

Winter Holiday Management 101

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It is December, the month of winter holidays; Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, sometimes Ramadan, the Winter Solstice, New Year's Eve. As in every year, this is the month that people "lose it." Absolutely normal people who act in predictable ways will behave erratically. And the people who already act erratically become the Perfect Storm. It's December, the most magical time of the year.

There is also a significant minority that enjoys this time of the year and responds well to it. One year I wrote a newsletter column that stated that most of us aren't going to have a holiday with matching L.L. Bean sweaters. A week later I received a photograph of a lovely couple in this congregation wearing matching L. L. Bean sweaters. Is it possible that a year later they sent me another photograph of their extended smiling family in L. L. Bean sweaters? Yes, it is true. So you are out there, you excited, happy holiday participants. We are happy for you.

But most of us are going to have a rocky holiday season every once in a while, if not every year. And there are lots of reasons for this. No, I am not the Grinch. I happen to be a minister, and as such, people come and tell me things, lots of things, especially in December. It goes like this (and by the way, it is the same for rabbis before the High Holidays in September – I've checked). It goes like this, people appear in my office. They don't schedule appointments. They are in the building, they see me, and a story tumbles out. They probably haven't even planned it. They just can't hold it in anymore.

One year it was a woman who would be seeing her brother this Christmas. She had seen him for Christmas for over forty years, but this year she just couldn't take the fact that he had sexually abused her as a child. One year it was a man of few words who walked in and suddenly had a lot of words, about the mental illness in his family and how he couldn't take much more of the strain. Another year it was a woman whose best friend had moved away.

I hear the stories because I am a minister and you trust me. It is part of my job and I am honored. I want you to come talk to me in December. I even schedule extra time for it. I consider my experience a macrocosm of your experience. I hear the big stories that tumble out from many different people, but in any given year you might have a big story, or pain from your past, or friends or family who need extra help or who aren't here this year. The season tells us to be happy, to sing and celebrate, but we just can't be happy all the time and buying more and more items will not help us.

What is it about December in the United States? In passing I blame it on the Victorians who seduced us with a tradition of excessive gift giving, and card sharing, and material items at this time of the year. It is not a corporate conspiracy, it is a Victorian conspiracy. Consider that next time you go in for a large item purchase.

This past week I watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and over 40 years ago Charles Schulz had seen the direction we were going. Lucy confesses that she gets

depressed at Christmas because her real desire is not toys, but real estate. Snoopy enters and wins the “Lights and Display” contest. Sallie asks for \$10 and \$20 explaining “All I want is what I have coming to me. All I want is my fair share!” As Linus knocks on a pink, aluminum Christmas tree he comments, “This really brings Christmas close to a person.” Lucy explains, “Christmas is a big commercial racket.” The money, the gifts, the lights; these expectations confuse the more important and deeper desires we have for connection, hope, and love.

But it is not just Christmas and its trappings that are hard this time of year. One of my Jewish friends has a notable dislike for Hanukkah, the Jewish winter holiday that falls around this time of year. She says it is a “Protestant” Jewish holiday used to counter Christmas, and I have had many other Jewish parents, no matter how much they like the holiday, tell me the same thing. And given that Chanukah is an eight-day holiday, there are eight times as many opportunities and or expectations for gift giving.

On the other hand, the United States has a Christian culture (I already saw a crèche up on what I consider public space – Hyde Park Square) as well as a strong consumer culture. I don’t think a crèche belongs on public space. We don’t see menorahs up the first day after Halloween; we see trees and stocking stuffers. Making Hanukkah a more significant holiday for Jews in the United States makes a lot of sense.

I have Jewish friends with a five-year-old who attends Jewish Day School. When asked by his grandparents what he would be doing this month he said “Seeing Santa Claus and Christmas.” You can believe he was in synagogue the next Friday. Yesterday Peter and I tried to talk him into Hanukkah (eight nights, good colors, menorahs, and jelly donuts). But he was unmoved and now his parents are struggling with issues of identity and cultural affinity.

