



Celebrate Life!

by MARIE WALL

It is my belief that celebration is an essential part of healthy living. The elements of healthy living are varied and the social component has as much importance as our physical and emotional well being. They are interdependent; one strengthening the others. Having a celebration is a conscious effort to mark and acknowledge events. Festivities, parties, galas, rituals, are but a few of the names of these events. They involve taking time for accomplishments, loves, losses, significant moments, people and anything else that seems fit.

A celebration is a moment in time when we stop to reflect on events and accomplishments, to delight and share with those who are important in our lives. Whatever the name, it observes a significant moment and gives us energy to keep going and memories to carry us through the routine of daily life. Becoming celebratory can even be a way to bring healing to a person or community. It is not only the good times that need to be celebrated; the tough times need to be acknowledged as well.

A ritual is often the marker that signifies the movement from one time to another. There are formal rituals; birthday and anniversary parties are yearly events that remember the people in our lives, weddings signify the love of a couple, funerals celebrate the life of a person. In our culture, wakes and funerals are important to help us acknowledge the contribution someone has made and for us to honour that person in our lives. I remember one person saying that while the funeral was a sad loss of a special person, it was a celebration of their life and a time to reunite with family. There are also informal rituals such as celebrating school successes or letting go of past memories, acknowledging the need to stop and think about experiences and obtaining the freedom to move on to new things.

Throughout the world various cultures have celebrations. They may occur at different times of the year or be called other names, but the essence of the festivities are the same. Just a short while ago we celebrated Christmas. One of the things that I have come to appreciate in a new way is the community aspect of a celebration like Christmas. Daily life and business activities changed for a short period of time while the celebration of Christmas, with parties and gatherings, were in full

swing. This is very different from taking holidays during the summer, when daily life slows and is much more personal than communal.

Celebration was first taught to me by my family and then by the community at large, and throughout my life people have learned its importance. The positive feelings it can awaken, the memories it can create and the opportunity to build and heal relationships are all reasons to celebrate and mark time and events through festivities. In some families and communities celebrations have been much more integral than others. I know individuals who find it difficult to celebrate events because it was never the norm for them growing up, and now it may feel uncomfortable, even foolish. It is not always easy, but finding ways to celebrate life makes life more enjoyable.

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Two events occurred during the past year which have taught me a great deal about the need for celebration – my parents’ golden anniversary and my 40th birthday. In the first instance I felt it important to celebrate my parents, and in the second I learned the value of celebration at a significant point in my life. Planning the celebration and gathering people who have shared their lives over time was a powerful experience. There was laughter and some tears, and lots of eating and sharing. We paused for a short period and just enjoyed each others company. The event provided an opportunity to reconnect with family and old friends. These celebrations were not just for the honoured guests, as everyone walked away a little lighter and rejuvenated. The memories will last a lifetime.

Celebrating the good times brings joy. Think back to a time when you were celebrated – a birthday or

graduation – and how good it felt to be acknowledged. There are times when things are going well and a person can say there is no need to stop and acknowledge an event. I remember the first time I was graduating from a post-secondary institution, following years of learning and camaraderie. I did not think it was very important to go to the convocation ceremony; I felt I had more important things to do. An older and wiser friend of mine encouraged me to attend, to mark this time, to acknowledge what had been accomplished and to use it as a springboard for what was to come. It was only in retrospect that I have been able to appreciate that wisdom. It was a way to bring closure to one period of my life and to explore the possibilities to come.

Celebrations are not always easy. There are difficult times in life when we would just rather not bother, either because of the circumstances or the people involved. Whether it is the loss of a relationship through death or otherwise, a failure experienced, or a dream thwarted, we have a need to honour the experience, to say what was good, what was bad and to receive permission to move on. In my experience celebrating the hard times are just as important as the jubilees which come our way.

Festivities can also precipitate strife. I think of times when a party has led to distress of some sort. This experience may cause us not to enjoy certain events or to avoid them. Although this is unfortunate, it is still important to have celebratory times. So when having a gathering it is important to remember that people are more important than things, a little time together is sometimes better than too much, and the pain of being disconnected from meaningful relationships can be carried on much too long.

Creating personal rituals can be one way to consciously celebrate life. Rituals can be quite routine and include daily events such as a good-bye kiss or an evening meal with family or friends. I often help people develop rituals to aid in letting go of past ties, whether relationships, material goods or attitudes. If you know people who are always rehashing the past or continually feeling hurt by events long over, this is an indication of what some call “old baggage”. In the movie *The Mission*, Robert DeNiro’s character was shown carrying a heavy bag of metal on his back. This symbolized his past transgressions. It was only when he had forgiven himself and cut this burden loose, that he became free to truly embrace life.

I know a person who let go of an old relationship by gathering friends to eat a meal and then burning the mementos that were no longer significant in a bonfire. Another person went on a long hike to signify the changes that had occurred and the need to move on and look to the future.

Healthy living requires a balance of many aspects of life and taking time to celebrate is one way to maintain this balance. It is this celebration, the marking of time, that helps us to cope with daily living – socially, emotionally, and physically.

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