

This Holiday season, like each one past, I will surely be interviewed by the media about coping with holiday stress, both at home and at work. My answers have always been the same: **moderation** in all things involving consumption and expectations, yet **excess** in hope for peace on Earth and good will to all. In light of recent worldwide events, this hardly seems profound enough, but maybe now--more than ever—such basic advisements are precisely the key.

As I child, I relished Christmas. I loved the carols and the spirit. The elementary school glee club would entertain parents each year. Kids, dressed alike, raised the roof with “Oh Come All Ye Faithful” and “Silent Night,” as well as Chanukah songs. Our town was about 50% Christian and 50% Jewish, and we shared our bonds. Friends came over to help us light our candles, and I helped them decorate their trees. Yes, bigotry existed, but in our insulated innocence there was hope. We did not have much, but what we had was special.

Why is it that we seem to have trouble, nowadays, taking the spirit of the holidays and making it a part of our lives throughout the year? Certainly, questions and horrors abound. What drove a group of human beings to become a bargain-seeking horde that stampeded and killed someone who got in the way? This lone incident is magnified by the recent carnage in India and other places, where terrorists push their agendas with little regard for sanctity of lives ... theirs included. Meanwhile, the world seems to stand by, helplessly, as genocide continues in Darfur and the Congo. Even some of the actions of U.S. representatives involved in a legitimate response to threats to our national security have gone overboard. There are sociological theories that attempt to explain such behaviors, but brutal acts like these defy sensibility. Victims and families are left without any measure of solace.

With regard to our national spirit, it has taken very little time for the post-election elation about President-elect Obama to be diminished by real and exaggerated concerns about our future. Unemployment is heading to a modern high, yet not even close to the level of the Great Depression. While many charitable pantries are devoid of food and while stories of the needy in our bountiful society are making headlines, history shows that giving does not drop significantly during hard economic times. At a time when the greed and ignorance of some corporate executives has been exposed, many good deeds and sincere efforts at fiscal accountability and responsibility continue to go unheralded. Obviously, good news does not sell.

Perhaps our holiday spirit is compromised by a misguided focus. In America, we say we value education, but we pay little attention to the fiscal needs or the everyday good deeds of teachers. Instead, we give homage to celebrities and athletes. In West Virginia, we obsess over the search for a college replacement head football coach and scrutinize the successor's every move. All the while, hardly a word is spoken or written in the Mountain State about the search for a new university president at that same institution. It is an abomination that athletes and entertainers make millions, while people who truly work hard cannot make ends meet. It is downright egregious when we stop to consider

the often-trivial things we focus upon ... contrasted against those important issues that we routinely overlook.

These laments do not mean I am blind to the scourges throughout the history of mankind or the realities of politics and economics. However, the global nature of business and communication has made this a very small world. I am amazed when I play poker on-line that other participants jockeying for play money come from many countries and interact without biases. There are few real boundaries. In many respects, aside from a violent minority that wants to send society back to the Dark Ages, we seem to be evolving into one world with cultural diversity but having much more that is to be shared and cherished. The vast majority on this planet love their families and friends and want to be able to live peacefully without bigotry or despair. Our similarities should stop hate and alleviate suffering. Our similarities should prevent murder of individuals or large groups, who may be different from a particular ruling class or targeted by a maniacal dictator.

As a teenager, I once wrote a story about a man who ascended a mountain. Atop this mountain there was a special communication device, a sort of microphone. It provided the power to translate and broadcast the words of a truly good person so that all other human beings would hear and understand his message. Fatigued by his climb, the man was energized when he reached the summit. He stood and grabbed the microphone. "Look," he said. "Look around you. Look into the eyes of your enemies who should be your friends. Why can't we just live in peace? Why can't we elevate our status as human beings to value goodness and condemn what is bad?" He felt so good until arguments arose, arguments about defining what is good. From afar, almost as if his voice were emanating from the heavens, he warned the masses and threatened them with annihilation if they did not heed his words. He yelled, "STOP!"

Aren't we nearing this point of self-destruction? What will it take for us to save ourselves?

So, we come back to the basics. Indeed, a return to fundamental ideals is what is needed. In this time of turmoil we can spend less and give more. In a turbulent world, we can apply moderation in all but our commitment to understanding and compassion. As is written in both Judaic and Christian liturgy, "May He cause His light to shine upon us, and may we be blessed in His name." In a word, SHALOM...Peace and Love. We are the ones who can make the offering.