This all adds to a sense of ambivalence experienced by many Jews, and Americans of other faiths this time of year. If your family is a mix of religions, Jewish, Christian, UU, or other (or none), you will feel this same intensity. How do we share holiday space?

Theologically Christmas is also a hot time of year for Unitarian Universalists. I hear some fairly strange things this time of year. One year it was a self-proclaimed secular humanist virtually yelling at me because we were not going to sing Handel’s Messiah on Christmas Eve. Where to begin? We aren’t Christian? You aren’t Christian? It’s an optional service? Handel’s Messiah might be more appropriate on Easter when Jesus is supposed to arise from the dead? I truly didn’t know how to respond. It’s December.

Behind all the peculiar interactions I have had with people during this time of year; one thing does stand out – emotion. Why was this man yelling at me about anything? Why is this person crying in my office? Why did a parent yell me at? I am given many reasons; tradition, religious and theological difference, mixed marriages, history, family dynamics. But I still think we are all talking, or rather emoting, and not talking about something deeper, emotions, hopes for love and feelings of loneliness and loss.

Christmas has the same problem as Valentine’s Day. On Valentines Day we are supposed to be in love with someone else and be loved back. Statistically speaking, what are our chances of having erotic love, of sharing erotic love with the partner of our choice one-day out of 365? They aren’t good. The build up to Valentines Day is sort of

crushing. And what we see on Valentines Day is such a limited view of love, such a minimal expression of the multiplicity of love, and no recognition that all love begins with loving oneself. Valentines Day is ultimately smothered under its own expectations.

Christmas has similar issues. I still remember sitting next to my internship supervisor for the children's service during Christmas Eve. Over 1,000 people come to First Parish in Concord for multiple Christmas Eve services. The logistics on that evening are mind-boggling. For the first time Gary had let a member in seminary lead the service. When the first thing went wrong I heard a short intake of breath. When the second thing went wrong there was a hiss. I looked over at Gary and told him to just breathe, to keep breathing.

Gary also had my favorite holiday anxiety dream of all time. In his dream he had to vault from the back of the sanctuary and make a perfect landing, arms outstretched into the pulpit. Isn't that what we are all looking for, some miracle?

Charlie Brown laments, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Is Christmas really about a miracle or something else? Think about it for a minute. What do you think the Christmas story is about?

Even for our friends who believe that Christmas is about salvation and God's new covenant, Christmas is about hope and love and I think it is rather a sad comment that hope and love have become miraculous. I believe that they are daily opportunities that we adults can create.

This is the emotional distress that fuels the winter holidays. Do we have enough love and hope in our lives? Most of us struggle with these issues in our families, and that is exactly whom we see (or not) from Thanksgiving to New Years, our families of origins, the partners we have married, the families we have raised, family. When the holidays begin we remember our childhoods, our hopes and they mix together, the past and the present. So before you know it someone is in my office blurting out a painful story about her brother.

It's not that the winter holidays are good or bad. It's that families and relationships are so strong and so weak, so healing and so hurting. Getting "everything done," buying the "right" present that is the easy part, but we worry about these things and busy ourselves with these things when other things are not right. Sometimes it is a lot easier to purchase a \$2,000 gift than explore the complexity and disappointment of a relationship. The gift is the easy part.

I can remember speaking to someone who was raised in a family so poor that there were no Christmas presents and he hated Christmas. But the other part of his story, the more important part of his story, is that his father was in jail, which is a major reason his family was so poor and every Christmas he and his family were reminded of their father's absence, their poverty, their shame and alienation from others. I am certain if his father were available and attentive to his children, he and his wife could have made Christmas OK, maybe still hard, but OK for their children, even if they lived in poverty. Christmas can be the best for children and the worst for children. If your childhood Christmases were not good, just remember that you have the power to make different choices as an adult.

