

Between Thanksgiving & Christmas

"You can't even get a T-shirt with a Turkey on it!" grumped an elderly friend of mine.

This well-meaning lament, from a wonderful woman, came out of sheer frustration. She just wanted something to buy for her grandchildren at Thanksgiving. To me, though, it wasn't a problem as much as a blessing. The incessant clacking din of "buy buy buy" becomes a background hard to escape at any time, and the year's end is more intense than any other.

Christmas catalogs already pulp up mailboxes and ads jam commercial air time. Smiling Santas urge you to buy this car muffler as grinning elves extol the virtues of that toaster oven.

Turning up the sales heat increases the pressure we feel during the holiday shopping frenzy. Somehow, though, and quietly, an understated holiday has slipped unnoticed under the watchful marketing radar — Thanksgiving.

Think about Thanksgiving and Christmas.

As national holidays go, these two have had unique origins, crossed each other in the dark, and are now associated with new meanings altogether: different when they started, and different than they became.

Thanksgiving began as a way for a band of political outcast Pilgrims to give thanks that only half of them had died of starvation. Persecuted for their religion, they worked hard, communed with nature and the Indians, and it all paid off.

Nice story. But the lacquer applied to this version results in the unnatural glimmer it gives off today. Historians point out that most of the food from the first Thanksgiving was provided by the Indians themselves, not the hard work of the Europeans. And it didn't help their PR image that, within only a couple of years, the Puritans were thanking God for the plagues that decimated the same "heathen natives," who had ensured their survival in the first place.

No matter, though. Even the people who are grumpy with the historically naïve view agree that the Thanksgiving we have developed is vastly more important than its over-polished storybook beginning.

We never really identified with the Pilgrims anyway. For example, when George Washington declared November 26th as a National Day of Thanksgiving in 1789, the idea didn't catch on at all. No President followed his lead because the identification with the Pilgrims just wasn't that strong. In fact, Thomas Jefferson openly scoffed at the idea of any commemoration involving Pilgrims.

It was only in the midst of the horrors of the Civil War that Abraham Lincoln established the final Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day. This time it stuck, being celebrated on this day until Franklin Roosevelt decided that it should be moved up to the next-to-last Thursday to allow more time for Christmas shopping. It wasn't until 1941 that Congress made it an official holiday, on the 4th Thursday of November.

Beyond the historical record, what is Thanksgiving to Americans?

Somehow this holiday has survived and thrived, even though we wink and smile at its questionable beginnings that have little in common with majority of us.

Thanksgiving has become a national treasure and, I believe, our greatest holiday because it links us to our family. It makes us stop for a second and get grounded in home base, after an entire year of hustling through our jobs and lives and madly checking off the items on an endless to-do list.

Just in sight on the other side of the hamster wheel, we run and run for the things we will take for granted as soon as we get them. The pity is that we often don't even want the things we lurch for. We don't. What we want is "*more things*." Get more stuff and you still want more stuff. Be richer than 90 percent of the world and you still want more. Where is peace of mind, when we set up our lives to struggle for something we can never attain? More.

This is why Thanksgiving is, truly, the greatest of our holidays. It redirects our sight from the slippery slope of continual acquisition, to those kids that love you, those parents that adore you, those friends that need you. The love found in friends and family is free. Its cash value is zero (and, ironically, infinite at the same time). There's nothing to "get" that you don't already have. You can relax now. You have it. Step off the hamster wheel.

So what started with a strange remembrance of an outcast Puritan sect has become a time of refuge and re-grounding.

You might think Christmas should be the same.

Even though our American background is not uniformly Christian, we have somehow had the vision to embrace a wide quilt of traditions within this holiday season. Yours, mine, theirs ... they're all valuable.

