

Warning: Good Times And Holidays Ahead!
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Based on a sermon by
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www.uucmp.org
December 3, 2000

In an article entitled "What Your Retirement Planner Doesn't Tell You" in *Christianity Today*, March 2000, Lynn Miller writes:

“Wouldn't it be a radical statement, if this Christmas, we sent a note to our friends and family and said, No gifts, please. We have enough?”

She goes on to relate a scene from the movie *Out of Africa* where the lead character, Baroness Blixen, returns to Africa from a visit to Denmark. Her Muslim servant, Farah, meets her at the train station. Upon seeing her, he asks, “Are you well, Msabu?”

She replies, “I am well, Farah”. She then asks him, “And you, Farah, are you well?”

Farah replies, “I am well enough, Msabu”.

“I am well enough. What an amazing statement of contentment. And in our time, how rare a sentiment.”

In its January 2000 issue, *Wired* magazine published a list of what's “OK” and what's “Not OK”. Christmas made the “Not OK” list. Once a genuine holiday, they opine, it's become “a three-month period of tiresome consumer bloat that's now threatening to swallow up a third of every year. Out, damned Santa!”

A couple weeks ago I mentioned International Buy Nothing Day sponsored by AdBusters. When Lama Surya Das discovered Buy Nothing Day, he not only joined the party, he went so far as to commission Opinion Research Corp. to do a scientific assessment of 1000 people and take the pulse of American consumerism the day after Thanksgiving.

Here's what they found:

- 62% of Americans plan to “buy nothing” on the day after Thanksgiving
- 61% intend “to stay as far away from stores or malls as possible”
- 35% have an unused Christmas present collecting dust in their closet
- 33% admit to throwing Christmas presents straight into the trash
- 8% say their credit cards will be “maxed out before the holidays are through”

Warning: Good economic times can be hazardous to our health, as can holidays. To get through this chaotic countdown to Christmas, we need to be spiritually grounded and know the ways of peace and love.

First they were on cigarette packages and diet soda cans, and now they're on everything from baby strollers to automobile sun visors. Warning labels. A cautionary note on a Batman costume for sale before Halloween says: "Mask and chest plate are not protective; cape does not enable user to fly". It seems to me that if a kid can read that, he already knows!

In 1999 legislators in the state of Washington introduced a bill that would require a cautionary label on credit cards, analogous to the labels that already appear on cigarette packs and liquor bottles. The message would read, "Warning: Failure to research interest rates and credit cards may result in personal financial loss or possible bankruptcy".

Economist Christopher Ruhm has made an interesting discovery. Writing in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, he suggests that there's a dark side to a booming economy and a silver lining to economic bad times. The health of Americans deteriorates during temporary upturns in the economy, and actually improves when business is in retreat.

It's a curious and counterintuitive conclusion. Not at all what we'd expect. Ruhm claims that our health is better when the economy is bad, and worse when times are good. He found, for example, that the death rate dropped in states when the unemployment rate went up, particularly among younger people. In one instance, he estimated that a one percentage point rise in unemployment decreased deaths involving 25 to 44 year olds by more than 2,900 in 1990.

He also found that as people went back to work, there was an associated increase in homicides, traffic deaths and accidents of all types. Deaths from heart disease, the flu and pneumonia also rise by a smaller but still statistically significant amount.

So why would good times be bad for our health? A big reason is that Americans, particularly younger people, tend to indulge more when the economy soars. They eat more and consume more alcohol, which is a significant factor in accidents of all types. Likewise, Ruhm says, obesity increases when the economy strengthens, whereas physical activity is reduced and diet becomes less healthy.

As we enter the Advent season and start the chaotic countdown toward Christmas, the bad news about good times may be extra bad. It's not news that the excess food and drink of the Holidays can hurt us if we're not careful, but so can the excessive decorating, shopping and other holiday activity. We need to find different standards and expectations to make the holidays less of an indulgence and flurry of driven activity, and more a time of spiritual significance.

To do this, perhaps we could use these next three weeks to prepare ourselves thoughtfully, to simplify our activities, and to focus on hope, peace, joy, love, and faithfulness to whatever it is we truly believe these winter holiday times are all about.

You know, this pre-Christmas chaos isn't really all that new. It has its roots in the riotous Roman Saturnalia--a time of uncontrolled feasting and frolicking to laud the approach of spring. In the fourth century, when the church chose December 25 for its celebration of the birth of Jesus, it simply laid a Christian context over the existing celebration.

And minister's warnings of excess are nothing new, either. The famous Puritan minister, Cotton Mather, was responding to this situation in the 17th century when he criticized the season's "Reveling, Dicing, Carding, Masking and all Licentious Liberty"--a sentiment that was tied to the passing of laws against celebrating Christmas in Puritan New England.

Shall it be said, Mather asked, that at the birth of our Savior we take the time to do actions that have much more of Hell than of Heaven in them?

Mather was raising a pretty basic question. I wouldn't frame it in the same way. For me, it isn't so much whether our actions have heaven or hell in them, but whether they are good for us or not; whether they issue from and lead us to the good that is within us.

Or have the gods of mindless consumerism taken such control of the season -- in the guise, incidentally, of the virtue of generosity -- that its time to seek alternative ways to celebrate?

Do you have enough?

