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CHAPTER EIGHT

CHRISTMAS

Like most people who celebrate Christmas, I never knew any other way than my family's until I got married. Some couples argue over what kind of tree to buy (natural or artificial, tall and scraggly, or short and bushy) and when to put it up. Fortunately, both my wife's family and mine did their trees mostly in the "right" way, namely, a tall, scraggly tree put up and decorated on Christmas Eve.

Our difference was over how to decorate the tree. On Christmas Eve, 1971, I discovered that I came from a family of tinsel *throwers* (creatively flinging handfuls of tinsel at the tree) and that my wife came from a family of tinsel *placers* (fastidiously draping each strand over its appointed branch). "What are you doing?" my wife asked in horror as she entered the room and witnessed her new husband standing on a ladder and hurling tinsel at the tree. An extended discussion ensued, during which I was brought to recognize the artistic validity of my wife's point of view. I learned from this encounter, and others that followed, that family Christmas rituals can carry the weight of law. Principles of tree decoration represent just one element in the emotional landscape of Christmas, the Ritual of All Rituals for most Americans. In case you are wondering, my wife and I are now a tinsel-free family.

The date of December 25 for Christmas was set by the Pope in the fourth century to correspond to the timing of the pagan Winter solstice ritual. By the Middle Ages, Christmas had become the major holiday of the year in Europe, but the festivities

never lost their pagan roots. According to historians, Christmas became by an “annual indulgence in eating, dancing, singing, sporting, card playing, and gambling.” Indeed, the Puritans who later came to North America were opposed to the festive aspects of Christmas and forbade the practice of the holiday.¹

Most people don’t know that Christmas did not become a major *family* holiday until the middle of the nineteenth century. Throughout most of Western history, Christmas was more a community celebration than a family-centered celebration. People went to Church and public festivities, and got together with their friends, but did not engage in our elaborate family meals and gift exchanges. When gifts were given, they tended to be special food items or small home made artifacts. There were few Christmas trees in America until the mid-nineteen century, and Santa was just starting to be known. The modern family Christmas with its elaborate family rituals and gift exchanges did not take hold until around 1880.²

The advent of Christmas as the quintessential family ritual celebration was a product of the early stirrings of the Psychological Family in the second half of the nineteenth century. As I described in Chapter One, the Institutional Family of history faced outward towards its community more than inward towards its own members. Sunday, for example, was a communal day rather than a family day. So too with Christmas. The modern Psychological Family, which began to take root in the late 19th century and came to full flower in mid-twentieth century, was a more private, inward group that emphasized its internal rituals and traditions. Family rituals require a degree of self-consciousness of being a distinct group with a history and a future. Most families did not have this kind of self-consciousness until the last 150 years. Before

the modern era, according to historians, rituals and traditions belonged mainly to communities, not to individual families.³

Not only was Christmas not a family affair until fairly recently, it has never been primarily a religious ritual either. For its first 15 centuries, Christmas was dominated by secular needs for fun and festivity rather than by religious practices related to the birth of Christ. Over the past century, Christmas became dominated by families' needs for reunion and connection and by commercial interests in selling gifts to consumers. Not that the religious elements have not always been present, and to some people the most important aspect of Christmas, but most people's time and attention has always been taken up more by secular interests than by religious ones. Perhaps this helps explain why Christmas has taken hold among non-Christians in so many parts of the world and is becoming the first truly global festival.⁴

If family Christmas rituals got a late start historically, we have made up the time!

Christmas has become the most rule-bound private family ritual of them all, the internal equivalent of the highly scripted public family rituals of weddings and funerals. But there is a paradox about the Christmas experience: although there are innumerable Christmas rules that are widely shared in American culture--such as whom you must give gifts to--there are many small variations that mark each family's own culture of Christmas--such as how to decorate the tree and how to open the presents. And since Christmas is so heavily about *memory and tradition* that are embedded in childhood, even the smallest differences between one's own Christmas rituals and one's in-laws can be jarring. In the midst of powerful Christmas rules from both the broader culture

and one's own family culture, becoming intentional about Christmas presents a mighty challenge. The first step is to understand the nature of the Christmas ritual dance that we already do.

