

The Spirit of the Season

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I am of an age where I can remember when stores did not begin displaying Christmas and Hanukkah decorations until the day after Thanksgiving. It was a tradition that no one dared violate for fear of appearing crass or acting in bad taste. Alas, the great arm of merchandising has slowly reached its way further and further into our culture, so that now we are greeted with Christmas carols while shopping for Halloween costumes for our kids. Something is very wrong with this picture.

Twenty years ago my clients were stressed the week before the holiday. Now, they come to me in early November dreading the holidays, already exhausted at the thought of what lies ahead. “How are we going to manage our lives, the decorating, shopping for presents, juggling parties and school pageants?” Parents are worried about money because the items on Johnny and Suzie’s lists for Santa are extensive and extravagant. Each year they go into debt but continue the behavior because they don’t want to disappoint their kids. Something is very wrong with this picture.

Ritual and religious celebrations were observed with more simplicity and meaning by former generations. Religious historians and transpersonal psychologists tell us that this is a need that is universal, ancient, and archetypal. Yet, today we participate in a pale shadow of the true power of reverence and celebration. Commerce and materialism have usurped the basic joy, awe, and mystery of what true ritual can offer. It is a magician’s slight of hand. All that glitters is not gold. We chase after the commercial promise yet find ourselves longing for something more. The magic that the catalogues promise disappoint year after year.

Somewhere deep down inside I believe people long for traditions that have meaning—celebrations that nourish the soul and the psyche. The desire to participate in rituals that are spiritual (in the broadest sense of the word) is an integral part of who we are. They represent a connection with some greater sense of our place in the universe, a way that we can briefly stop our daily existence and experience transcendence, peace, or a connection and belonging to something larger than ourselves. True rituals offer us a way to pause and reflect, and in doing so we are able to take stock of who we are in the greater scheme of things. It is an opportunity to express a sense of wonder and gratitude for what it means to be alive on this planet.

What would it take to stop? How could your family make a change around how you celebrate the holidays this year? What observances or traditions would you want to put into place? How would you slow the pace down so that you could enjoy the quiet and take solace in the hope that this time of year brings?

This is the season that on a psychological level calls us toward introspection. It is the darkest time of the earth’s cycle, a time when we are challenged to draw upon an inner light. How can you sense this light and let it carry you through the season? How can you help your children experience that light?

When I was a child I went to my grandparent's home every Christmas Eve. At the age of eleven I remember being alone outside the house after dinner waiting for the adults to leave for a midnight church service. It was a crystal clear dark night. The stars were brilliant, and the air was so crisp it hurt to breathe. I was looking for the Star in the East but couldn't find it. And then something quite mysterious happened. Suddenly I was filled with an inexplicable sense of peace that filled every part of my being. I understood what "peace on earth" meant. I literally felt in that moment the earth at peace. For me, it was a true miracle of the season, one that stays with me to this day.

Sometimes we miss the quieter, spiritual moments in all the rushing around. Perhaps, the greatest gifts we can give each other this year don't come with price tags attached. Maybe they come from finding a place of quiet reverence and sharing with family and friends.

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