

The Counselor's Corner

Bringing More Joy to the Christmas Season

I love to decorate for Christmas. Outside, the Christmas lights sparkle from my bushes and around my windows, and a spotlight shines on the stable with all the pertinent figures except for Jesus (who is not born yet). Twinkling deer graze on the lawn, and the angels can be seen in windows and near the stable. Wreathes hang from the door and the lamp post, stars sparkle and flags fly, proclaiming that something different is about to happen on December 25. Inside, there is more than one tree, and some type of holiday decoration in every room. I can't imagine it any other way.

Then, I met a couple who no longer follow this ritual. Although they put lights outside, inside the decorations were sparse, and there was no Christmas tree. These people were happy and surrounded by friends and family. Taking many decorations out of the holiday mix seems to have been the right choice. They were content with what they had, and they did away with the stress of pulling out decorations from storage, putting them on display, taking them down, boxing them, and then struggling to put them out of sight for the next few months. This approach has taught me that there will come a time when my winter wonderland will be reduced, but that will be perfectly fine. Decorations are wonderful, but when they bring exhaustion, anxiety, and stress, it is time to rethink the pattern.

Christmas doesn't have to live up to our perfectionist standards. Much of the preparation we do is work that can take away from the joy of the season. Christmas cards and letters can fall into that category. We can choose to let them go, when they are a source of stress. Our real friends will survive without the postman bringing them a glittery card from us.

Buying presents can be stressful financially and in terms of time. Sometimes we feel we have to give our children as much as possible, especially if we did not receive many presents as a child. Some years, we cannot afford to buy presents. Although our children can make big lists for Santa, their wants exceed their needs. Pretending that we can lavish our children with presents when times are tough gives our children an unrealistic view of gift-giving. Going into debt and paying high interest rates all for the sake of putting presents under the tree is not a good choice. Being honest with our children about their expectations and our limitations is far better. We can replace the many material gifts with what children really want, our time.

Sometimes, we need to reexamine gift exchanges with friends, co-workers, and extended family members. Our family used to buy gifts for everyone. I secretly disliked this. It took lots of time selecting gifts that sometimes turned out to be poor matches, resulting in disappointment and ultimately standing in long store lines to exchange things. Then, we went to phase II with two exchanges, one for adults, and one for children. Before long, adult gifts were eliminated, and only the gift exchange between the children remained. What a relief to head to Christmas dinner without fumbling with loads of packages. At work, most of us are happy to say the gift exchange has ceased to exist. We don't have to prove we care about each other by running up credit card bills.

Proper eating, sleeping, and exercising, along with drinking in moderation, can make us happier. We must also learn to say "no" when we get too many invitations that leave us without a break to recharge.

Eliminating those things that bring us stress is even more important when our life is in crisis with health issues or the loss of a loved one. Our main job becomes nursing ourselves back to health or starting the grieving process. We must drop all the nice, but unnecessary rituals and focus on what really counts.

Whether we decorate a little or a lot, we need to recognize our limitations. When the time comes to eliminate some traditions, embrace it. They are all superficial. Stress on the holiday menu is just not a dish we want. Inner joy and peace is what the Christmas season is all about.

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