I'LL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

For families who celebrate Christmas, the location of the primary Christmas meal and gift opening is even more consequential than the Thanksgiving location, because the emotional stakes are higher. The waters of Christmas traditions run deeper in the family psyche, and individual family variations on Christmas practices are greater than for Thanksgiving. There is nothing like Christmas to bring family loyalties into clear and sometimes painful focus. Loyalty struggles may erupt months before the Holidays when decisions are being made about whose family to celebrate with.

Since your in-laws are not your original family and their Christmas traditions are different from yours, you may feel left out and inclined to self-pity at their house when everyone around you seems to be having such a good time. The song does not say "I'll Be at My In-laws for Christmas." This can lead to spouses sulking, complaining, and being generally disagreeable--in violation of the norm to have a "Merry Christmas." It can also lead to power struggles over whose house will host the main event, an issue discussed in the Thanksgiving chapter.

The only "acceptable" reasons not to be with one's family at Christmas are that the travel distance is too great or that you are with your spouse's family. Any other reason suggests serious family problems. During the 1984 Christmas season, the whole nation witnessed the President's family play this out. Ronald Reagan's son, Michael, was conspicuously absent from the family photograph at the President's California

ranch. (Michael had no in-laws and presumably had the money to travel home.) Michael's stepmother, Nancy Reagan, said that her stepson was "estranged" from his father. Michael hotly and publicly denied this, saying that the problem was really Nancy's excessive loyalty to her husband. Thus the nation was treated to an all-American holiday squabble that reflected the mixed loyalties and wounded feelings that many American families experience at this time of year.

Even when there are no serious loyalty binds or family problems, practical difficulties can make it difficult to spend Christmas with one's family. When Roger and Patricia were first married and lived far from both of their families, they alternated spending Christmas one year at her family's Nebraska farm, the next at his family's house in Philadelphia. Both families wanted them every year, of course. Once, in an excess of fair-minded zeal, they tried doing both families in one year. They spent Christmas Eve in Philadelphia, then jetted across country on Christmas Day--spending a very merry few hours on stopover at O'Hare Airport--in order to consume a second Christmas dinner in Nebraska. Roger was on crutches that year, and they had a new baby and a two year old on board. As the children got older, Roger and Patricia began to realize that they needed their own family traditions at Christmas. They wanted to be more intentional about Christmas. The key moment came when their five year old daughter Emily asked, "How come Santa never comes to our house?" The parents realized that it was time to be home for Christmas, a decision that their families reluctantly accepted. Some years they did visit their families right after Christmas, but they reserved Christmas Eve and Christmas Day for their nuclear family.

Divorce can make Christmas location a tortuous decision. Even when parents put the children's needs first, there are serious losses and sacrifices. When parents focus on their own competing needs, Christmas becomes a crucible for testing children's loyalty. When parents remarry, the logistics and loyalties can become a tangled muddle of new and old "family" members, households, and traditions--sometimes waiting in readiness for a holiday war. Still, the bright side is that after a divorce or remarriage many families become more intentional about Christmas by developing new traditions. Children especially can be quite shrewd about the inherent possibilities in the new situation for extra attention, extra food, and extra presents.

Even if a family escapes loyalty struggles and divorce, it will inevitably deal with the death of parents and other family members. There is a special anguish about the first Christmas without a loved one, especially the parent who hosted the Christmas celebrations. As with the loss of the Thanksgiving host, some families splinter at this point and never return to family-wide rituals at the Holidays. Others accept new leadership from the next generation and maintain their family rituals.

