

Reclaim the Meaning of Your Holidays

By Lisa T. Wood

Brace yourself. Retailers are geared up to gamble on their biggest advertising trifecta of the year—Halloween, Thanksgiving and the pinnacle of the shopping season, Christmas. What are they after? Your wallet. Yet, the real cost to you may be more than financial. Lucky for us however, the framework already exists for this time of year to be three months of fun. No, really, think about it—we get the silly spookiness of Halloween leading into the grateful appreciation that Thanksgiving brings, which then kicks off at least a month of celebrating love and kindness. That sounds pretty good to me. So what's going on?

Where's the Fun?

Past surveys report that in recent years over 50 percent of Americans spent more on Christmas than they could afford. Oops—that probably put a damper on the holiday spirit. This year, let's not do that.

Financially, it's a no-brainer to discuss the benefits of a simple and more streamlined holiday. But what is the emotional cost of focusing too much on shopping and spending during the holidays?

Before the holiday season officially kicks off this year, Americans are already reporting high levels of general stress. And, according to JWT's AnxietyIndex, which tracks the levels and intensity of consumer anxiety, 86 percent of us who are anxious worry specifically about the economy and money. Add to this the increased stress typically reported this time of year and suddenly you're not in the mood to start decorating after all. Are you nodding yet? Well then, let's do something about it! Increasing the holiday fun factor is certainly something we can do.

A Happier Holiday

First, let's set the stage. Bolstering emotional health during the holidays is the starting point and begins by


asking one question: How do we center ourselves within the original values of the season? Perhaps consciously holding the gratitude of Thanksgiving in our hearts leads us into a more balanced holiday. Focusing on the love and original truths of our religious and spiritual traditions also guide us towards what's important. Before you make a shopping list, write down what nurtures the emotional health and well being of you and your family this time of year. Let this be the list that really matters, becoming the foundation for a season of heightened meaning and enjoyment.

Reclaiming the fun in our holidays also requires being mindful of what takes us off course. A challenge is the extra work the holidays bring. Family and spiritual traditions, festive meals, gift exchanges, decorating—it all requires increased planning and responsibilities. There's travel, cleaning, cooking, partying, getting stuff in and out of storage, shopping,

wrapping gifts, volunteering, community service and envelope licking. All of this while our daily lives pitch along in full swing. Suddenly there aren't enough hours to fit it all in. Consumerism beckons to us relentlessly during the holidays, but it is the demand on our time that launches the

season into a fevered pitch of activity. Reclaiming the significance of our holidays beyond this busyness takes saying "yes" to some things and "no" to others. Protecting ourselves from being stretched too thin is a wonderful gift for

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our families.

What Really Matters

To help put the holidays into perspective, I conducted a statistically tiny, yet emotionally revealing survey. I asked my 11-year-old son, Eric, what he thinks about presents during the holiday. What is the best part about giving someone a gift? "Knowing they will enjoy it," he said. What about receiving a gift? "Opening gifts is great!" Then he added, "Knowing the people around you care about you is the best part of receiving a gift." My daughter Emilie, a junior in high school, shared what means the most to her during the holidays. "The holiday spirit. I get a good vibe during the holidays. The spirit of giving, being together, happiness."

My children's answers reminded me that what remains after the lights come down and candles are stored - memories of kindness and being together - are the true gifts. Prioritizing what matters to my family means I'm on the right track. To align with these values it takes a plan—simplify, stay focused on enjoyment and don't over do it.

Honoring A Tradition

Giving and gifting is a central theme with ancient roots in holiday traditions around the world. The custom of holiday giving historically involved small gifts and treats with the focus on feasts, gatherings and singing as

"gifts" shared. Gift giving as an expression of love is rooted in our ancestors' traditions and rituals, extending beyond immediate family into the broader community. However, increased goods production from the industrial revolution and the creation of advertising, which became a part of western society by the 1840's, morphed the simple custom of gift giving into the commercialized behemoth it is today.

Of course, the truth is that presents are a big part of holiday fun! Don't we all love a beautifully wrapped package with a secret tucked inside? Although simplifying is a good idea this year, we shouldn't deny this seasonal tradition. People who refuse to accept or exchange gifts during the holidays, experts say, may be missing out on an important emotional connection with family and friends. Not being willing to receive denies another the opportunity to express caring through giving. Perhaps consciously returning to the original intent of gift giving - as human connection expressing gratitude, love and kindness - shines new light on this holiday tradition.

A Fresh Look at Gifts

Instead of buying more "things", look for new ways to express the giving spirit. Think of friends and family in terms of interests and what they enjoy, and then identify organizations aligned with these interests. If your friend loves animals, make a donation in her name towards a wild life fund or local animal rescue. Families who enjoy skiing or hiking in Tahoe will

appreciate membership in an organization preserving open space in the Sierras.

Another way to give focuses on time together as the gift. Many would be thrilled to receive a gift like this—last Christmas, 84 percent of us said when times are tough, thoughtful gestures mean more. The gift can be a hike together followed by your treat of coffee or lunch. Share a round of golf, cooking class or any number of activities—out-of-the-box thinking brings fun and thoughtful ideas. And you can plan them for after the holidays, when you are both more available. Creative gift giving aligns your actions with your wishes for a more enjoyable, meaningful holiday. It also means discipline when shopping, keeping presents in perspective as only one element within a much richer holiday context.

Maybe the secret we've been discussing all along is simple—make time to mindfully acknowledge what is important during the holidays, then move in that direction with our actions. Use intentional awareness to embrace the values of the season while incorporating the demands of modern life. Focus on time together and fun to loosen the grip of consumerism, allowing us to recognize when enough is enough. Lastly, drawing firm boundaries to protect our emotional health makes room for the spiritual renewal offered by the season of love. So get your pen and paper—it's time to start the list that really matters!