

Liking Yourself During the “Merry” Days **By Tim Schnabel**

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“Tune Out the Hype of the Holidays.”**

I have been intrigued with all the goings on of our year-end holidays from the moment I can remember a jolly, plump man showing up in town on Thanksgiving Day. As a kid I was mystified that Santa could actually find where I lived without a map or directions and then carefully place precious gifts for my sisters and me, never being seen.

As a grown man I am aware that for many of us this time of year is painfully stressful, not just at a social level with stretching our budgets, shopping, decorating our homes and attending parties, but on a deeper emotional and psychological level. Yes, the days between Thanksgiving and the New Year are universally stressful regardless of race, religion, creed, socio-economic level or marital status.

I am struck by the odyssey of the celebration of Christmas. Over 2000 years ago a messenger of love and hope...a prince of peace was born, thus beginning our annual Christmas celebration commemorating his birth and life. What has evolved is now a period of commercial frenzy accompanied with often life-draining busyness. This season heightens the expectation for the expression of being loved for who we are, separate from what we do...or don't do, accomplish or achieve. How sad that the honor of our essence is often solely measured primarily by the size, cost or number of gifts given or received.

Separate from the celebration of our own birth, there is no other annual ritual where we are to be recognized as truly special by friends, co-workers and family. This is the time of the year for the wished for recognition of our value, worth and dignity, especially in being part of a family. When the expectation of what we hope for clashes with the reality of what actually occurs, children and the child in the grown up, can understandably experience disappointment and emotional scarcity.

Today, as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice, I see many remarkable and courageous individuals, couples and families who are experiencing various levels of emotional poverty upon arriving at my office. The year-end holidays can often accentuate current unmet emotional needs as well as those which linger, unresolved from the past.

Each January I still hear a familiar theme in response to folks being queried as to how they fared during this time. It goes something like, “Oh, the holidays, they were OK, but I am glad they are over.” This response is not just from clients, but family, friends and colleagues as well. I still recall a professional meeting I attended in a January many years ago and the reply of a well-known psychiatrist when he was asked how he had fared during the holidays. “I survived,” he proudly quipped!

Doesn't it seem incongruous that we should endure or survive a season founded on abundance, peace, joy and love?

What are these year-end holidays really like for you? If there is part of you who approaches this time of year feeling anxious, frustrated, sad or angry, you are not alone. Why do we have thoughts and feelings of frustration, dread, guilt and yes, sometimes even despair, associated with what is "supposed" to be a joyous season?

First, almost every communication medium tends to present a very ideal representation of what these holidays should be – ideal in terms of goodness, relationships, pleasant surprises, peace with one's self, but mostly with others. The song, *Silver Bells*, written almost 50 years ago, is a vivid example with the line, "Children laughing, people passing, meeting smile after smile." But that's not what I see at our area malls. It's more like meeting holiday mauling!

Second, associated with "the ideal," there is also be the notion of "The Christmas Dream," the wish for everything to be perfect. How many TV programs do we watch each year where a leading character is miraculously transformed or a major family problem is resolved? As in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, where Scrooge changes overnight from a harsh, stingy, callous character to a gentle, generous and loving individual, how many of us privately desire for a Scrooge in our lives to change in a similar way? Then through this transformation we will receive that for which we have been hoping or even struggling – love, acceptance, validation or something material. Our Scrooge may be a family member, friend, lover, employer or even the government!.

"That's exaggerating a bit," you might be thinking. However, how old were you when you first were introduced to Dickens' tale and how might this story have shaped your childhood beliefs about people changing? What part of your belief system holds that another has to change in order for you to be happy? Believing that your happiness or worth is directly linked to another changing is a set up for unrealistic expectations accompanied with ongoing disappointments and frustrations..

This touches on a third area called Magical Thinking, which can occur when we tell ourselves the holidays will make some of our worst problems go away. At least for awhile maybe we won't have to deal with unpleasant situations or people. Maybe, if we are really lucky, some of the problems will actually disappear!

Part of the magic can be attributed to holding onto the hope that someone, often in the absence of a direct request, will do something nice for us. Perhaps, by serendipity, something will happen bringing us the illusive joy, love or happiness. The magic is not that these gifts or birthrights are desired. No, for grown ups the magic lies in the waiting for their arrival and that someone else, other than ourselves, will bestow them upon us.

When we were children we literally depended upon the "lumbering giants" in our lives for survival. Needing and receiving as much as we did from parents, large segments of our world sure appeared magical at times.

Being dependent and not having power as a child or a senior in an assisted living facility is very different from not exercising our personal power as a grown up today.