When the loss is that of a younger parent or a child, the pain of the next Christmas is even more intense. Home may feel like a place of loss, not a site of celebration. The year after his wife Cindy died, my friend Peter and his three young children packed up and visited a close friend in California for Christmas holidays. In being intentional about their family Christmas, Peter, Cassie, Lonnie, and Petey were placing themselves in a different ritual space where they could celebrate Christmas as a new family creating new traditions. They knew Cindy would approve.

UNITED WE STAND--AND GET IRRITATED

The worst Christmas rule is that we should be “merry.” “Merriment” is a once in a while experience in family life that cannot be commanded or forced. In fact, the sheer intensity and duration of family Christmas rituals insure long periods of non-merriment. During the rest of the year, families work out regular patterns of contact, closeness, and distance. At Christmas time, these interpersonal boundaries are overrun by swarming relatives. Members of the extended family, who maintain a comfortable distance from each other by perhaps hundreds of miles throughout the year, now switch from phone calls and letters, individually initiated, to eyeball-to-eyeball contact, en masse. Peaceful neutrality, carefully nurtured through mutual avoidance of certain topics, breaks down under conditions of too much mutual exposure. Previously tolerable differences among family members now become unbearable. The contemplative is bombarded by the incessant talker. The family socialist insists upon clarifying welfare issues to the Republican fund-raiser. The uncle cannot resist badgering his nephew about the new earring, and wondering under his breath about what kind of parents would allow this “gender-bending” in their own house. Merry Christmas, everyone.

As with Thanksgiving, most families are required by another inexorable rule of Christmas to eat and drink themselves into a stupor, thus accounting for the torpidity of after-dinner conversation and the lethargy of Christmas afternoon, which runs neck and neck with Thanksgiving for the slowest afternoon of the year. See my recommendations in the Thanksgiving chapter for being intentional about planning the whole day to keep people in motion.

At Christmas, family members find themselves clicking into old, familiar roles as if they'd never left home. One sister, the "princess" who never did any housework, manages once again to get out of doing the post-Christmas dinner dishes. She leaves them to the family "Cinderella," who quickly becomes as submissively resentful about it as she ever used to be. And most of the men go about their day as if showing up were a singular contribution to the ritual.

An insidious Christmas rule is that conflict may simmer under the surface, but it must never erupt. Why? Because the one who starts the conflict will be accused of RUINING CHRISTMAS. No one wants to be accused of RUINING CHRISTMAS, an act nearly on a par with ruining someone's wedding day. If Cinderella gets upset with Princess or with her lazy brother, somebody will quickly tell her that her negativity is out of line with the spirit of the holiday. If the conflict goes further, the family Guardian of Christmas Peace will signal, either directly or with tears or threats to leave, that the combatants should shut up and stop RUINING CHRISTMAS. In fear, therefore, of RUINING CHRISTMAS, everyone accepts an uneasy truce--until next year when the old issues will spurt once again to the surface.

'TIS BETTER TO GIVE--AND RECEIVE

Gifts are central to most Christmas traditions and to the U.S. economy. American families spend an estimated 3-4 percent of their annual income on Christmas presents.⁵ Americans purchase their major gifts rather making them, thus creating high stakes for businesses whose main profit comes at Christmas or not at all. The gift ritual--strategizing, shopping, purchasing, wrapping, and presenting--is without doubt the most nerve wracking and exhausting aspect of the Holidays for lots of people.

Without gifts, Christmas would not be much more draining than Thanksgiving. With gifts, it's the family ritual without peer, the main event of the family year.

Christmas gift exchanges were almost entirely ignored by social scientists until Theodore Caplow and his colleagues studied them in their famous Middletown study in the late 1970s. The researchers discovered through intensive interviews a series of very clear rules governing gift exchanges, rules that everyone seemed to understand but that no one could articulate in words. It's like with language: even if you can't explain the grammatical rule, you know what sounds right and wrong. If I had just written "what sounds rightly and wrongly," you would immediately detect the mistake in grammar if you are a native English speaker, even if you could not explain the rule that adjective was called for rather than an adverb. I invite you to ponder the following gift exchange rules that Caplow inferred from his interviews, and ask yourself if you already knew them implicitly, like rules of grammar.⁶

1) The Wrapping Rule: Christmas gifts must be wrapped before they are presented.

