

There's No Comfort In A Carrot
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I know ... I know ... I shouldn't seek comfort from the refrigerator. Food is not the solution, but, at times, it sure seems to ease the pain. Maybe it simply masks the moment, but it also gives me something to do later as I sweat off that extra cookie.

I know about food and nutrition and self-esteem, and I know, too, that comfort does not come in bottles, boxes or bags of chips (except for Oreos). I know that food is only a temporary source of solace that will turn into a long-term battle of the bulge. But there are some days when all that knowledge simply leaves me aching and wishing for some chocolate. I've been on this journey through grief more than once and I've learned a lot about coping skills, healthy choices and positive affirmations. I've also learned that sometimes what I really want is a cookie. There's no comfort in a carrot, but when there are no words left to say, when the pain is overwhelming and the helplessness sweeps over us, there is always chocolate!

Some days are worse than others. Some are not worth remembering and some should not have been allowed to happen. I don't know who is in charge of those days, but I sure would like to speak with that person someday. Some days are just not worth having.

They move so slowly that even the sun gets bored and simply falls from the sky in a rush of despair. Some days the sun is smarter than I am, and it just doesn't get up. Some days are rain-filled while others are shrouded in gloom. Some days are painful, while others just seem empty.

Oh, there are some good days, too. In fact, there are some pretty wonderful days, but we don't seem to remember them as well as we recall the awful ones. Somehow, the tough days get relived more often in our memory and the hours of darkness seem longer than the hours of light.

Some days I need chocolate.

If I am lucky enough to only suffer from an occasional "down" day, then my usual coping techniques of sleeping late, eating a real egg and watching a good movie (while consuming semi-indecent amounts of popcorn) generally suffice. I've read enough and lived long enough to realize that those days will eventually pass, especially if I do not ignore them. And so, I have learned to cope with those days that simply should not have happened.

But, once in a while, once in a great while, one of those days turns into one of those weeks and maybe even into one of THOSE MONTHS, and suddenly I can't remember anything decent, lovely, worthwhile or fun. It is as if my memory banks have been erased of all joy, and the sun only casts shadows of sorrow.

Those days, when we can't remember his smell, the sound of her voice or the touch of his hand, are the days we fear the most. Those days, when pain sweeps over us like searing flames, are the days we lose even the light, and then hope seems an empty place.

Those are the days that are meant for chocolate. On those days, we may discover we need more than a good book, a bowl full of popcorn and a box of tissues. On those days, what we need is comfort, companionship, courage ... and chocolate. Surviving an attack of those days can test the wit and wisdom of even the best of us. All the tricks of the trade just don't seem to touch the emptiness, and that's when we have to call in the reinforcements. On those days, there is no comfort in a carrot.

But, oh, the caring compassion of a friend bearing chocolate! I'm not sure if it is the chocolate or the friend that lifts the gloom, but I do know the silent blessing of a phone call from a concerned and loving friend, the gentle touch of a companion and best of all, the shared joy of a warm, chocolate-chip cookie. This journey is simply too much to endure alone, and blessed are they who dare to walk with us.

It is the knock at the door that draws me away from my silent suffering and gently nudges me forward. It is the phone call that comes to shake off the emptiness that keeps me moving forward. It is the hand reaching out across the darkness that becomes my lifeline when I am lost in despair. It is the gift of friendship that helps me hold on through those days.

We cannot stagger and stumble across the rocky path of grief alone. We need all the help we can get. Some of us need a friend to talk with into the long hours of night. Others need a card or a note in the mail to remind them of their support systems. Tuna casseroles and meals sealed in foil help ease us through those days when we cannot remember where the kitchen is. There is nothing better than a warm, chocolaty something brought in the arms of a loving friend.

I have acquaintances who love vegetables and have tried for years to convince me of the merits and joys of broccoli. I know people who actually jog and who think early morning is best enjoyed from a bicycle seat. (I love them anyway.) I

have had my share of advice-giving friends, friends who shared their own thoughts and experiences with me and friends who didn't know what to do, but came over anyway. Some of my friends specialize in specific activities. I have a bowling friend, a walking friend, a friend who will shop for bathing suits (and not laugh) and a friend who will mow the lawn. I have friends who will travel with me, some who will loan me their beds and several who have even done my laundry. I have my sensible friends, my psychic friends and my chocolate friends. I have friends who understand my love and battle with cookies and who never actually offer me a brownie, but who send me chocolate thoughts instead! I have friends everywhere and I need them all!

I have friends who will cry with me, laugh with me, sing with me. I have friends who know my secrets and others who think I am still thirty years old. I have friends who know my story and some who can't remember where we met. I have friends who share my passion for living and several who are even crazier than I am.

All of us have had our share of struggles and some have endured more than any one should have to. We've danced in the moonlight, cried in the firelight and healed in the sunlight. We're old, young, tall, short, fat and thin (but not too many!) We're Moms and Dads, brothers and sisters, parents, spouses, grandparents and friends. There are some strangers, too. (Some who are stranger than others!)

Some do like carrots, most love chocolate, and all know the hurt and pain of grief.

Some love winter, while others dream only of basking on a beach somewhere. Fall is the favorite of some, and some love the challenge of spring and tax season.

All of us have birthdays, and mostly we don't remember them except with cakes and hugs. We know other dates bring heavy thoughts and the mailbox and the phone lines are choked with hugs and prayers, sent lovingly to ease the pain of those days.

Friends are our security ...our insurance policies against loneliness and despair. Food tastes better when shared with friends and the very best of friends know exactly what to bring! Some send flowers, others order pizza. Some come toting homemade lasagna and some bring fruit. A GOOD FRIEND WILL NOT BRING TUNA, LICORICE OR CARROTS. A true friend comes with hope, a listening heart, an extra roll of toilet paper (to more efficiently sop up tears) and a bag of Oreos.

It is hard enough to survive those days, but without a friend, those days are glum indeed. Friends know when to talk and when to listen. They know they cannot erase the guilt we carry or talk us out of our despair. They do not try to cheer us up, but neither do they drag us down. They know when to call, when to come and when to just stand silently close ... trusting.

They offer prayers, poems and pastries. A friend will go jogging FOR us (HA!) and always says how nice our hair looks! The gift of friendship goes beyond the mere exchange of gifts and into the magical space created by love.

A friend doesn't have to bring food -- doesn't even have to come! We can simply feel a friend's caring, even when it comes from thousands of miles away. We are connected through compassion, caring, cookies, carrots and chocolate ... (CARROTS?!)

A friend helps us remember and helps us to heal.

I wish Hallmark had a Friends Day, but maybe I won't wait for one to be created. I'll just start one myself! Stamps would be free that day and so would phone calls. We could all go outside, open up our arms and reach around the world to each other. We'd shed a tear and share a smile. We'd sing and laugh and hold on tight.

Since we cannot do this alone, I'm mighty glad God invented friends!

So make this day your own National Friends Day and send a card, a cookie, a casserole or a carrot (it could be a chocolate carrot) to say, "Thanks for being my friend! Thanks for caring, for calling, for cooking, for cleaning, for coming. Thanks for being a part of my circle ... for being a part of me. Thanks for helping me skip the cookie and embrace the moment. Thanks for jogging with me, for believing in me and for loving me. Thanks for not sending chocolate but visualizing it instead! Thanks for YOU, my friends. Someday there will be fat-free chocolate! But by then, I won't need it anymore because I have finally learned it is the gift of YOU that gives the greatest comfort!

There's no comfort in a carrot, but, oh, the magic of YOU sharing it with me!