

Antidote to the too-busy Christmas

Jean Sweeney/CNS

What is it about Christmas that stirs our deepest vulnerabilities?

Each year as a pastoral counselor I witness a slight regression in clients and in some people who are in spiritual direction. They re-face tender feelings from growing-up days.

Along with the longing and expectation of the Christmas season is hidden fear, anxiety, self-doubt, depression and loss. The Christmas holidays, more than other special times, are loaded with emotional impact. If a loved one has died near Christmas it forever marks the season, but there are also other issues.

A man I'll call Jack grew up in a heavy-drinking family with a dad who made lots of promises but rarely followed through. Jack dreamed of a Christmas Day where his often-fractured family went peacefully to church together, sat under the Christmas tree, opened presents and ate a big happy meal.

Instead, there was disaster and chaos in at least one of those events every year. He remembered the tears of his mother, and his own terror and protection of younger siblings, during fierce arguments, plate throwing, slamming doors.

As a married man with his own family, Jack's inner anxiety caused him to control and orchestrate the family Christmas. His ideas ruled. He had no tolerance for any normal family mishap that changed the grand plan of the day.



Jack had to learn the lesson of the first Christmas. Mary and Joseph needed to have a great deal of flexibility. Things didn't happen as they wanted them to.

Jack learned that faithfulness to family was not built on controlling all that happened. He began to bear the anxiety of living with the unexpected in his children. He learned to look for the real love present.

As a child, Kathy tried to earn the love of her "too busy" parents. They

each had careers that were absorbing. Family time was squeezed in between work engagements.

Kathy remembers one Christmas when her parents both napped most of the day while she played by herself. She brought them food. As Kathy grew, she became a bit of a parent, keeping the household running. As an adult she was, by habit and need, still earning love from friends, acquaintances and family with her organizational skills and

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giving.

It meant that she was up late baking Christmas cookies and breads, making gift crafts, sewing and writing cards. All this was in addition to her full-time job, housework and doing homework with three children.

Depression set in as she began to dread the season of giving.

The Christmas season is a challenge for those who are beset by the exhaustion of perfectionism and the earning of love.

An antidote to the too-busy, too-perfect Christmas is to stop.

- Stop to take stock of your energies, your time, your real desires.
- Stop to think through your values.
- Stop to make real choices.
- Stop to take some moments to receive the people that you live with by listening to them.
- Stop to sit on the couch and snuggle with the children..
- Stop being afraid that you won't measure up.

Emmanuel, God-with-us, already knows you are limited. You are only fooling yourself.

Sweeney is a pastoral counselor at St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Arlington, Va.

The Courier will not be published on Dec. 25, 2003, or Jan. 1, 2004. We will resume publishing on Jan. 8, 2004.

GENERAL

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