2) The Decoration Rule: Any room where Christmas gifts are distributed should be decorated by affixing Christmas emblems to the wall, the ceiling, or the furniture.

3) The Gathering Rule: Christmas gifts should be distributed at gatherings where every person gives and receives gifts.

4) The Dinner Rule: Family gatherings at which gifts are distributed include a "traditional Christmas dinner."

5) The Gift Selection Rule: A Christmas gift should a) demonstrate the giver's familiarity with the receiver's preferences; b) surprise the receiver... and c) be scaled in economic value to the emotional value of the relationship. [An example of "c" would be that it would be out of line to give one's nephew a gift of far greater value than the gift to one's son.]

6) The Scaling Rules: These complex rules are stated in technical terms in Caplow's article. I will paraphrase them here. Husband-wife gifts are highest in value, followed by parents to children. Parents with more than one child give them gifts of approximately equal value. Children do not give more expensive presents to parents than parents give to children. Treat your parents and parents-in-law equally. Treat your married relatives' spouses equally with your relatives, e.g., you give your brother-in-law a gift roughly equal to your sister's. Gifts for siblings who live nearby and are part of one's network should be equal, but far away siblings may be given lesser gifts. More distant relatives such as cousin and aunts may be on the par with siblings if they are part of one's network. Gifts to friends should not be valued more than gifts to spouses, parents, or children.

7) Fitness Rules: Rules about fitness of gifts (e.g., women should not give cut flowers to men) are too numerous to specify, but one deserves passing attention. Money is an appropriate gift from senior to junior kin [say, from grandparents to grandchildren] but not from junior

to senior kin [grandchild would *never* give grandparents or parents money], regardless of the relative affluence of the parties.

8) The Reciprocity Rule: Participants should give at least one Christmas gift every year to their mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, to the current spouse of these persons, and to their own spouses. By the operation of this rule, participants expect to receive at least one gift in return from each of these persons excepting infants. The Reciprocity Rule does not require the gifts to be of equal value. Imbalance between the generations is central to the entire ritual, as parents give more than they received from their young children.

These Christmas rules for gift giving are not written down anywhere. They are not found in etiquette books. And despite some variation among families of different ethnic groups, they appear to be widely followed in American society. They require so much complex balancing, however, that mistakes are also common, leading sometimes to regrets, misunderstandings, and bad feelings.

Within these rules, there is still considerable room for individual styles of gift giving, and for family variations. Each family, for example, puts its own spin on the fitness rules. Some families believe that extravagant, impulsive gifts best demonstrate their love: your present is a diamond ring, a personal computer, or champion show dog--whether you wanted it or not. If both spouses share this proclivity, all is well, as long as they both understand the provisions of bankruptcy law. But if he comes from a "Christmas extravagant" family, and she from a "Christmas frugal" family, mutual consternation is inevitable. If, for example, the husband gives his wife a microwave

oven with all the bells and whistles, when she's happy enough with her 40-year-old gas stove, and has, furthermore, bought him two ties and a beer mug, complications can result. He is hurt by her pointed lack of enthusiasm, while she feels overwhelmed by his gift, embarrassed by her own paltry offering, and resentful that he has somehow placed her in this untenable position.

Gift giving is always a perilous undertaking, even when you try to follow the rules. Moving into a higher income bracket than the rest of the family, for example, sets in motion a real predicament. Presents of middling expense will be thought cheap: "With all that insurance money he's raking in, you'd think my brother the doctor could get his only sister something a little nicer." On the other hand, expensive gifts will be branded crass and pretentious: "It was humiliating. She gave me a bottle of Chateau Lafite-Rothschild 1966, and I gave her a jug of Gallo Red undated."

