

HOLIDAY STRESS? WHAT STRESS?

**From Rev. John R. White – The First Congregational Church of Dudley, MA – United Church of Christ
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Recently, while leading worship one Wednesday afternoon at Christopher Heights of Webster, as I do every 4th Wednesday of the month at 2:00 p.m., a spontaneous conversation occurred during which everyone gathered began reflecting upon the stresses people feel today around the holidays as opposed to the stresses, or lack of stresses, in years gone by. Leaving it all anonymous, here is some of what was shared.

One woman who particularly touched my heart said: "I have lots of siblings. My father died when I was very young so my mom raised us as a widow. We all helped her as we could. I helped mom by sewing and washing clothes, which mom did for others to raise money for us all. Around the holidays my mom would get together with other widows and their families. It was great! We never had much of anything, yet there was always plenty of love to go around."

Everyone gathered nodded their heads with approval and understanding of this story. The circumstances of each person's life in that room were different, of course, yet all remembered and all yearned for a simpler time, a time of less stuff, less stress, and more love and caring amongst family, neighbors and friends.

Another woman, someone with an ever present smile and laughter always at the ready blurted out: "Holiday Stress? What Stress? I don't remember any stress. We didn't have much stuff, yet we didn't even think about that. We had each other. That was enough. We used to go outside and have fun and run around. I was the mischievous one amongst my siblings you know." She said this last line while giving me a wink, so I smiled and laughed back. These moments were the highlight of that particular day for me, this simple sharing.

Yet, truth be told, the holidays can be enormously stressful for many, especially, I believe, those who are a bit younger than those I was speaking with. It's not that younger people have less stuff than in days gone by as indeed many of them have more stuff and even, in some cases, too much stuff, yet holiday expectations for purchasing stuff has increased more and more and the notion that the amount of stuff you purchase for others equals the amount of love you want to give them, seems, to me, to have set in much more firmly in our society in these past several decades. While I love the lighting of Advent candles and the Christmas story, the stress I see some people go through at this time of year often weighs heavy on my heart.

This stress which seems to be felt particularly strongly around the holiday of Christmas is not partial to Christians in December however. I have Jewish relatives and am a friend of others in other traditions. From what I hear and see this stress which comes from equating the amount of stuff you purchase as gifts with the amount of love you're trying to convey to family and friends has seeped into many religious traditions and certainly also affects those who claim no religious tradition at all.

Recently I listened to another person who will also remain anonymous, a younger woman...about my age, therefore very young. She said: "I raised several children as a single mom. From Halloween through Christmas it was always stressful. I dreaded when the seasons turned to Fall. As soon as October rolled around those children came home from school saying they needed this and that, and I tried, yet I couldn't always do it, and that felt terrible. I believe I suffered PTSD for years, even after my children were grown, feeling that stress come into me every time Halloween started coming close." How sad this is.

Jesus calls us to live differently. Without saying it directly, since radio, television and social media hadn't been invented yet, I believe Jesus urges us to turn off the voices urging us to stress out in our pursuit of equating the acquisition of stuff with the showing of our love. He says: "So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Matthew 6:34 NLT) Or, in other words, during this season of Advent and always, recognize the hope, peace, joy and love residing within you now, while also expectantly waiting for them to be born again, through you, to and for the world around you.

Henri J.M. Nouwen writing in The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery (Crown, 2013) said: "Advent does not lead to nervous tension stemming from expectation of something spectacular about to happen. On the contrary, it leads to a growing inner stillness and joy allowing me to realize that he for whom I am waiting has already arrived and speaks to me in the silence of my heart.

"Just as a mother feels the child grow in her and is not surprised on the day of the birth, but joyfully receives the one she learned to know during her waiting, so Jesus can be born in my life slowly and steadily and be received as the one I learned to know while waiting."

Holiday stress? What stress? We have each other and the love which urges us to care for one another. So Happy Holidays! Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Peace, Pastor John