

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

Merry Christmas !

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Ages Served

Adult
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Children ages 10 & up

Merry Christmas!...For Better or for Worse

The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and even into the first of the New Year, is a very interesting and rather unique time of the year. For some, it may be their favorite time of the year, associated with activity and pleasant memories. But for others it is often a time of sadness, even depression, loneliness, and a sense of frustration or fear, with the latter two often being related to whether that individual did or did not buy everything they felt they "should" for their loved ones and friends.

For many this holiday season may hold warm memories of family get-togethers, childhood excitement of coming down the stairs and seeing what was under the brightly lit tree, or even as a young parent staying up late to put together those dollhouses or bikes that never seem to quite have enough instructions or screws. But for others it may bring back memories of loneliness, families that were no longer together, or even at times of violence or abuse by a drunken or stressed-out parent.

Next March I will be turning 60. I never give a great deal of attention to one's age, believing that you tend to be only as old as you think you are (it can be a positive use of denial)... but I must confess that 60 is starting to sound a bit old. It also means that I have lived through 60 past holiday seasons; and I would just like to share a few thoughts about what I have learned, along with a few suggestions on how you might make this a more Merry Christmas.

I have learned that the joy we experience at Christmas does not correlate, positively or negatively, with how much we have spent on the gifts. Many memorable Christmases have been times when there weren't many dollars to go around. I remember my wife and me making gifts for others while we were in medical school. In fact, we spent much of one vacation doing just that. While she is quite talented in the craft making arena, I felt quite proud of the ice candles that I made and the carved leather coasters. I also think people appreciated the thought, time, and effort that went into it. Anything that you can make of a personal nature that may have special meaning or indicate that you devoted your time to making it will tend to be special to the one receiving it. This also is true of children, as I have seen them get extremely excited over hand carved wooden toys, as opposed to being disappointed if they do not get the latest Guitar Hero.

Things are tight financially for many, and while perhaps defining "tight" is a bit relative to what one is used to, there are things that you can do in giving the gift of memories to those you love. You may plan a special outing or activity with your children. I remember as an intern going out with our children looking for the best looking "scrub pine" in the Virginia woods around where we lived. It wasn't the prettiest tree by general standards... actually, by any standard... but it was certainly more memorable than when we've gone to a parking lot to pick one out or hauled one down out of the attic. I felt a bit like Paul Bunyan, and dragging it back to the house was a bit like a Hallmark movie. It may be just as memorable to take the little ones to a park and feed the ducks or to a petting zoo where you can explain how Mary may have ridden on a donkey "just like that one," if that is not something you ordinarily do.

It is important to try and build family traditions, whether it is the reading of the Christmas story, watching Miracle on 34th Street for the 30th time, or even making your own Christmas tree ornaments or decorations. It's not how much money you spend that determines the quality of the memory, but it may be about how much time you're willing to spend. For those of you who often find the holiday season associated particularly with sad or hurtful memories, you might want to think of the ones that have been positive and either put together a written journal about what made them special, or, if you have photographs, put together a scrapbook and share it with at least one other person.

I would also encourage parents who are finding things particularly tight financially with the current economy. Even if you have had previous Christmases in which you could buy more and "better" (often equated by many with cost), remember how the children often spend as much time enjoying and playing with the boxes and the colored paper as they do the toy. Especially for younger children, you can go and get some large left over appliance boxes at perhaps an appliance store or Home Depot, build a fort or dollhouse that need not be too elaborate, and they will enjoy that and remember it for a long time. Even longer if you play in it with them. I'm sure many of you can come up with your own ideas of how to make Christmas special without making it more stressful by assuming that the quality of Christmas and Christmas giving is not determined by the cost or quantity of the gifts.

I want to just close this with some thoughts that were originally written by Fra Giovanni in 1513 A.D. He wrote the following:

I am your friend, and my love for you goes deep. There is nothing I can give you which you have not got; but there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it, you can take. No heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in today. Take heaven! No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present little instant. Take peace! The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. There is radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see, and to see, we have only to look. I beseech you to look. Life is so generous a giver, but we, judging its gifts by their covering, cast them away as ugly, or heavy, or hard. Remove the covering, and you will find beneath it a living splendor, woven of love, by wisdom, with power. Welcome it, grasp it, and you touch the angel's hand that brings it to you. Everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty, believe me, that angel's hand is there; the gift is there, and the wonder of an overshadowing Presence. Our joys too: be not content with them as joys. They, too, conceal diviner gifts. Life is so full of meaning and purpose, so full of beauty-- beneath its covering-- that you will find earth but cloaks your heaven. Courage then to claim it: that is all! But courage you have; and the knowledge that we are pilgrims together, wending through unknown country, home. And so, at this time, I greet you. Not quite as the world sends greetings, but with profound esteem and with the prayer that for you now and forever, the day breaks, and the shadows flee away.

By Fra Giovanni-- 1513 A.D.

One significant memory I have of holidays past are the many Christmas Eve candlelight services at church. Singing the Christmas carols such as "Silent Night" or "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" reminds me of the fact that God gave us the greatest gift possible in the person of His Son being born to bring salvation to a desperately needy world, including myself and loved ones and you and your loved ones. It cost God much, but as Giovanni describes regarding life and its treasures, God's gift is there if we are only willing to accept it.

Merry Christmas and a joyful New Year from all of us at Stonebriar Psychiatric Services!



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