

Do you have the post-holiday malaise?

For some, the holidays are something to be dreaded, even avoided if possible. The mix of family dynamics is exceedingly stressful, largely because we can't control everything. Someone will say something or do something, and you'll probably have to deal with the consequences, wondering why everyone can't just get along.

If the above describes your perspective, when the holidays are over then it's probably a joy. Indeed, it's a downright pleasure to return to regular life. Things are fairly predictable and when they're not, we can generally deal with it.

But if you find that the holidays *are* a joyful time for you, and the letdown after they're over is nearly unbearable, it's worth asking why they bring you such joy and if there is a way to extend some of that joy. Of course, if you find that the holidays are miserable, you might explore if the problem is the people you have to associate with or if the problem is in you. Starting with ourselves is generally a good approach.

Now to be fair, we're not going to be able to extend the joy of a holiday permanently. It is, after all, a special day. To paraphrase *The Incredibles*, if every day is a special day, no day is special. If your holiday was a good one, there will be a coming down from it. Think of the holidays as "peak joy". But just because the holidays are "peak joy" doesn't necessarily mean that we have to suffer through enormous emotional peaks and valleys.

With all of that in mind, here are some incomplete thoughts on why we enjoy the holidays and how we might explore ways to have more joy in our daily lives.

Purpose

Holidays have a purpose. For Thanksgiving and Christmas, the names say it all. Thanksgiving is a time to come together to give thanks, presumably to the Almighty for our blessings. Christmas is “Christ’s Mass” – a time to come together to celebrate the birth of Christ for Christians, though it has morphed as society has become more secularized and companies have taken advantage of the gift-giving symbolism during an age of consumerism.

Whether we want to admit it or not, there is something in our nature that demands purpose. We want to have a *reason* to live, to work, to do much of anything. We are not satisfied to simply do something like an animal because of instinct, we have to give meaning to it.

That idea of purpose carries over into our daily lives. Why am I here? What’s the point of my job? Why do I have a spouse and children? Am I supposed to be alone all of my life? We all ask those questions at different times, but finding purpose, even in a big-picture way, can help us take joy in the mundane. We find peace in purpose. Have you found purpose to your everyday life?

Family

If the holidays are known for anything, it is the reuniting with family. Even more than mere reuniting, the holidays often involve a purposeful focus on family. We set time aside to be with family. We catch up, we have the conversations that often haven’t happened, we play games, we immerse ourselves in family.

Our daily lives generally don’t look anything like the time we have with family during the holidays. Extended family is often separated by large distances, rarely able to get together more than a few times during the year. The economy certainly plays a role in that separation as

people move across town or even across the country for work. But it hasn't always been like that. Furthermore, is it always worth it? If you come from a depressed portion of the country, certainly, but is there ever a point of sacrificing one's desires to preserve family? It's a question that has come up more and more in some circles.

As we look at the economy, social security, health care costs, debt, etc., a growing portion of people are wondering if the economic treadmill is worth it. Might clustering together as family, with multiple generations living in very close proximity or even sharing housing, be a way to not only survive but thrive? In the past it was and for many immigrant groups it still is a way to do well. Certainly, it would be a culture-shift and not something that can be done haphazardly, but it might be worth considering as a long-term plan. If family is a source of strength and joy, why not find ways to be together more?

The idea of spending time with extended family applies to our "nuclear" family as well. These days, even intact families spend only limited time together. More often, members of families are highly scheduled with sports and extracurricular activities. Even just eating together as a whole family can be difficult at times, let alone talking, teaching, playing games, or reading with the kids. Nonetheless, if it is family that gives you joy, maybe it's time to take a serious look at all of those extracurricular activities and the overall busyness of today. Do we need to do all of them?

If family brings us joy, how do we make more room for it?

Giving

One of the main components of the end-of-the-year holidays is gratitude and giving. On one side, we are reminded to

be grateful for the things we receive, even the everyday blessings such as good health. The other side of the holidays is the emphasis on giving.

Giving done right takes the focus off of us and our wants, and instead teaches us to focus on the needs of others. It's hard to do that these days when so many advertisements and cultural inputs are telling us to focus on ourselves. Yet, almost from the beginning of man, we have known that a focus on giving is actually a surer way to finding joy and peace in our daily lives than an emphasis on getting.

Perhaps a way to keep the joy of the holidays alive is to extend our frequency of giving and charity rather than reserving them for special occasions. Do you feed the homeless in April or May, or just around the holidays? Do you seek out the lonely and destitute all year, or just during the holidays?

It's certainly something to think about and it relates quite a bit to one's "purpose" in life.

Rest

Finally, it's worth pointing out that the rest provided by Thanksgiving and Christmas is a welcome break. In the past, America shut down on Sundays. It was culturally expected that nearly everyone, of all socioeconomic backgrounds, would rest at least one day a week. That even meant taken a break from work around the house or shopping. Obviously those days are gone.

As the last remaining sacred times, the holidays reacquaint us with a moment set apart for rest, purpose, and family. Unfortunately, companies are even trying to make inroads into those sacred times to extend their selling periods and increase their bottom lines. Rather than giving in to the relentless busyness and consumerism

of today, we might want to figure out how to reclaim rest as individuals and a culture. Each of us probably needs to be better about carving out and defending times to rest. We are only human and we need it.

While certainly not a complete or thorough list, these are a few things to ponder as we move through the holiday season. When humanity has flourished, it has nearly always involved various components of the list above. It would be our hope that we may all flourish again as individuals and as a society. The easy part, though, is to talk about it; the tough part is doing it.