



At the risk of stating the obvious, I'm going out on a very short limb to say that the winter of 2020 is an altogether different experience than past holiday seasons. As much as we'd like for it not to be the case, the pandemic is still a reality and political divisiveness is still raging. In the midst of it all, I shout to the skies to bring on that holiday cheer!

Decorate downtown store windows and front porches with as many lights as your hookups can handle. Spread artificial snow to the rooftops. Make reservations, hop in your car, drive to Murrell's Inlet, and be gobsmacked by Brookgreen Gardens' "Nights of a Thousand Candles." Read "The Night Before Christmas" to your kids, and if you have none, read it yourself as you guzzle eggnog or hot toddies until you're giddy.

Should you actually be able to do any of that, then ho-ho-ho into December and enjoy this cheery time.

That said, the reality of Merry Christmas, Happy Hannukah, Joyous Kwanzaa – or however you choose to celebrate this time of year – is that the season can be a tough time for many people.

For those so inclined, an overwhelming array of demands present themselves. Think bucking parking lot crowds for gift and ingredient shopping, spending hours online to locate this year's sought-after toy, Betty Crocker-ing in the kitchen, and Mr. Cleaning the house for payback entertaining, not to mention selecting gifts for people you may not have seen since March. And should you chance attending that ritzy party on the Point solely for its fabulous bourbon selection and exquisite shrimp'n'grits... or not? Will masks be optional? How high are the numbers right now anyway? Talk about stress.

The ideal expressed by Norman Rockwell's illustrations of "the perfect Christmas" can indeed be a setup for feelings of failure if one's experience doesn't even come close to that image. According to the artist's concept, excited families drive from the four corners of the country to happily gather 'round the holiday table, a groaning board complete with a huge roasted turkey and all the trimmings – okay, with a nod to the present, perhaps fried turkey or turducken or tofurkey. While chowing down on scrumptious vittles, smiling family members take turns enumerating their gratitudes, and after polishing off grandma's pecan pie, spend quality time together watching a Hallmark Channel Christmas movie. What bliss!

Lest you think me related to the Grinch, and if this *is* your experience, by all means revel in it and thank the heavens for your good fortune.

However, in many family holiday get-togethers, dysfunctional dynamics and eccentricities hold court and direct the drama. Due in part to loneliness, family issues, addictions, and military-and-other-trauma-related PTSD, "holiday stress and depression" became entities long before the aforementioned presence of Covid and America's political situation. These current crises have upped the ante for widespread blues that are affecting a significant number of people. So many people have lost dear family members and close friends to the virus. And with the numbers of folks testing positive climbing, many people have cancelled those togetherness plans in lieu of staying safe.

I can't help but wonder how Norman might have imagined holiday season 2020. Despite the odds, I have a feeling that, no matter how deep he might have had to dig, his positive perceptions would have led him to create a message of hope. The thing is, no matter how dark circumstances may appear, there *is* always hope, even though sometimes you have to simply trust the truth of that until it becomes clear. That steady faith is the backbone of Twelve Step programs and the source for one of its many right-on-target slogans, "It works if you work it."

Following are a few time-tested suggestions for "working" the season into a time that can be manageable for you, even though it may not come close to a widely-held vision of "ideal." Perhaps one or more of these might speak to you and ease your mind a smidgeon.

- In case you didn't realize this, at a certain point in your life you get to choose your family, none of whom have to be related to you by blood. Think carefully about the truth of this and you may find it freeing, perhaps even lifting a burden from your shoulders. You can spend holiday

time with a person or people whom you like and who like you. Trust me, it'll sure perk up your December.

- If you're sad for any reason, acknowledge your feelings. Don't try to pretend everything's fine when you don't feel that way. It's okay to cry or express your concerns.
- Be realistic. Don't try to move heaven and earth to be with loved ones just because it's Christmas. Be open to adapting and changing your plans. Maybe schedule a celebration next summer instead at a beach house on the ocean. Or how about a virtual Christmas? Since Covid began, my family, which is spread across the nation, has been zooming twice each month, and we've become much closer.
- Set aside differences, especially if they involve politics. Leave that hot potato cooling and express your pride at gifting a donation in each family member's name to Heifer International or the Palmetto Animal League. Perhaps send a donation as a memorial gift.
- Stick to a budget and you won't dread those January bills. Well...only property tax.
- Learn to say no. Give your calendar some blessed time off. Read a book. Listen to music. Carve out alone time for yourself and/or to be with those close to you. Honor that gift.
- Take care of your health. Eat good food in moderate amounts with a very occasional indulgence, and have a tiny, good-for-you snack to keep your appetite under control before holiday buffets. Get plenty of sleep. Meditate or practice yoga to stay present. Breathe deeply and often.
- Keep up your regular exercise to avoid the promise of New Year's resolutions that you'll never keep. Take regular breaks from the news and social media for a reality check. Step outside and revel in our Lowcountry nature.
- Last – and perhaps most important – remember that if you aren't up and perky and reveling in the joy of it all, you're not remotely alone. If you can't shake those down feelings, you're sad and/or anxious, you're grieving, you can't sleep, or you're feeling irritable and hopeless, seek help. Talk to a close friend or buddy, an online support group, a minister, or a licensed therapist. The latter professional can help you figure out where your feelings come from and develop solutions to overcome them.

And don't forget to look up at the sky on these dark December nights and be dazzled by the stars, planets, constellations, Milky Way, and all the seeming magic that appears in that deep velvet void.

“they looked up at the stars and said,

‘why are there so many of you?’

the stars quietly responded

'to remind you that you're not alone.'"

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