THE EMPTY CHAIR

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There’s an empty chair in our house and I am not sure what to do with it. It’s been empty a long time and although we’ve moved more than a few times since it became empty, we still haul it around with us. It’s not a particularly classic chair or even a very pretty one, and it is empty…all the time.

I never really know which room to put it in whenever we do move, but once it has found its place, I’ve noticed that it simply stays there. No one moves it, no one suggests putting it away. No one sits in it. It’s just an empty chair.

As a military family, for many generations, we are used to having members of the family off in faraway places for what often turns out to be, long periods of time. My father would be gone for sometimes up to a year or even two. His chair was often empty at the table. My husband’s military career took him away for many months at a time and his chair was often empty. And then, when our daughter was commissioned in the military, we knew her chair would also be empty sometimes. So empty chairs at our house are not an uncommon thing, but this chair…this chair should never have been empty.
As the holidays approach, I am always faced with the task of deciding what to do with our empty chair. Should we put it away for the season? Should we decorate it or should we just ignore it.

One year we did decide to put it away. Even though it was an empty chair, it left an even bigger empty space when we did move it to another, less occupied place. How can that be? How can something that is empty leave a bigger empty space when it’s gone?!

We’ve tried to ignore it, but its emptiness is very loud and it is hard to miss an empty chair in a room filled with people sitting in all the other chairs. And even when we could manage to ignore it, others could not and they always commented on it. An empty chair is not invisible.

Then, one year, we decided to simply include it in our holiday decorating scheme and that was the cause of some interesting discussions. Should we put a special holiday pillow in it? What about tossing a colorful quilt or afghan over the back? Should we put something in the chair so it wasn’t empty…Now THAT was a novel idea! But nothing we tried could fill the emptiness of that chair. It just sat silent like a sentinel, waiting for something…or someone.

It took us many years of living with that empty chair, day in and day out, to finally figure out what to do with it.
When we serve our meals, those chairs that are usually occupied by the assigned person (yes, we do assigned seating at our house) can be filled by other family members or guests. You get to use the sterling silver napkin ring with that person’s name on it and if you are lucky, that person has not lost a knife or fork or spoon over the years, so you will have a complete place setting of silverware. You must endure listening to tales about the person whose chair you are occupying. It makes for some lively conversations and that way, even though you may not be with us for this occasion, your presence is still in our life.

That works for our empty chair as well. It is a military custom to always set a place at the table for those who are not with us at this time, but whose lives are still within our hearts. So, we have a place setting, complete with silverware (all 6 pieces), dishes, crystal goblet and napkin ring. Our empty chair is pulled up to the table and a single rose is placed on the plate, a symbol of everlasting love.

We join hands in thanksgiving, completing the circle with the empty chair within our family circle, for even though death may have come, love never goes away. That empty chair now represents all of us who are not with us for this occasion, but who live within our hearts forever. It is not a
sad sight because we know that empty chair represents a love we have known and shared and with that gift, our family is forever blessed.

So, if your holiday table will have an empty chair this year, remember that it is not truly an empty space. That place is still occupied by the love and joy of the one who sat in it. Don’t hide that chair away. You may not wish to bring it to the table as we do, but take time this holiday season to remember the laughter, the joy, the love, the light of those who are no longer within hug’s reach, but whose love still fills us with gratitude.

Join hands around your table, however small, and say a prayer of thanksgiving…for the love you have known and still hold deep within your heart. You are rich beyond measure for having had a chair fulfilled. Don’t let death rob you of the heart space that love keeps.

We are a family circle, some chairs filled and others not, broken by death, but mended by love.