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northwest Good Grief, the Holidays Are Here

Portland man helps homos hang on this time of year
by Malka Geffen

The holiday season can be difficult for anyone dealing with loss. Grief seems to smell the turkey and the pine and come running. According to Trey Malicoat—a nationally renowned expert on the effects of grief, stress and trauma—queers can feel an acute sense of grief because of disenfranchisement by society at large.

In addition to the tangible loss of the person you once felt in your arms, Malicoat argues that queers have an abundance of intangible losses to cope with from a lifetime of disenfranchisement. "We have experienced the intangible losses of freedom, acceptance, justice, hope, our future, our dreams and our own identity. We have felt loss from the death of friends and being considered an outsider. In addition, we continue to feel the sting of loss as we see our basic human rights compromised in the media and the political debate over gay rights," Malicoat says.

For many, loss begins with coming out. "When we come out of the closets, many of us give up friends and family only to be greeted by a superficial community focused more on the type of jeans you wear and the flatness of your stomach."

Malicoat says this loss deepens for those who come out at an older age. "The later we come out in life, the more intangible loss we live with, and for many of us, we literally give up our families, ex-spouses and the life we worked so hard to build."

The nature of our relationships—the struggles we face to find and nurture them, and the need to protect them with no help from the law—can often lead to grief. "We feel the sting of intangible loss when our partners are ill and the health care community doesn't allow us to participate in their care or, for that matter, even see our partners unless we have prepared a power of attorney acknowledging our practical and emotional commitment," says Malicoat. "Our sense of disenfranchisement is compounded when we are not included in the funeral planning and have no legal rights to the remains of our loved ones. It is not uncommon to be excluded from the planning of the memorial service and sit on the sidelines as our partner's family takes over."

As the openly gay president of Signature Hospice in Portland, Malicoat has the opportunity to educate the greater health care community about sexual minority issues. "We cannot walk the journey of grief in a normal way," he says. "We must first weed through the misunderstanding our straight peers have about our lifestyle."

He argues that in the straight world, a wife who loses her husband of 50 years is afforded a grief journey with full support and at least a year of recognized grief. However, a gay man who loses the love of his life after a committed relationship of 10 years is not afforded the opportunity to grieve.

"Your grief is not as significant, and the world thinks you can get over the pain in a few weeks," Malicoat adds. "My experience in over 10 years of hospice [work] and as a gay man leads me to contend that all of this loss is what robs many of us from the experience of living with hope and joy."



Grief counselor Trey Malicoat offers hope during the holidays.

As the holidays approach and loss seems to exacerbate, Malicoat says people can take steps to live life more fully.

- Create new holiday traditions. Decorate your home differently, serve a different meal for Christmas Eve or invite new people to your home.

- Do not isolate yourself. Volunteer at a homeless shelter or as a grief counselor. For more information visit the Oregon Hospice Association Web site at www.oregonhospice.org.

- Avoid knocking back a bottle of wine or a cranberry martini. If life becomes too overwhelming, take a walk around the block or call a friend. Jump online and have a conversation about something other than sex!

- Give voice to your grief. Write a letter to your departed loved one, or paint a picture in memory of your past life. But also celebrate the life you have now.

- If the tears start, let them flow. Tears from grief are toxic to the body and need a way out.

- Be OK with the emotional rollercoaster you're riding.

- Avoid denial.
- Surround yourself with people who can provide emotional support by listening unconditionally.

"As you make it through the holidays and the new year approaches, consider acknowledging the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social aspects of grief," says Malicoat. As a health care administrator, he says his goal is to create a full environment where anybody has the ability to live and get care with respect, dignity and honor. The author of two books, *The Journey of Change* and *The Challenge of Change*, Malicoat also speaks locally and nationally on loss and the resilience of spirit. **jo**

To learn more about the sexual minority resources offered by TREY MALICOAT visit www.treymalicoat.com.