

HOLIDAYS WITHOUT STRESS: VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

Last December my wife and I had an opportunity to visit the Czech Republic, my ancestral home. Our first impulse was, “We can’t do that! We have too many holiday traditions and obligations we must complete!” Our second thought was, “This could be a trip of a lifetime. What can we forego so we can travel in December without feeling burdened by holiday demands?”

The up-coming holidays of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukah, Kwanza, etc. can easily become exhausting rather than renewing. Women in particular are frequently more taxed due to food preparation, gift buying and wrapping, entertaining, decorating, etc. What would happen if we carefully examined our faith and values and decided to live more aligned with our authentic selves and less compliant with society’s expectations?

We began by making a list of our traditional holiday tasks and deciding what we could do without or possibly simplify. It’s wise to make these decisions with input from all family members. We decided to drastically reduce our holiday decorations, both inside and outside our home. Next we eliminated baking and all those sugary calories! Lastly, we simplified gift giving for children and grandchildren in distant cities by sending money or gift cards in lieu of gifts requiring wrapping and mailing. We also realized that by completing some holiday purchases or baking well in advance, say September or October, we were freed up to truly enjoy the holidays.

Without realizing it, we had entered the realm of a concept and a movement called “Voluntary Simplicity” (visit www.choosingvoluntarysimplicity.com). It entails choosing a lifestyle that fits the uniqueness of you and your values. The goal is a life that is joyous, exciting and truly fulfilling rather than just existing day to day. Here are some components of Voluntary Simplicity:

- Live within your means. Live the cliché, do I “want” it or “need” it? Avoid the stress of being financially overextended.
- You are what you eat. Be selective. Real food free of preservatives and additives will make us healthier and happier.
- Really evaluate how you spend your time. Is your life filled with events that are meaningless to you?
- Connect with the healing power of nature. A walk in the woods, time spent gardening or boating will refresh us; provide relaxation and peace of mind.
- Spend time with those people whose eyes light up when they see us. Relationships need nurturing. Spend time with friends and family members whom you love and who love you.
- Find a balance between work and relaxation. We need to take care of ourselves. It’s wise to do things every day that renew us physically and emotionally.

When we personalize our simplicity by knowing who we are and what we

truly value, we will make decisions that create a life of meaning and genuine fulfillment. Aristotle famously said at his trial that, "An unexamined life is not worth living." He said this after choosing death rather than exile from Athens or a commitment to silence. If only all of us had the courage and the time to define ourselves and as they say in Hawaii, "Live da Life!"

We might also read Duane Elgin's 1981 seminal book, Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich. The book was revised in 1993 and many related books have since been published. See Linda Breen Pierce's Choosing Simplicity: Real People Finding Peace and Fulfillment in a Complex World for an annotated bibliography of books, web sites, study circles, seminars, newsletters, magazines and organizations. It takes a major effort to acquire the countercultural skills of Voluntary Simplicity.

By the way, our holiday trip to the Czech Republic exceeded our highest expectations and Christmas that year with our family was wonderful! No Stress!

Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD, who adheres to balance in all areas of life. Visit his website at www.askdrdavidnow.com or email at james519@comcast.net