But this embrace hardly comforts, when Christmas becomes maddening consumer clamor on every street corner. And this is driven by a looming deadline: "*Got your shopping done yet? Get your Elmo doll before they're all gone!*"

The impending gift day means having to buy something for mom, dad, the kids, the siblings, their kids, the grandparents, and probably all

their pets too! And perhaps the worst part is that the very notion of a gift, something that reaches out from our love, has become expected: an obligation. Not only **MUST** you buy something for each, but how much you spend becomes a statement of how much you care for them.

Most people agree with this idea, but get caught up in it anyway. After all, what is there to do when our own traditions are run so completely by the equation between love and consumption? If you give Johnny a really cool remote control Buzz Lightyear, and Janie only gets Smokey, the Beanie Baby bear, it looks like you weren't thinking about Janie and just grabbed the first thing you saw off the checkout line counter as the staff wrapped Johnny's really cool present.

Janie will pout, or worse, cry.

That's why Christmas can seem to us like a list of chores with an exam looming at the end. "Did we get enough for them? How much did we spend?" The value of the Christmas holiday itself can dangle from the end of a string with a printed sale price on it. Is it any wonder that parents sit back on Christmas morning, exhausted, glad it's all over?

No one made Christmas this way.

We find ourselves with our current traditions because of a slow erosion from the original intent, regardless of your tradition, of this season — a promise of peace on Earth. This is what we try to remember, try to teach our kids, but lose among the thousand tasks along the way. We get distracted from any common purpose by this false equivalence between love and consumption.

I was an exchange student in Norway for one year when I was in high school, and we celebrated Christmas on the farm very much like Americans celebrate Thanksgiving. My host family filled the house with the sights, sounds, and incredible smells of the coming dinner. They dressed up for each other, and then visited the rest of the family to eat and sing together.

In the evening, everyone gathered around the tree in the center of the room, with small candles actually placed on the branches themselves, carefully lit, until all was ready.

We formed two circles around the tree. Everyone held hands as the inner circle began to move in one direction, singing softly their Christmas songs. The outer circle, too, moved in the opposite direction around the flickering lights. Now envision this scene without an obscene pile of presents beneath. That was their Christmas.

I was foreign to the language, the customs, and the family. I looked at these people like Whos in Whoville, and yet the sense of place put me within the family, rotating by me, singing songs I didn't need to

understand. It's what they did together, what we did together. I was family, too.

The holiday season and its promise of peace extends from the home, with hands held. This is why Thanksgiving, somehow still hidden from commercial view, can conjure in our hearts and minds the basics we crave: home, food, family, friendship. By contrast, Christmas has come to evoke the Grinch's grump about the "noise, noise, noise!" and a spending Mardi Gras from which our Lenten January leaves us to tighten our monetary (and actual) belts.

But what to do?

We do live here in this culture where mountains of boxes are the expected norm. What can any one individual do against the cultural currents that feel like Class-5 rapids?

For starters, we need to replace just a few of those presents with a cup of coffee shared with your mom before the rest of the house wakes up; a cognac with your dad after the house has bedded down.

Children need hugs like food, like snacks, like water. Find out from your nephew which version of his latest video game is the best, and why. Find out who he is, and why. Just do that — in no rush to leave as if he were another of your chores — and he will love you forever. Sit with your niece and help her untangle her doll's characteristically unrealistic bleach-blond hair. Sit in the floor and help pick out the shoes that go perfectly with her Malibu sports car. Just do that, taking your time like she is the only little girl in world, and she will love you forever.

These kids will remember the time you helped them wobble along on their first bicycle far longer than that extra board game you bought to top off the pile. Tell your parents you are sorry you were such a pain, that they did a fine job. Let your kids know how proud you are. Would you really trade 42 presents for a son who lets you know he really loves you? I hope not.

Help out in the kitchen. Be with them. Laugh with them. But most of all, extend your hand and arm every chance you have. We are social animals and touch is what binds us together. It could be a pat or a hand-hold, a hug or a noogie.

I suppose I'm asking the impossible, "pushing the river" as one friend quipped, to expect us to focus more on people than stuff. But it has to be said because it's so important: spend more time than money this year, and have a wonderful holiday season!