Know that powerlessness causes suffering and that suffering, not sadness, is optional; suffering, not disappointment, is optional; suffering, not pain, is optional. So, into what part of that old powerless magic might you still have an investment? How might you be setting yourself up to suffer?

Then there is the magic in the music. Take the song, “Toyland” adapted from a Victor Herbert melody. Reflect for a moment on the last verse, “Toyland, Toyland, wonderful girl and boy land. Once you pass its borders, you can never return again.” I wonder if you are like me and bought into that belief – thinking that once we became “grown up,” we wouldn’t be able to be childlike (not childish), play with abandon, have toys or most significantly, experience an abundance of joy?

My experience is that with some of my friends, their toys merely cost more than those of their children. How many of you, being generous with your own kids, have afforded them expensive toys, adding both to your own learning as well as entertainment? And why not?

There is no law of which I am aware stating that happiness and joy are apportioned to a specific age group or that you have to receive a predetermined amount of goodies in order to experience happiness, joy and contentment.

The fourth area is staying stuck adhering to rituals which have lost their meaning, are no longer joyful and perhaps are no longer even useful. Rituals, both in terms of daily routines and holidays, are predictable ways of social recognition. Rituals can afford us structure, comfort and security. However, following a ritual, which no longer meets our needs, can be a source of stress, tension and resentment. How often have you spent more money than you wanted, sent cards to persons you didn’t like or begrudgingly gone places you didn’t want to, where you found yourself bored or frustrated, simply to “be polite,” or “please others?” Maybe, feeling guilty, you decided to go somewhere to “keep the peace” only to require an antacid to calm your not so peaceful stomach?

I believe that by operating from a place of sustaining guilt, love is based on the condition of my giving or doing enough so that I won’t feel badly, instead of what I might otherwise want to give or share spontaneously or from the heart. When operating from a place of guilt, we often intensify getting down on ourselves, fueling the critical parent in our heads or in other words, depressing ourselves.

Lastly, there is the loudest message of the season, “Buy, buy and buy some more.” As a businessperson I sure appreciate the realities of advertising and profit. However, my concern is with what I would call the SECRET message accompanying the massive advertising and it is something like this: “If you don’t buy or receive enough of all these exceptional products, you won’t have a wonderful holiday.”

Even if there are only grains of truth to this message - that joy, happiness and fulfillment of this season are framed in giving or receiving *enough*, then how much is truly *enough*? If we fall prey to all this materialism then I guess what it could boil down to is:

How much should I give to you to prove I love you and how much should I receive from you so that I am assured of your love for me?

Having said all of this, I affirm that these year end holidays are ever so special. Eric Berne, the father of Transactional Analysis, identified two liberating influences which the season brings: encouragement to relax the desire for personal gain, and permission to see and hear without prejudice. I also agree with Berne that this season provides us a passport for unified compassion and communion in its purest form. For me it is a time of heightened awareness of how much I care about life, reaffirming the love I have for so many and giving thanks for the past year.

So, what do you want from your holiday season and how are you going to find meaning for yourself? Here are a few tips:

1. Clarify *your* purpose for this season. What beauty, love, joy, peace and excitement do you want to create and share? Write down your responses and affirming wishes.
2. Create your holiday vision for yourself. Imagine what you are ideally thinking, feeling and doing, not how **others** are responding. You just have charge of you.
3. Own what you're experiencing emotionally - mad, sad, angry, guilt, disappointment, in addition to moments of happiness and joy. Condemning yourself for feeling badly only intensifies you feeling badly.
4. Plan ahead. Where do you want to be? Who do you want to see? How much money are you willing to spend? How do you want to enjoy the people you love? Invest energy into generating what you want as opposed to worrying about what you don't want, hoping it doesn't happen.
5. Avoid predictable disaster from living out the song, "I'll Have a Blue Christmas Without You." If you have lost a loved one through divorce, death or misfortune, it is understandable you are in pain and grieving. It is appropriate to continue your grieving and to find moments of peace and enjoyment. Each of us can do both.
6. Build in additional down time and quiet. Take a gentle walk in the woods. Rest.
7. Demonstrate self-love...purchase a gift for yourself...without guilt!
8. If you are in a rut, do something new and exciting. Depending on your budget, plan a trip to Lake Tahoe or Lake Burton.
9. Be aware that after emotional highs it is appropriate to need solitude, further rest and balancing time. Coming down after intensity doesn't mean you're depressed.
10. Use this season as a learning experience and practice. Being 100% committed to your holiday vision and decide that making your holidays joyful is a journey for life.

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