

Those Holiday Blues – Friend or Foe?

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“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times,” wrote Charles Dickens in his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*— and so the holidays can feel for many of us. The festivities, the sharing of gifts, and the extra time with family and friends can make the holidays the “best of times.” The holidays also point us to spiritual and humanitarian concerns and make us think about others, providing a welcome break from the usual focus on our own problems.

Along with the extra socializing, the Christmas message of joy and hope can boost the spirits – so much so that suicide rates decline. According to The Center for Suicide Prevention, the highest frequency of suicides occurs in August, not December.

The Christmas spirit of “peace on earth” and “goodwill towards all” can also lead to a temporary “cease fire” between warring relatives and friends; and, in some cases, to a longer term spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness. During World War I, it even led to a spontaneous truce between enemy soldiers. Despite the official disapproval of military commanders on all sides, in both 1914 and 1915 French, English, and German soldiers could be found exchanging Christmas gifts of whiskey and chocolate instead of gunfire. Some even held football matches.

On the other hand, the holidays can precipitate an attack of the “holiday blues.” Even people with no history of emotional problems can find themselves feeling sad and lonely next to the most brightly lit Christmas tree. For those mourning the absence of a loved one due to death, illness, or military duty, the holidays can feel like the “worst of times” – as it can for those

experiencing a divorce or a broken friendship or family tie. Christmas can also arouse memories of past holidays which were painful or traumatic. The contrast between the sadness inside with the merriment outside can be excruciating. Trying to shove aside the sadness, instead of acknowledging it, is yet another stressor, as is having to pretend that all is well in order not to upset others.

In working with gold-star mothers and military widows, I found that many of them suffered tremendously because they felt it mandatory to maintain a stoic silence about their losses. I then realized how fortunate Greek Americans are to come from a tradition that acknowledges and honors loss, rather than denying it. In addition to our Greek Orthodox memorial services, it's usually acceptable to mention a deceased loved one at a holiday gathering and to set aside slices of the Vasilopita for absent family members, even long dead grandparents.

Financial pressures loom large at holiday time. According to the 2009 American Psychological Association's *Stress in America Study*, some 70% of American families identified financial anxieties as their major life stressor. A third of their children also expressed worries about "having enough." The financial pressures resulting from gift giving, entertainment, or travel can be compounded by the time pressures involved in the plethora of Christmas activities, which although enjoyable, can also be physically fatiguing, especially since normal day to day responsibilities must also be met.

Then there's that pesky Eris, the Goddess of Discord and Strife, the twin sister of Ares, God of War. Sometimes she worms her way into the best planned holiday event in hopes of resurrecting old resentments and creating new ones. She's so good at her job that Zeus called upon her to turn brother against brother. Using one of her favorite weapons, jealousy, she caused

Atreus (the father of Agamemnon of Trojan War fame) to banish his twin brother, Thyestes. In fact, Eris is credited with starting the entire Trojan War.

When Eris wasn't invited to one of the most spectacular events on Mount Olympus, the wedding of Thetis and Peleus, she was furious! So she went to the wedding uninvited and threw an apple bearing the inscription "To the Fairest" into the crowd of heavenly wedding guests. The ensuing argument between Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera over who deserved the apple ultimately led to the abduction of Helen by Paris; and the rest is history.

Like Thetis, we won't invite Eris to our spectacular holiday event. But she may show up anyway and interfere with our Christmas cheer by arousing jealousy in our hearts towards those we feel are more successful, loved, happier, talented, or attractive than we are. Trying to get rid of Eris by pretending she isn't there or by ordering her to leave won't work. She's a goddess; you're a mortal. The best way is to listen to her.

According to psychologist Karl Jung, jealousy has both negative and positive aspects. Negative jealousy is based on the erroneous belief that if your rival was weakened or no longer existed, you'd have what you wanted. However, eliminating competition will not necessarily grant you the abilities or success you so desire. For example, if you envy someone for losing weight, their absence or demise won't make you thinner.