Should we be looking for ways to observe the holidays that might bring us some peace and joy, and that involve a generosity that is more of spirit than of shopping lists?

Perhaps we can begin by considering Advent as a season of expectation -- not gratification. Less is more could be our mantra as we use these three weeks less as a time of shopping, indulging, and worrying about perfection and more as a time for reflective preparation, a time of mystery and awe. Perhaps we could overthrow the gods of consumerism and try for a simpler, warmer time this year.

Of course, it's tough to set limits on Santa when you have grade school children and grandchildren, and in many instances, it's the desire to be good parents or grandparents that lures us into holiday excess. The gods of the mall seduce us with the Siren song of generosity, and even the old elf himself tries to be a symbol of joy and love as he encourages the kids to long for things for us to buy. And we all love parties and gift giving and the whole thing -- to a point!

But when is enough enough?

There is another problem to consider: even GOOD excess can be hazardous to your health. Many of us have come across the "Life Change Index". It's a chart developed by a stress researcher that assigns numerical values to the amount of stress various life events bring. For any one event, 100 would be the maximum amount of stress, while zero would indicate no stress at all. The researcher's claim is that if, within a one year period, you accumulate 300 stress points, you are likely to experience some negative change in your health.

Predictably, the death of a spouse yields 100 points on the stress scale.

- Divorce gives 73 points,
- A marital separation 65 points,
- Personal injury or illness, 53 points,
- Being fired, 47 points.

But what is surprising is that several events that we normally consider to be good things also show up on the stress scale:

- Getting married, 50 points.
- Marital reconciliation, 45 points.
- Gaining a new family member, 39 points.
- Outstanding personal achievement, 28 points.
- Even vacation gives us 13 points.
- And closest to our topic today: Christmas, 12 points.

Rev. Miller puts it this way:

“I used to stress big time about the Holidays. I had such high expectations:

- finding the perfect, deeply significant gift for each person on my list,
- having the best ever Christmas tree,
- beautiful decorations,
- lots of cookies and candies I made myself,
- happy, clean, well-behaved children,
- clean pets,
- a spotless house,
- and a wonderful Christmas dinner with everything made from scratch.

I was searching for some fairy tale image of family togetherness, friends gathered ‘round, love, peace, beauty and warmth. And I got pretty close some years, too!”

Some people are moving away from store-bought baubles and toward a group of items and services called "alternative gifts". There is, for example, the Heifer Project International, which provides livestock and training to families in more than 40 countries. Donors are invited to purchase such gifts as a flock of chicks for \$20, a trio of rabbits for \$60, a pig for \$120 or a heifer for \$500. You purchase any of these and give cards saying that an animal has been purchased in the recipient's name for a struggling family. It's probably better for most of us than another gift basket.

Other people set limits on the amount they spend on gifts at Christmas. Some are promoting the "Hundred Dollar Holiday," in which families promise to spend no more than a total of \$100 on Christmas -- an act that forces simpler, more personal and often handmade gifts.

There is an environmentalist named Bill McKibben who has been spearheading this program through the Methodist Church in New York state for about 10 years with some success -- although retailers surely wish it would die a quick death.

McKibben's ideas for simple gifts include baking a pie, recording a song, whittling a walking stick or visiting a nursing home resident.

How about coupons for practical, helpful, or special quality time? We can encourage children to give coupons redeemable for household chores. Family members or good friends can exchange coupons for monthly back rubs, babysitting, help with house painting, gardening or other chores, going for coffee together, a walk, or a trip to the aquarium.

There is a wonderful joke that asks what would have happened if Three Wise Women had gone looking for Jesus instead of Three Wise Men. Well, Three Wise Women would have:

- asked directions,
- arrived on time,
- helped deliver the baby,
- cleaned the stable,
- made a casserole
- and brought practical gifts!

Stable cleaning beats frankincense and myrrh any day of the week!

In a time of holiday hazards, truly valuable ACTIONS are ways that we might move toward a deeper appreciation of the true gift of Christmas. Investment of precious time and talent express our love in a very special way. Some people are choosing to follow the path to a simpler, more meaningful Christmas by "adopting" a low-income family through a local interfaith social service agency -- a project that might involve buying and wrapping gifts for children, or delivering a Christmas tree. There is tremendous value in exposing our children to the value of giving to help a neighbor in need. Such activity at Christmas, and at any time, can help weaken the walls that isolate us in our own economic niches.

All these possibilities:

- Advent expectation,
- Limit-setting,
- Alternative gifts,
- Outreach to neighbors

can reduce the risk of holiday hazards and prepare us much better for the deeper, spiritual meaning of Christmas.

If we're thoughtful with our time and resources in the days to come -- focusing more on activities than on acquisitions -- we'll be able to arrive at Christmas feeling some energy and expectation instead of sheer exhaustion. And we'll come to it with the satisfaction of knowing that we are celebrating the season in a way consistent with our deepest beliefs.

This is not to say we have to plaster a warning label over the entire season and proclaim that good times are always hazardous to our health ... but let's do what we can to turn down the volume and find some peace and quiet when that "Silent Night" finally arrives.

CLOSING WORDS by Max Coots, adapted

May the patience that makes life tolerable,
the laughter that eases pain,
the reverence that makes life holy,
and the love that unites all things,
be ours this day, and in the days to come.

Amen.