joy as you remember your people.