

Chapter 32: A Sane Preholiday Rush, and a Savory Holiday

December holidays (Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and others I may not be aware of) are special in many ways, much of which can be expressed as *more*:

- More gift-giving
- More celebrating
- More eating and drinking
- More after-Christmas shopping (giving new meaning to the phrase “Many happy returns of the day”)

And some less-savory aspects:

- More societal expectation that we should be merry and celebratory as the holidays approach. And that we should carry the holiday spirit throughout December.
- More hype and advertising. The message is, “If you love your family and our economy, you’ll go out and do your (market) share. Get out there and shop ’til you drop!” It’s hard to keep our priorities straight and to remember what the holidays are about at their core. My understanding is that they weren’t originally intended to account for 40 percent of annual sales.

We have two challenges in this frenetic month: (a) Moving through the pre-holiday period with as much calm and enjoyment as possible, while not buckling under the pressures of work, holiday shopping, and our mixed feelings about the upcoming holidays.(b) Being in the holiday period itself in an as-present and life-affirming way as possible, without drowning in *more*. Here are some appreciative ways to deal with each of these challenges.

Pre-holiday Self-Care

1. Give yourself many stillpoints. I introduced the stillpoint concept of Dr. David Kundtz in chapter 15. A stillpoint is a brief respite—a few seconds, or as much as a fifteen-minute break—that allows you to breathe and come back to yourself. We probably need more stillpoints than usual this week. Here’s a starter kit of stillpoint opportunities:
 - waiting on line at the post office
 - pumping gas
 - making out holiday cards

- writing a report
- caring for a parent or infant

This week, each stillpoint is an investment in our sanity.

2. Cultivate positive images of the upcoming holidays. Picture yourself happily immersed in the settings you'll be in. Get into the scene in your mind's eye. Picture who'll be there and what they (and you) will be wearing, smell the smells and taste the food and drink, laugh the laughs, enjoy the private conversations, feel the crunch of the snow beneath your shoes or skis. The more senses you can employ, the more effective the image will be in creating a state of positive anticipation.

When you feel rushed or stressed this week, call to mind one or more of the above scenes, savor it for a moment, and then resume your business, refreshed and replenished. The more often you can focus on positive anticipation, (a) the more pleasant the preholiday activities will be, in and of themselves, and (b) the more enjoyable the ensuing holidays will be. Each time you focus on the positive anticipatory image, you train your brain to enjoy the holidays when they eventually arrive. You're feeding your brain positive messages like "holidays = good feelings."

If you find yourself unable to summon up those positive images, maybe you could give yourself a "good (i.e., a life-affirming) talking-to" (see chapter 19 for more on this). Seek the counsel of someone you trust, and talk about the upcoming holidays and how to enjoy them. If your holiday plans hold the promise of more distress than you wish to experience, maybe you simply need to consider modifying them. Positive anticipation is not meant to be happy talk. In Appreciative Inquiry, there's something called the constructionist principle. It tells us that in every situation, there's more than one truth. It's usually wisest to choose the truth that's most life affirming. That's not happy talk; that's simply wise choosing.

Savoring the Holidays

Savoring is defined as the awareness of pleasure, and the devoting of deliberate attention to that experience. Heaven knows there'll be plenty of opportunity to be aware of pleasurable indulgences next week: the opening of presents, the look on recipients' faces as they express (or feign) delight and surprise, the offering of truly savory food and drink, the way-too-many football games and endless reruns of *Miracle on 34th Street*, and all the rest.

The more you focus on savoring each separate aspect of what goes on during the holidays, the more you'll enjoy them, and the less taxed you'll be. If you've ever gone to a wine tasting, you'll recall being instructed on wine mindfulness: how to view, swirl, smell, sip, swallow, and experience the wine. As a result, you probably paid a lot more attention to your experience, you tasted the wine more deeply and fully than usual, and you drank more mindfully. And you probably consumed less than you might otherwise have.

Applying that example to our holidays, we would try to approach each situation—each present opened, each meal, each drink, each video viewing, and so on—with greater intention to savor. We would devote deliberate attention to the experience. Fred Bryant and Joe Veroff at University of Chicago have researched how best to do that, as I discussed in chapters 14 through 16. Here are some of their recommended practices:

- We'd practice **absorption**: We'd get into the food, the drink, and the activity in a fully immersed way. We might even limit our conversation, from time to time, to savor the moment. It may be awkward to be silent and still while in holiday company, but you can create frequent stillpoints where you remember to pay attention to the experience.
- We'd also **share the experience with others**: When we not only go through an experience with others, but we also comment on how cool, how meaningful, and/or how enjoyable it is while we're in the midst of it, we deepen our savoring.
- We'd **build memories**: This may consist of creating Kodak moments. It may also consist of taking small mementos of particularly meaningful holiday events: a program from Christmas Eve services, a coaster from a restaurant, a souvenir from the place you visited over the holidays (you know, stuff you'd never buy if you were in your right mind), and so on.

There's no magic to savoring the holidays. There's just (a) mindfulness, (b) a conscious willingness to focus on the good stuff, (c) an intention to catch ourselves when we're on overload or going negative, and (d) using that awareness as a cue to give ourselves frequent breaks from the action (a.k.a. stillpoints). And, of course, purchasing some goofy souvenirs.

It works for me. How about you? Think about your practices for keeping your sanity in the lead-up to the holidays, and maximizing your joy, delight, and meaningfulness during them. Resolve to call upon them in this frenetic time.

PRACTICES

In addition to applying the practices discussed in this chapter, consider the following practices:

1. Think about your own best practices for staying present and centered in the midst of intense or chaotic situations. When are you at your best in such circumstances? Reflect on how you can apply those practices to the lead-up to the holidays.
2. Think about who your most effective role models have been as far as weathering the preholiday buildup and the holidays themselves. What are their secret recipes for remaining centered? How can you apply those recipes? When feeling as though you're succumbing to holiday or preholiday stress, pause and ask yourself what your favorite hero would do. See what you discover.

3. On a three-by-five-inch index card (or on your PDA or as a screen saver on your computer), note the following three practices for savoring the holidays. For each one, make a note about how you can apply it. (For example: “Building Memories: Use my video camera to capture special occasions.”)

- Absorption
- Sharing the Experience With Others
- Building Memories

When the holidays are getting to you (when they’re just too much, or not enough), review the three practices and see if they provide any insights and cues you can use.

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