

Let nothing you dismay

By Stuart White
Printed in the Weekend Post

What is this life, if full of care
We have no time to stand and stare. (W. H. Davies)

It's a week before Christmas, the season to start being jolly and doing our bit for peace on earth and goodwill to all men. Any minute now the city will finally dissolve into a ghost town as everyone rushes to the cattle posts or the coast. The shops will finally revert to relatively quiet and you stand a chance of finding a table in any restaurant... bliss. The past few weeks have been chaotic – things to do, clients to attend to, projects to close. No wonder you need a break after eleven and a half months of slogging. But why do I always find it difficult to slow down?

It's the same every year. It takes us all time to unlearn how we have been living for the past few months. The minute we take a break we have to re-programme ourselves to function without the day-to-day packed schedule and inevitable stresses. Once you lose that structure, in spite of how stressed you and your family have been, it is so difficult to become, dare I say it, normal again, living without rushing and just chilling. That packed timetable and regimentation becomes totally imprinted. Even when my kids are on holiday from school I've been known to wake them at 9am because it was 'time to get up', only to be asked why. I have no idea except I just felt we should be up and about – still in wound-up work mode.

But perhaps I am just edgy with this season? Deep down I see through the duplicitous nature of Christmas, the insatiable appetite of consumers in a frenzy of overspending, contrasted with the majority of the world's starving population. And this leaves me wondering how to instil the true values of the season in my children, the real reason we are supposed to have a few days of peace and good will and a few silent nights when all is calm, as opposed to rushing around last minute shopping, constantly checking Facebook for updates and being totally avaricious and self-centred?

Or perhaps I may just be suffering something else. Maybe it's just that when we do have time to stop and take stock of who we are and what we have achieved, it's just too sad, too ugly or too painful? The festive season is categorised as a menacing period psychologically-speaking, when unresolved emotional conflicts, loneliness and other problems trigger an alarming rise in psychiatric emergencies and suicide. When we become human again, not the workaholic beavers we are the rest of the year, we expose the raw individual underneath. Sticking our heads in the sand and burying ourselves with business and busy-ness is a great way not to deal with the real you. It's said that the suicide rate goes up during the festive season, that the joy that other people experience during the holidays drives home the hopelessness of the situation to someone who is alone in the world. All the merriment, happiness and ho, ho, ho-ing just highlight to the less fortunate what they don't have, and as a result the whole thing comes tumbling down in a great depressive, self-revealing slump and the only way out is to end it all!

Or perhaps not. According to recent evidence, holiday depression is as real as Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer, a notion fairly unfounded despite it having been around forever. One of the largest studies to examine seasonal trends in suicide and psychiatric problems found no increase around the Christmas holidays. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that depressive periods are below average over the holiday, though one group of researchers did discover an increase of suicides on New Year's Day when some people become so depressed at the prospect of returning to work and everyday life, it all becomes just too unbearable.

So if you are feeling less than festive this season you can't blame it on the time of year – that's a myth. If having the time to look back makes you realise you don't much like what you see, try looking inwards instead. Find your own inner peace and resolve to live your life the way you want all year, and not the way society tries to dictate. Understand there's a year-long balance between work, home, family and friends, not just something that can only be scheduled in over Christmas and New Year; that despite what the carol says, it's not only Christmas that should bring tidings of comfort and joy, even if that's the only time you have to truly stop and think about it. That way you might even find a bit of that elusive festive spirit lurking somewhere deep inside yourself, not just at the bottom of a glass!

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