In positive jealousy, someone has traits or a situation which you want, but which you haven't yet developed or are afraid to develop. The challenge here is to identify your jealousies and the hopes and wishes underlying them. Some of the qualities or advantages which you envy may be unattainable due to circumstances beyond your control; and you are entitled to grieve your inability to ever have them. Others, however, could possibly be acquired, either in whole or in

part. If you're able to direct the powerful energy of your jealousy towards those dreams, then perhaps Eris' visit wasn't in vain.

Then there's Dionysus, best known as God of Wine. In small doses, he's been known to help people be more affectionate, generous, and forgiving and free them to enjoy the moment. On the other hand, Dionysus, especially too much of him, can bring out the "worst" in people – anger, abusiveness, and other disruptions.

The holidays can be the "best of times" because they provide us with time away from our usual routines and pressures. But they can be the "worst of times" because, like birthdays, they mark the passage of time and remind us of our mortality. New Year's Resolutions make us aware of resolutions we failed to keep the previous years and make us ask ourselves "million dollar" questions, such as, "What do I really want out of life?" This forces us to confront Hades, God of the Underworld.

Although most of us think of Hades as the god of physical death, he can also represent the end of a relationship, a purpose, a hope or a way of being. Psychologically, he symbolizes our personal "underworld" – our unconscious thoughts and wishes and our forgotten memories, all of which can be aroused by significant events such as the holidays.

"Hades is not evil or Satanic, nor an enemy of mankind," Philip Mayerson points out in his book, *Classical Mythology in Literature, Art and Music*. But Hades is quite grim. And none of us like how depressed and cut off from others we feel when, in the middle of singing Christmas carols, we suddenly find ourselves in his realm. To Jung, however, there are instances when visiting Hades, like feeling blue, can be a friend, not a foe.

Hades' other name was Pluto, which in Greek means wealth and riches. Hades' invisible richness was symbolized by the image of the cornucopia that he held in his hands, overflowing with fruits and vegetables or with jewels, gold, and silver.

“Hades is the god presiding in . . . our depressions, our anxieties, our emotional upheavals, and our grief with the power to bring illumination and renewal,” writes Arianna Stassinopoulous in her book, *The Gods of Greece*. “Only after we . . . become familiar with the realm of Hades can we discover that there are riches to be found in the dimness, coldness and darkness of what mystics refer to as the dark night of the soul,” explains Jean Bolen in her book, *The Gods in Every Man*.

Descending into the realm of Hades can be a means to rest and replenish oneself after a period of overexertion; a type of retreat, a time of looking inward which permits us to uncover underdeveloped, suppressed, or entirely new longings and talents wishing to assert themselves, such as a desire to redirect the course of one's life. In this sense, the holiday blues can lead to the discovery of new potentials and new sources of inner strength, joy, and purpose. For such reasons, Hades is also known as the “Good Counselor.”

“Minor descents into Hades are the stuff of everyday life,” writes Bolen, especially after the holidays, when the everyday problems forgotten due to the holiday season return; and any disappointments, longings, or other feelings not attended to during the holidays begin to emerge. But not all feelings of emptiness and depression can be viewed in a positive light. For persons suffering from a genuine clinical depression, visiting Hades may not lead to fruitful introspection, but to despair.

No single symptom – whether it be fatigue; sadness; indecision; social withdrawal; feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, or guilt; or difficulties eating, sleeping, or concentrating— necessarily means one is clinically depressed. The holiday blues usually involve one or two of these symptoms, which do not persist, but come and go and which, for the most part, do not disrupt functioning. However, having several of these symptoms consistently for two or more weeks, especially when these symptoms interfere with everyday activities or include thoughts of death or suicide, can signal a biological depression that needs immediate professional attention.

Depression is the most common psychiatric problem in our country. About 16% of Americans will probably experience a clinical depression of at least two weeks duration at some point in their life. If you suspect you might be depressed or suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) due to the lack of sunlight during the winter, there is no shame in seeking help and no point in suffering needlessly.

In Greek mythology, Dionysus descended into Hades to rescue his mother. Orpheus entered the realm of Hades to save his beloved Eurydice; and Hercules, to pull out his friend, Theseus. But we mortals who suffer from depression or from SAD have to save ourselves.