

STRIKING A BALANCE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Jerry L. Harber

Holidays are *supposed* to be a joyous, happy time, filled with warmth and laughter. Yet, for many, the emotions that are often present are tension, anger, disappointment, sadness, disillusionment, and even incompetence. What is it that happens to turn the days that are to be holy days into these horrid days? An even more important question is what can be done to keep that from happening?

Let's start with the first question. There are three things that combine to produce the pain: pressure to have a perfect experience, unrealistic expectations, and the expectation of intimacy. Let's look at each one.

The Perfect Experience. In our culture, holidays, especially Thanksgiving and Christmas are portrayed as "perfect moments." Fairy tale pictures in commercials and holiday cards show us something that for many rarely happen--snowy landscapes and horse drawn sleigh rides, flickering fireplaces and perfectly arranged candles, golden brown turkeys and laughing family members toasting the season. The subtle message is: this is how holidays should be; anything less is inadequate. The reality of holidays can be more like holiday dinners that exhaust the cooks, and kitchens that take hours to clean, dinner rolls that won't rise, wrong gifts, and people who show up late "spoiling everything."

Unrealistic Expectations. Trying to have the perfect experience is an unrealistic expectation. But there are others, too. There is tremendous pressure to spend too much money on decorations, food, drinks and gifts. Others expect you to "get into the holiday spirit" by doing these things or by coming to more parties between Thanksgiving and New Year's than you will be invited to all year. Declined invitations bring raised eyebrows or sad looks. How can you want to stay home and just have a quiet evening? You should be enjoying yourself!

Expectation of Intimacy. The idea of going home or coming home for the holidays is another cultural pressure to contend with. The cultural message is simple: you're supposed to be together on holidays and you're supposed to *enjoy* being together. The reality is often very different from what is wished for. Often the added stress of the holiday season's expectations undermines attempts to be together and to enjoy each other. It is common for the number of people seeking counseling to increase after major holidays because of the stress, which uncovers the flaws in relationships during this time.

In spite of this dismal picture of the holidays, yours need not be like this. Here are some ideas that can make a difference.

1. Start by remembering what holidays are really all about.
 - Thanksgiving is for giving thanks for what you have,
 - Christmas is for celebrating God's gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ,
 - New Year's is a time of reflection, refocus and renewal about things that matter.
2. Stop and rethink your habits and traditions associated with these days.
 - Make a list, write a narrative, jot some notes to yourself in which you describe what you *really want to do* versus *what you think you should do*. Traditions can be very helpful because they provide a sense of continuity with the past. This in turn fosters a sense of belonging, security, relatedness, and intimacy. And traditions provide a structure for important moments. But traditions should be reexamined because they may need to be changed, revised, even abandoned if they don't achieve what they are supposed to achieve.
 - If new traditions make more sense, replace the old ones. It's one thing to visit everybody in your family when there are only two of you and one or two families of "them." But, as families expand and/or change through divorce and remarriage, another approach may make more sense and be just as meaningful.
3. Accept those things that cannot be changed, but change those things that can.
 - For example, you are not likely to get for Christmas this year those emotional things you needed from your parents when you were growing up. If they couldn't do it then, they probably can't do it now.
 - Decide to break the bad habits you have with siblings or other relatives, such as rehashing old hurts just because you're together during the holidays and can.
 - Intimacy and warm feelings come in momentary waves, not long lasting deluges; take what is offered and be thankful rather than comparing it to what you wished for and be miserable.

These are some things that can actually make holidays into holy days.

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