As the family network extends out, the rules become vaguer and it can be tricky to determine if you are expected to keep giving gifts each year. If you have always exchanged gifts with your cousins, what about gifts to their children? To their children's new spouses? How far out do you go? There are always possibilities for social gaffes, as when your second cousin, once removed, presents you with a leather-bound first edition, and you present him with...nothing. Next year, however, you can remedy the situation by getting him an antique silver snuff box--after he's crossed you off his list.

Gifts carry messages to family members about what we think and expect of them. In some families, recipients can be generically lumped together--all men get socks or handkerchiefs, all women get kitchen appliances or bath oil. In other families,

you are expected to engage in an intense study of a personality to find clues for the “perfect gift.” Gifts can also communicate hostility or fear of change, as when a successful dieter receives two pounds of chocolates. Johnny Carson once told his television audience that he had never received so much alcohol for Christmas as he did the year he announced he was quitting drinking.

When should Christmas gifts be opened? Christmas eve, or Christmas morning? And, once the time is set, how should they be opened? In elaborate rituals or in donnybrooks of flying ribbon and paper? In Patricia’s family growing up, the gift opening ceremony was on the elaborate side. First, the youngest child approached the tree, picked up a present and handed it to the person whose name was on it. The whole family watched the opening of each gift, after which the receiver displayed the gift, commented on it, and expressed thanks. That person then selected and handed out the next present, in a stately choreography that could take a couple of hours. Roger felt like fainting with boredom.

Roger’s family, as you no doubt have guessed, was at the opposite end of the ceremonial spectrum--verging on anarchy. Their procedure, which Roger was fond of, required about 90 seconds for everyone to rip open the presents, express quick thanks, and scatter the contents all over the living room. Roger thought the procedure had two major advantages: you got to your presents quickly and you didn’t have to make a false show of delight with items you were lukewarm about. The first year Patricia sat through this orgy of gift opening, she was shocked and nearly in tears. “I married into a pack of savages,” she said to herself and later to Roger, who was not amused by the metaphor and took the opportunity to comment on the annoying rigidity of her family’s

gift ritual. In an unscientific survey of friends and acquaintances, I have discovered that the world is divided evenly into gift ceremonialists and gift anarchists.

Unfortunately, the two groups tend to intermarry, and they never, ever, talk about it before their first Christmas together. Merry Christmas and welcome to married bliss.

THE CHRISTMAS COORDINATOR

Like any complex enterprise, Christmas requires a competent executive director, in this case the Family Christmas Coordinator, the one person in most families who is in charge of putting the entire production together. Traditionally, this role belongs to the wife/mother of the family, so it is no accident that women's magazines begin in August providing encyclopedic instructions for making, baking, and buying the perfect Christmas experience. For many women, Christmas is like a serious athletic event, and August is not too soon to begin working out and making advance game plans.

Since family roles generally come in pairs, the Christmas Coordinator in this holiday dance is paired with the "Christmas Abstainer," usually a man, who stays aloof from the demands of the season while being vaguely aware that the Coordinator is getting hard to live with. A predictable series of interactions between the Coordinator and the Abstainer begins soon after Thanksgiving. As the Coordinator becomes more obsessed with Holiday preparations, the Abstainer becomes more detached and irritable, while the children for their part are becoming more excited and demanding.

Part of the Christmas Coordinator's burden is the belief that Christmas must come off perfectly, without a hitch, and approach a Yuletide fantasy of beautifully wrapped presents, Christmas carols sung on a frosty doorstep, freshly baked cookies, the fragrance of evergreens, the laughter of children, and so forth. There will be no

undertone of irritation, no yelling, no drunks, no ungrateful relatives, no duplicate presents. This is a dream doomed to disappointment.

