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### Season's Meanings

In the iconic scene from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, the dispirited Charlie Brown stands on a stage with a tiny disheveled pine tree he picked out after passing up the “big shiny aluminum Christmas trees” Lucy wanted him to buy. He laments the commercialization of the holiday and cries out in frustration “Is there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” Linus (always calm and collected), shuffles forth dragging his security blanket behind him, replying “Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.” He proceeds to tell the story of Jesus’ birth. The “aluminum trees” and other commercial symbols blend into the background as Charlie Brown’s outlook (and his own scraggly little Christmas tree’s appearance) transform with this re-focusing on deeper meanings and the care and attention from Charlie’s friends.

Many holidays fall into this little segment of the year—Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, the winter solstice, Eid, Pancha Ganapati—each with its rich traditions, history, and values. Oh, but how easy it is to lose sight of that. We just recently celebrated Thanksgiving, which often seems to get quite overshadowed by pre-Christmas preparations. A character on a Disney show my kids like joked about “celebrating the true meaning of Thanksgiving: buying electronics at terrific prices.” This year, I made an extra effort to focus on the holiday. What a feeling of peace to go into this generally hectic month having taken the time to acknowledge the abundance of love and gratitude we already have in our family.

A truly remarkable aspect of our humanity is our ability to make meaning. Psychologists John and Julie Gottman note that “everyone is a philosopher.” The holidays are a time when we can get swept away in the momentum of what others tell us to focus on, or we can choose for ourselves: “What *is* this holiday all about?” Think of the values and meanings at the heart of it: peace, love faith, joy, family, light, unity, sacrifice, perseverance, forgiveness. Individually, we each can choose what to highlight. In our families and communities, we can honor and amplify the values we share with our loved ones.

Many of us need to scale back at this time of year, as it is impossible to “do everything” we feel we want/need/should do. Connecting to the meaning and value of the holidays makes these choices so much simpler. The values most important to you are probably intrinsic to the holiday activities and traditions you most enjoy. This year, perhaps identify two or three values that represent the holiday’s meaning to you. This can be your compass; when you are asked to do something or feel you are putting pressure on yourself, consider whether it connects to those values. For example: “Yes, I will celebrate family, light, joy, and beauty by hanging up the twinkling strands of lights in my home. No, I will not freeze half-to-death watching a parade that does not hold any special meaning to me.”

On the other hand, some of us have meanings associated with the holidays which deplete our spirit: stress, loneliness, conflict, obligation. Sometimes these meanings are handed down to us and blindly accepted. Other times, if we do not choose the meanings to connect with and amplify, an empty space is left which is all too easily filled up by stress and frustration. Take some time to make a different kind of wish-list for the holidays. Have you been wishing for love, peace, joy, faith? Find ways this season to honor this and transform what the holiday has meant to you.

And if you are asked “Does anyone know what this holiday is all about?” my hope is that you can smile and reply “Sure, I can tell you exactly what it means to me.”

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