Parents, particularly of small children, have the power to make things OK for their children by being calm, hopeful, loving, appreciative, laughing. This makes small children safe regardless of the forces brewing outside of them. When my son was two he

just wanted to unwrap presents. He didn't care what was in the boxes; he just wanted to destroy wrapping paper.

Even now my son will be happy with our budget of \$75 for his Christmas gift. Now, my son is five, and I know it gets much harder when kids get older and like MP3 players and sports equipment. That I understand. But our parental gift does not show my son he is safe and it never will. Our parental gift does not show my son that he is loved and it never will. My son learns about safety and love on a day to day basis when his father and I bathe him and listen to him and play with him and laugh at his jokes and tickle him and apologize to him when we hurt his feelings. There is the miracle; there is the miracle, available every day regardless of religion or holidays.

Friends, the holidays are not the time of year when Billy will stop drinking, when Susannah is going to come home if she hasn't been home, when Dad is going to apologize for being an abusive parent. It's OK that there are broken parts in our lives. Anything that hurts will hurt more during the holidays. You lost your job, it will hurt. Things aren't going well in your family, it will hurt. That empty plate at the dinner table is going to be sad. But you are an adult. You can figure out what to do. Go ahead and be sad sometimes. There is room for this too in December.

Perhaps your family gatherings are silent, but still hurtful. It is the stiff hug from Mom and Dad, the same one you have received for fifty years on New Years that will bother you at your holiday gathering. It's the fact that your kids didn't call today which makes you wonder if they love you. You are an adult. You can figure out what to do.

The December holidays are like a litmus test of our emotions. As your minister I encourage you to be honest about the personal losses in your life this holiday season and begin to celebrate from there. Give yourself the emotional litmus test before you yell or cry or do some other peculiar thing and move on from there. Be honest so that you can nurture yourself. "Mom will not say 'I love you' when I see her and I know this and Hanukkah is just one day and not a measure of either my love or hope." "I don't need to host a large, exhausting, expensive holiday party and pretend to be happy so that I don't have to think about something else that upsets me more this time of year." It's also just fine to love parts of the holidays and not be able to bear other parts. Take what you enjoy, relish what you enjoy, and leave the rest behind. It's also OK to cry, to feel loss. It's OK.

One year I was at a friend's house for a Christmas Eve party. I was actually at my friend, John's, parent's house. John's entire noisy extended family was there. The Swedish meatballs were flowing, the house was loud. John's father went to light the fire and that was when the smoke started pouring out of the chimney into the house. Turns out John forgot to open the flue. John's mother ran around the house in tears yelling, "John, you ruined Christmas!" We still tease John's mother about this.

"You" can't "ruin" Christmas by forgetting to open the flue or dropping the roast or buying a cheaper gift. These are but outward manifestations of one day. They can't measure love or hope or even happiness or kindness or truth or safety, and a whole other list of things that I treasure. It was one smoky house and no one was hurt. Today it is just a funny story.

My son's day care recently put out a list of "12 tips to help parents and young children relieve stress during the holidays." It had all those usual things like limit activities, plan for transitions, take a break, exercise, the usual self-help list. It was good,

but it was missing one thing, talk to your friends and family. Be a real person and share your thoughts and feelings, this is how we find hope and love and relieve our fears. Reach out to someone you trust.

I also like humor in December. I looked at this list to help relieve stress and added two things to the top of my list A) Don't be a minister, B) Don't give birth to your child five days before Christmas. Oh well, that is where I begin from every holiday season. You have your own A, B, C, and D too. Name them. Whatever they are, it's OK and move forward from there. A, B, C, and D are not a post mortem on your life; they are just where you are this year. If you name them, it takes the hurtful power out of them.

And there are good things this time of year; parishioners who send photos of themselves in matching sweaters, unexpectedly warm weather, turkey for dinner, my Israeli friends who help us decorate our Christmas tree every year and then they argue about it like my parents used to do (I just love that), taking our son to the Festival of Lights. There is something out there that is fun, that offers you hope and love. Go find it and know that hope and love is not just for the few, but also for each of us if we choose and work to make it so.