By Christmas eve, the Christmas melodrama is underway, but is not being played to the Coordinator's specifications. She is exhausted by the work, worried about the outcome, annoyed by fault-finding relatives, and still hoping that the pageant will come off as promised. For months she has shouldered the entire burden of Christmas, an unsung martyr who is growing tired of her cross. At last, appealing for help to the Abstainer, she breaks down in frustration, only to hear him accuse her of overreacting, getting worked up over nothing, flying off the handle. The last section of this chapter offer suggestions for both the Coordinator and the Abstainer to prevent this common degeneration of the Christmas ritual.

SAME TIME NEXT YEAR

After Christmas is over, families wearily return to their normal patterns, and the Christmas Coordinator collapses and promises herself, never again. Like people two hours after a junk-food binge, many families experience a letdown after Christmas. They are relieved that Christmas is behind them, but they miss the intensity. Several months into the new year, something called "Christmas Amnesia" occurs. In March or April, the Christmas Coordinator and her relatives forget about the ordeals just finished, and begin to think fondly of next year's festivities; they even start jockeying for the right to hold Christmas in their own houses. This phenomenon is akin to some women forgetting the pain of childbirth soon after delivery. In this way, benign amnesia helps to populate the earth and repeat the tradition of family Christmas.

HAVE YOURSELF AN INTENTIONAL LITTLE CHRISTMAS

If your family celebrates Christmas, you will do it next year no matter how last year turned out. Except in extraordinary circumstances, the consequences of a complete boycott of family Christmas are just too grave. However, you do have options about how you will do Christmas this year. If nothing else, you can work intentionally on your attitudes and expectations, which are three-fourths of what is good and bad about Christmas anyway. Here are my recommendations for accepting the inevitable hassles of Christmas while working towards enjoying it as an intentional family. Take the ones that fit and discard the others forthwith if they don't fit your family.

1. Except the traditional difficulties. Families, unlike street mobs, are very predictable. After observing Christmas festivities for a few decades or so, you can pretty well predict that certain patterns will repeat. Your brother and sister-in-law will whine about having to miss their Mexico vacation to be with the family. Your sister and brother-in-law will let their children loose on your house. Your mother and father will snap at each other constantly, reflecting the strain of the season and the stickiness of too much family togetherness. Your uncle will tell his sister that grandma and grandpa always favored her. Since these behaviors are predictable, even scripted, in most families, why not expect them to show themselves--just as in Minnesota we expect the snow to appear sometime each Fall? If you anticipate these deviations from a "merry" Christmas, you will not let them ruin your Christmas. If it is a family Christmas, why not expect your family to act like--your family?

2. Have a plan for handling the predictable bad moments. While some unpleasant events at Christmas can only be tolerated with Zen-like acceptance, for others it is possible to formulate an advance plan of action. As with Thanksgiving, you

can't prevent a post-Christmas dinner slump, but you can take the edge off it by proposing a family outing. Before the meal, have a variety of board games in reserve, to be pulled out when your sister starts her traditional monologue about how hard she works in her job, or when Aunt Margaret and Uncle George begin their annual debate about whether the Catholic Church should have ever abandoned the Latin Mass. Scrabble, anyone? The point is to take advantage of family predictability by generating plans to ward off the ill winds or at least to minimize the damage.

3. Be prepared for family leopards to change their spots. Don't get so locked into your expectations of family members that you fail to notice, and celebrate, the times they act "out of character." After surviving a heart attack in the Fall, Grandpa may be downright sentimental this Christmas, unlike his Scrooge-like demeanor of past decades. Be open to the difference, and maybe this year the family can improve its dance of intimacy at Christmas. He may be willing to talk about his childhood Christmases, giving you an unprecedented glimpse into past family traditions. The balancing act for families at Christmas is to prepare for the predictable while being open to the unpredictable.

