

For a long time now I've had ambivalent feelings toward Christmas. Some of my blog posts from years past on the day and its meaning have very much celebrated its great sides (you can just search for "Christmas" on the blog and you'll see them). But I've long seen the downsides as well, frequently discussed among people we know and know about and more frequently felt even when not discussed. I still see these downsides - one above all - in some ways more and more every year. But I've begun to wonder if at least there might not be *something* good that can come out of them. Or at least a couple of them.

The one for which I think there is no real hope is the severe loneliness and depression the season causes for so many people. It is a fraught time, when everyone else seems to be enjoying family, friends, and festivities, but so many have no one and nothing to look forward to, or horrible experiences with the holiday in the past, personal disasters, family cataclysms, violently dashed hopes for a happy time. For many people - I know some, you may know even more, many of you are among them - the "joyful" holiday is the most miserable time of the year.

I know some very sanguine people who see such miseries as an opportunity to help - go to the rescue mission to serve meals on the day, visit a lonely neighbor, do something nice for someone not expecting it. But I think I know more people who are inspired by the idea of it being an opportunity for doing good who are principally hopeful that others take the opportunity.

My own reaction to those who have an awful time of it is more frequently simply paralysis. There are some experiences that are just awful with no redeeming feature to them.

When confronted with such situations, instead of making suggestions and offering bright ideas (Hey, why don't you just do X?) my response is more often that of Job's friends - not in the poetic part of the book where they blame everything on the one who is suffering and offer sage advice from their superior position to let him know what to do to improve his lot - put in the narrative tale itself, where they are struck mute by his anguish and simply sit with him for three days saying nothing. Instead of solving people's problems, sometimes that's the best thing you can do.

About that, the biggest problem, I have nothing really to say. But there are two others I've had some thoughts on recently: the massive crass materialism of the season and the fact that for many of us it is the one time of the year when we go out of our way to enjoy the presence of those we love and show real concern for others we are either reasonably or only remotely connected with. Why once a year?

I'm not going to talk about the economic realities of the crass materialism, the need for businesses to have the season to make a profit for the year, and thus keep people employed, and keep the economy afloat - all things for which we can be grateful indeed. Nothing like economic crisis to long for the good ole days when there was money to be spent. But the materialism I'm talking about is more on the personal level, the crass desire for more and more and more and more. I understand it. Most of us were raised in it. And the holiday season more than any other promotes it.

How ironic. The actual *point* of the Christmas season is to give, not to receive. And to give out of love and gratitude, not necessity and obligation, or a desire to impress. Even though I am not a Christian, I resonate deeply with the actual basis and meaning of the season. It is a severely anti-material message. The Christmas story is about how God, for no benefit to himself, sent his Son into the world as an infant. His Son came not because he

would get a solitary good thing out of it. He came into a world of pain in order to suffer a life of hardship and poverty with the ultimate goal of being publicly tortured to death, for the sake of others. To help others. As an act of grace for others. To bring salvation to the world.

The season is to reflect on that infant taking this upon himself and to be grateful for the incomprehensible gift that has been received.

But we have turned it into the opposite. Kids are raised to think of nothing except what they are going to *get*. And they grow up like that. We all grew up like that. It's about us. Our presents. What we can get from others to make ourselves happy. Ugh.

At the same time - to heighten the irony - it comes in the season where, at least as adults, we work hard to foster the idea that this is the time to be nice to each other, and pleasant, and jovial, and helpful, and considerate. And so the materialism (starting now at Halloween) is coupled with a sense that we really should be better people. And it lasts for the season. But why do we need a point in the calendar to be self-consciously decent, loving human beings?

OK, so these are my dark thoughts of Christmas. But I've recently been thinking about the upside of the materialism and the seasonality of the holiday. I need to say that I am not Pollyanna about the problems, and never will be. But I am starting to see how they may not be an entirely bad thing (quite apart from the arguments based on the US economy and that it is indeed nice to be around nice people for a while).

My thinking actually has been motivated by something completely different. My exercise routine. Go figure.

For most of my life I've been a believer in exercise; I was always active as a kid, not a great athlete but always doing things, baseball, tennis, running. As an adult my activities shifted (racketball!) and I slipped away a bit on and off, but for many years now I've exercised regularly, whether in the gym on a cross trainer and lifting weights or running (which I hate) or walking (which I love) and so on.

about a few years ago I started getting serious about core exercises and stretching. Getting older. Aches and pains. Back problems. Hip pain. Need to keep the body not just moving but reasonably supple and as pain free as possible. And I've noticed something. This kind of exercise in many, many ways is less satisfying than, say, doing something seriously aerobically or lifting weights, where there is something actually to measure - HA! Ran six miles! Ha! Got my heartrate up to 160 for five minutes! OHa! Benchpressed 220! Or Something that can be quantified. Now it's - OK, I did 15 minutes of core. Uh, well, OK.

But I've noticed something. Some months ago I started forcing myself doing five minutes of core (for the back) right out of bed. Then decided, hey, I can do ten minutes - why not? / Then it went to 15. Then to 20. And so on.

It's a great routine for me. And started with me doing *something* but not a *big* thing. And just recently I've wondered if Christmas can have that effect on some people.

Yes, it's a lot of obligation and necessity and buying and it's tiring and often aggravating. But it's also the pleasure of seeing people open presents and realizing that you've made

someone happy. And yes, it's once a year. But again, it brings a good feeling.

And the point is, good feelings can be addictive. So I wonder if, for many people (I'm not talking about the hopelessly lonely and depressed here), even though it's obligatory and seasonal, it kind of "catches on" and makes them more inclined to be like that generally. To give things when there's no obligation. To buy things not just for themselves but for others. To give money to those who could really need and would really appreciate it. And not just once a year, but as a life style.

I have no way to know how to see if that's right, except anecdotally. I think maybe it does work that way for me, at least. I'm not always like that throughout the year (oh boy am I not), but I wonder if I'm more like that because there's one time of the year when I focus on being like that.

In any event, it's a hopeful thought.

My other hopeful thought is that you have a wonderful Christmas, calm, restful, happy, joyful among those you love; and if it is a very hard time for you, please know that there are happy and kind thoughts speeding your way from here.



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