

## Features

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### Adding meaning to your holidays

By Rebecca Cohen - Chronicle columnist

The holidays, all the way from November through January, are a time of year that you either love or dread. And sometimes we feel a little in between.

Most of us look forward to the holidays and get excited about the prospect of rekindling childhood feelings of innocence and wonder. We hope our family will come together in peace and love. We hope the holidays will bring changes that we have been hoping and wishing for. The problem, however, is that while we have these dreams in our hearts and minds, we often don't feel the same kind of anticipation toward family obligations that often arise during the holidays. In addition, few of us look at this time of year as an opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of the holidays and why they are meant to be important and special.

The holidays are a time to take a good look around you. They are about finding something spiritual and wonderful about yourself, your life and the people who fill it and make it special. By that I don't mean to just give thanks or show appreciation through some materialistic and commercial sense, but to understand that you have a lot. Despite everything, you are alive and relatively well, and have a life filled with people who care about you. You may not realize it or believe it is true, but it is, nonetheless.

No matter what their religious or spiritual beliefs, for most people the holidays involve some understanding that they should be celebrating something very special. In celebrating, though, we often lose sight of the things that are truly important in our lives. We get tangled up in the specifics and forget the general point because we're so busy trying to make it perfect. What is the point of a holiday if you don't give yourself time to enjoy it?

This year, add meaning to your holidays by rekindling good memories, reinforcing relationships, relaxing, and re-establishing priorities.

To understand your priorities, ask:

**“What is my favorite thing about the holidays?”**

**“What are the most important traditions in our family?”**

**“What part of our holiday routine takes a lot out of me/us and creates stress/negativity?”**

If you truly understand what's important to you and your family, you will be better able to prioritize activities. Don't be afraid to experiment and try something new. Create new traditions in the family that your children, and you, can look forward to and pass on to their families. Rekindle old traditions that have long since been neglected but not forgotten, and keep only the ones that are enjoyable, renewing, meaningful and relaxing. Let go of the strict holiday standards for perfection and just enjoy yourself.

For example, if you have always had stressful family dinners for the holidays, ask yourself what part you can play in making it different. If you find yourself gorging on sweets and food, do you really want to continue this practice? If everyone has dinner and then watches football on TV, goes to parades or sings carols, are those meaningful experiences for everyone? If you spend hours decorating your house with lights, do you enjoy the time? If these are important traditions to you and your family, then continue them with joy and peace, not stress. If they are no longer meaningful and have been continued only because they have been done in the past, ask everyone what is important and start new traditions.

The Sarah Ban Breathnach book *“Simple Abundance”* has an entry for each day of the year. I am writing this column on Dec. 12, and today her entry is called “A Partridge in a Pear Tree.” Under the title she has this quote: “There is only one real deprivation and that is not to be able to give one's gifts to those one loves most.” She talks about the holidays and

the inner struggle we go through because we fill our lives with too many obligations, promises, “should-dos” and conflicting commitments. We don't give the gift of ourselves because it requires our precious but dwindling natural resources of time, creative energy and emotion. Ban Breathnach suggests that we try to remember that the gift of giving ourselves is a one-size-fits-all gift that would be absolutely thrilling for everyone on our list. Here are some of her ideas for what you can offer as your gift:

undivided attention,  
enthusiasm,  
creative energy,  
communication, wonder,  
peaceful surroundings,  
beauty,  
good cheer,  
tenderness,  
joy and love.

There are no magical answers or words of wisdom that can help you achieve the holiday or life you want, feel true to yourself and have family, friends and a job that have meaning. The only thing anyone can say is that life is full of choices and we make choices every minute of every day. We choose what we value or don't value and whether we want to be materialistic, stressed-out, angry or unhappy.

This holiday season, take a moment to celebrate the special joys of you, your loved ones and all your blessings. Make choices that bring meaning to you and your family and remember that the possibilities for peace, joy, love, connection, health and understanding are there.

We only have to make the choice.