



Holiday Happiness

By Wendy Marks
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Thanksgiving is just recently over and the Christmas lights are already up. Holiday music is everywhere you go; at the mall, at the dentist and even at the airport. It is encouraging for us to have a "Merry Little Christmas," to buy the latest gadgets or toys, to show our love to the world, settle 'round with the family, and receive and bring joy.

Many of those lyrics were written at a time when family was very different in form and structure than it is today. We live far from our relatives, have smaller families, and almost half of us live alone. We don't have large sit down meals with dozens of people, and share tons of gifts around a tree. But somewhere in our thoughts, reinforced by the advertising, music, and pictures, we think we will somehow, if we get it all right, have a picture-perfect Christmas, or other seasonal holiday with a circle of happy family and holiday good spirits.

Movies, TV and internet specials reinforce a family group all in good cheer. This image however is one that may never have existed except in media images in the first place. Let's face it, families have scattered all over the map. I have relatives in several parts of the country and friends over the globe. As much as I'd love to get everyone in my living room for a nice fire and holiday food, that is most likely never going happen. The reality is, even in more localized families the gatherings will be smaller and may not be happening at all due to schedules and work commitments. We are busy people. But the fantasy remains. And it often makes us feel like we are outliers, not in the mainstream of the celebrations.

Some folks become depressed comparing their lives to an ideal; others try frantically to make it all happen. Let's take a deep breath. What is realistic for the holidays and what would really make you feel good?

First, let's take a look at what we are celebrating, be it a miracle of light, Jesus' birth, or the winter solstice. It is the time when winter begins and the start of the season of introspection. So come with me for a minute and reimagine it: the best cure for sadness or loneliness is to do something for someone else. The Dalai Lama says so, as do many therapists and mothers worldwide (including this mother).

Many years ago my children decided that they were blessed with abundance. They felt that their Thanksgiving was an overwhelming display of food, drink, family and fellowship. They wanted to find a way to share in their abundance. I'll admit that at first I was skeptical. Was this a school project, a focus for a moment, soon to be discarded? But they surprised me. I sent them to research where we could do some good on Thanksgiving and still make it home to cook the turkey and do the fixings. They found a church in a nearby town that fed the homeless Thanksgiving dinner. We could go and use their giant kitchen to make food from donated staples

given by local supermarkets and serve it to all the people who came because they had nowhere to go.

Making this meal was quite a challenge, as we never knew what would be donated aside from turkey. There were some pretty creative experiments in that kitchen. There with folks from families, old and young, single and coupled, and we made a feast! This went on for several years and each year was better than the last. Alas, my children went off to college and our journey ended.

So why now am I telling this story. Because we felt so good. In 2016 we did not have a wonderful, shiny Thanksgiving. We did not have many people and much food. Circumstances changed and we had to forgo a wonderful celebration because we needed to pull together as a family and help out. But my children and I were together, and helping each other out. And it made me remember our past Thanksgivings. We were blessed with the gift of each other's love and caring. And it was more than enough.

This season take some time to volunteer, call an elderly neighbor, invite strangers into your home. Break out of the TV mode; turn it off, turn off the music and ask yourself "What can I do to make someone's holiday happier?" and return to the spirit of giving and loving. That is what really matters. I am grateful every day for life, health, kids (human and furry), family and dear friends.

Time to give back.

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