

When The Holidays Hurt

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



I'm not sure when it happened, exactly. Looking back, I can't pinpoint the specific year things changed... when I transformed from a cheerful holiday enthusiast into one of those folks who often feels cranky and overwhelmed this time of year.

Maybe it's just a middle age thing. Maybe it's because I no longer have a small child in the house, because the losses are adding up, because the world is full of sorrow. Maybe it happens to everybody eventually, and maybe (hopefully) it's not even permanent. I read recently that human happiness over a lifetime is shaped like a U. Perhaps I'm at the bottom of the U curve, poised to rise back up the other side?

All I know is that at some point over the past few seasons, the scales tipped and something inside me shifted. My long-held, cherished feelings of excitement, generosity and wonder were finally trumped – beat down, if you will – by the forces of commerce, commotion, excess and expectation. Somewhere along the line, the magic became . . . the motions.

When I'd hear others singing these "holiday blues" in years gone by, I'd secretly roll my eyes. *Snap out of it*, I'd think.

The holidays are wonderful! Just light a cinnamon candle, put on some Christmas music, pour yourself some eggnog and get with the program!

Now I'm the poor sap driving around town, weeping spontaneously every time she hears "Where Are You, Christmas?" on the radio.

Do you have any *idea* how often they play "Where Are You, Christmas?" on the radio?

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Still, where there are tears, there is hope, right? A longing unfulfilled is still a longing, a healthy sign, an intimation of something real but not quite reachable. As long as I can still cry over losing Christmas, I know it's not really lost.

"The world is too much with us; late and soon," wrote William Wordsworth. "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

The sonnet is over 200 years old, written during the First Industrial Revolution. In it, the poet mourns humanity's estrangement from the natural world, from its awesome grandeur that once inspired . . . its ancient rhythms that once resonated in concert with our own. You have to wonder what ol' Wordsworth would make of the Internet Age – of our 24-hour information dump, 24-hour advertising, 24-hour shopping . . . our 24-hour connection that makes us all feel, ironically, a little less connected.

Never is the "worldliness" Wordsworth speaks of – our obsession with "getting and spending" – more fully activated than at this time of year. Combine that getting/spending mania with our collective insistence on loud, bright, noisy festivity. Then juxtapose it all with the shorter, colder days . . . the wilting flowers in the window boxes . . . the trees baring their branches under greying skies . . . the morning madrigals of birdsong giving way to stark silence. What you've got, I think, is a recipe for psychological disorientation . . . a kind of mind/body bipolarity.

Did that make any sense? Probably not . . . but trust me, I think I'm heading somewhere with this. Just keep in mind that I am not a psychologist – nor any kind of ologist – and these are just the musings of an increasingly odd Bird Lady.

But, if you're still with me, here's what I'm thinking. I'm thinking there's an air of desperation in our frantic holiday machinations. We're in a kind of denial. On some deep, primal level, we feel the year coming to an end . . . feel the natural world shutting down, going into hibernation, shriveling up, dying. And it scares us a little, mortal creatures that we are. We don't want to go there. To steal from another favorite poet, we're not about to go gentle into that good night. So we decorate like crazy and throw glittering parties and eat 'til we're sick and shop 'til we drop. We rage – oh, how we rage – against the dying of the light.

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Bless our hearts. Can you blame us?

But at some point – for some of us, anyway – it all becomes too much. It begins to feel forced and even fake, all this bright, manic cheer. There's too much noise, too much food, too much festivity. The constant bombardment of holiday commercials becomes almost physically painful. (I'm talking to you, Target.) The Christmas music on the radio – once such a joy – starts to sound like so much droning, especially now that we hear it for two months straight. ("The same forty songs, over and over," my husband gripes.) The mere thought of all the shopping we must do – even if we plan to knock it out online – becomes damn near paralyzing.

Okay, I'm bringing *myself* down, so I'll cut to the proverbial chase. If you've managed to escape the holiday blues thus far, congratulations! Consider yourself lucky and enjoy the season. For those of you who know what I'm talking about, though – who are currently bracing for the annual onslaught of mixed emotions – I think I have some advice. I'm not sure it'll work, mind you, but it's what I'm planning to try . . .

In short? Relax. Don't fight this feeling. Let it come. Winter *is* approaching and the earth really *is* going to sleep. This is as it should be. And it is good. (Here in the Lowcountry, it's a very short, light sleep, anyway. More like a catnap.) Allow yourself to feel nature's waning; embrace that melancholy. Revel in it, even. Allow yourself to grieve for the year gone by – it's only natural – and know that spring will surely come.

(No, this doesn't mean you get out of shopping and decorating and partying. I'm not your freaking fairy godmother. But once you – *we* – relax a little and allow ourselves to feel what we feel, I think those pursuits will become fun again.)

And one more thing: If you have a faith tradition, now's the time to jump in with both feet. Immerse yourself. At its best, spiritual practice takes the raw material of our days and sets it to poetry, distilling order and beauty from chaos. For me, the close observation of Advent is the best antidote to the holiday blues. Advent is everything The Holidays are not. A quiet anticipation . . . a solemn, watchful waiting. It requires nothing of me but a heart that's open and ready to receive the gift of the incarnation. When I allow The Holidays to obscure Advent – when I'm blinded by the bright, shiny shimmer of the season – I risk missing out on the coming of the Light. Whether you're Christian or Jew, Pagan or Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu or something else entirely, spiritual practice can be a source of both peace and energy this time of year.

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I know myself well enough to know I can't *force* Christmas. But if I give myself the occasional gift of silent stillness – if I face the darkening, dying year, mournful but unafraid – Christmas will come to me. As yet another poet wrote, *“The*
light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Take that, Holiday Blues!

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. Read her regular column [Rants & Raves](#) and catch her on her blog at www.memargaret.com