4. If you are the Christmas Coordinator--and want to remain one--then insist on an active supporting cast. Coordinating Christmas can be a rewarding experience, as long as you don't carry the whole enterprise on your own back. For many Christmas Coordinators, it's not just the work load that gets them down; it's the awesome burden of decision making. Buying presents for your in-laws might be a chore, but this chore becomes a burden when your spouse won't even make suggestions about what to give them. Tell him (I will assume here that the Coordinator is female, and the Abstainer

male) that he has to share in the decision-making--and the shopping as well--about gifts for his family, and for your common children. In the same way, as Christmas Coordinator you can politely inform family members in advance of the big Christmas meal that you want help this year on preparation, set up, and clean up. And then write down specific names beside specific tasks. It is best to solicit these commitments in advance, so you don't come across as a Christmas Shrew by losing your temper when people haven't volunteered, as in: "Do I have to do everything around here? Why don't you get off your lazy butts and help for a change?" People will shape up--temporarily--but wonder what happened to your Christmas spirit. If the Coordinator involves others in the planning and work, everyone has a better time. Maximum participation is a cornerstone of successful family rituals.

5. If you are a Christmas Abstainer, work slowly towards more involvement. I say "slowly" because the Christmas Coordinator is often ambivalent about giving up control over events. The best way to fail is to announce: "I'm tired of your complaints, so this year, I will buy the kids' presents," or "This year, I've decided to cook the turkey and fix the trimmings." The first statement will be viewed by the Christmas Coordinator as a unilateral takeover of a valued role, and the second as criticism of her past performance in preparing the Christmas meal. Both are doomed to fail, which then justifies to the Abstainer his right to abstain. It is much better to begin by proving yourself a reliable helper for the chores of Christmas: writing Christmas cards; thinking about, shopping for, and wrapping presents; doing part of the meal and cleaning up after it. Breaking out of the Abstainer role is best done gradually, perhaps by helping with one or two tasks the first year, and then adding others the next year. Eventually

you may start to enjoy the season more through being active. And your spouse may trust your commitment enough to really share the responsibility. But keep in mind that real partnership in decision making will come only after you have shown that you can actively support and appreciate the Coordinator's efforts.

6. Honor family Christmas traditions, and suggest "experiments" with change.

Tradition and continuity are what give Christmas a special feel. Changes are best introduced with delicacy and respect for other family members' emotional attachments to the traditional ways. New daughters-in-law and sons-in-law bring different family traditions into the family but they are wise to step carefully before suggesting that their way is better. Even after they have convinced their spouse of the value of the alternative ritual, prudent in-laws avoid taking too much personal leadership for changing the larger family's rituals. Rather, the "blood" family member might suggest a "small" change in a ritual--as "an experiment for this year." For example, if you want to slow down the way the family opens Christmas presents--say, from a sprint to a jogging pace--then you could suggest that this year the children open their presents one by one, for all to see. Then let the adults have their orgy of tearing off wrapping paper. The ritual will have been slowed down, and the adults will have the opportunity to assess the new way, without having to make a complete shift the first time they heard the new idea.

7. Discuss gift exchange expectations in advance. Intentional families are able to work out agreements on managing gift exchanges for the larger family clan. Some families are content for everyone to give everyone else presents, but this is too

expensive and time consuming for many families, who then negotiate Christmas ground rules. The White family, for example, decided to put the adults' names into a pool. Each adult member draws a name and is expected to purchase a gift of no more than \$50 for that individual. For most families, the expense and time involved in planning, shopping, purchasing, and wrapping Christmas presents will soon undermine the joy of the season unless the family becomes intentional about its gift ritual. Even for couples, it can be helpful to give each other a clue about the magnitude of Christmas gifts you are considering. Leah and I have this kind of discussion each year, which prevents either of us from feeling badly about not having reciprocated the other's generosity in quantity or value of gifts.

8. If you are in a single parent or step-family, create new Christmas rituals. The new family structure can be reinforced by creating new ways to do Christmas, ways that were not present in the previous family structure. For post-divorce families, the children and each parent may decide, for example, that Christmas Eve will be with Mom and her family, and Christmas Day with Dad and his family. They will do some different activities on each of those days than they did during the time that Mom and Dad were married. This might mean starting to sing Christmas carols, or going to a different Church, or going to brunch on Christmas Day. Similarly, for step-families, it is important that aspects of both parents' traditions be reflected in Christmas, plus some brand new rituals that neither family knew in the past. The challenge is to cling to the old for a sense of roots, but to introduce the new for a sense of being a special family with your own traditions.

9. If you are cut off from your family, try to find one relative to celebrate Christmas with. Most of what I have written assumes that you are in regular contact with your family. Some families experience serious cutoffs, often because of major trauma such as abuse or neglect, splits over marrying outside one's religious or racial group, or coming out as gay or lesbian. Being cut off from one's parents' or children is the most painful of all. When such a cutoff has occurred, I do not recommend the risk of showing up unannounced on Christmas Eve. But it can be helpful to find at least one relative to connect with at Christmas in addition to the people who have become your new intentional family. People too readily assume their whole family is involved in the split. You might reach out to one of your siblings who has not taken sides in the family split, or to a cousin, an aunt, or an uncle. This connection might be no more than a phone call on Christmas Day, or a short visit. But any family contact at Christmas is generally far better than no family contact whatsoever. The best way to ease the pain of a family cutoff at Christmas is to engage with at least one relative who can give you a sense of linkage to your past--and some hope that the future may be different.

If a family Christmas requires so much physical and psychological labor, and carries so many risks of things going wrong, then why must we do it? Why not just forget the whole season, hole up with work or hobbies, exchange no presents, and leave town for the week? The reason is that Christmas, if it is part of your family tradition, is the one time in the year when you are expected to connect--even if only through a card or phone call--with everyone else in your family system. If each of us is like a ship traveling through the sea, as the years go by after we leave port, or after our own children leave, we can lose touch with some members of our family convoy, and there

are fewer opportunities to get everyone together at the same time. Christmas calls our family convoys together once a year to at least send up flares to one another. When we reconnect with our families, we are pulled along, for a few days at least, by the same currents and we breathe the same air. We celebrate new and growing members of the clan, and we observe and mourn the decline and loss of other members. We take stock of where we have traveled with this motley collection of ships. The ritual of Christmas is the excuse for our family convoy to regroup each year, after which we once again move out into our own seas, grumbling perhaps at the hassles of the season, formulating plans to make it better next year, but never doubting our desire--and our need--to do it again.

Although Christmas has become commercialized and trivialized in contemporary America, many of us would feel impoverished without it. We need a festival that combines the powerful elements of religion, culture, family, and the winter solstice. We need a protracted family ritual that society makes possible by creating time off from work and school. We need a time to pursue ideals of family harmony and solidarity, even if the reality inevitably falls short. As Garrison Keillor wrote, "A lovely thing about Christmas is that it's compulsory, like a thunderstorm, and we all go through it together...."⁷ Despite its faults, if we did not have Christmas, we would have to invent it.

¹ Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 3-16. 264.

² Restad, *Christmas in America*, pp. 91-122. See also William B. Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

³ John Gilliss, "Ritualization of Middle Class Life in Nineteenth Century Britain" Gilliss, John (1989). Ritualization of middle class life in nineteenth century Britain. International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society, 3 (1989): 213-236. See also Carrier, James G. (1993). The rituals of Christmas giving. In Daniel Miller (Ed.), Unwrapping Christmas. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁴ Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America*, p. 3. For Christmas' reach into the non-Christian world, see Daniel Miller, "A Theory of Christmas," in Miller (ed.), *Unwrapping Christmas*, pp. 22-26.

⁵ Theodore Caplow, "Christmas gifts and kin networks," *American Sociological Review* 47 (1982: 383-392). This was a 1978 study of a representative group of families in a mid-Western city, who were given detailed interviews about all the Christmas gifts they gave and received.

⁶ Theodore Caplow, "Rule Enforcement Without Visible Means: Christmas Gift Giving in Middletown," *American Journal of Sociology* 89 (1984: 1306-1323).

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