

New Ways for the Holidays

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Holidays have been supersized. Around Halloween, Styrofoam cemeteries sprout in yards all over town, followed by fake cobwebs, plastic pumpkins, and store-bought Grim Reapers, skeletons, zombies, and witches, heavy on the plastic blood. When did something as simple and local as Halloween become an orgy of spending? Americans drop \$6 billion a year on Halloween costumes, treats, and décor, second only to the approximately \$740 per person we spend on Christmas, according to Gallup.

Now, just weeks after the excesses of Halloween we face the same issues: imported decorations, advertising's constant bombardment, the subtle message of a "perfect" holiday that is just a retailer's fantasy, and tons of waste. Christmas gift wrap and shopping bags alone generate four million tons of waste annually. For all the time, energy, and money spent on "celebrating," people are exhausted, irritable, and cynical.

Recently I spoke to Corey Colwell-Lipson, co-founder of an organization called Green Halloween and author, along with her mother and co-founder Lynn Colwell, of the book *Celebrate Green*. She emphasizes that they're not about taking the fun out of the holidays and special events, but about putting it back in. The group's website, www.celebrategreen.net, suggests meaningful activities that create less waste and make holiday observances

more affordable.

Colwell-Lipson, a certified marriage and family therapist, started Green Halloween after she took her daughters trick-or-treating for the first time. Most places handed out fistfuls of candy. But she observed that at some houses, her daughters got to choose between a treasure (a small toy, sticker, or bubbles) and a piece of candy. Her kids almost always chose the treasure, and they enjoyed the eye-to-eye interaction with the grown-up making the offer. Colwell-Lipson had an epiphany. Surely there were ways to make Halloween and other holidays more meaningful, less stressful, and even healthier. The answer lay in emphasizing simplicity and relationships with loved ones.

This month we're celebrating Christ's nativity. It's ironic that something that started out so obscurely—a baby, a stable, a teenage mother—has become a key part of the U.S. economy. Our retail culture emphasizes decked-out Christmas trees and animated reindeer, but Colwell-Lipson encourages families to connect and choose meaning over stuff. "When we focus on having fun, family togetherness, and relationships with other people, the joy we receive will outlast any present," she notes on her website.

For the past few years, I have muddled through December, trying to hear God's voice amid the din. Somehow we have managed to establish traditions that bring us together year

after year. We always put the tree up right after Thanksgiving—it's a fake one, a concession to my husband who doesn't want to hassle with a real tree. (Another tradition: reminding him that he's the Grinch.) We hang a new cardinal ornament every year—Indiana's state bird and a tradition I've borrowed from my mother.

One of Colwell-Lipson's suggestions that we're trying this year is making a button garland. My grandmother's sewing machine cabinet is stuffed with old buttons. We'll carve out an evening to sip hot chocolate and string buttons with thin florist's wire, and perhaps I'll tell my girls some stories about the grandma they never met.

Here's something else we're going to try. Kate and Claire love to bake. My husband, a physician, often receives goodies from his patients during December. As a family, we're going to turn the tables and offer baked treats to his patients, especially those confined to nursing homes. We prepared by starting our cookie-baking in November and freezing the treats until we needed them.

We've also been saving our money for a vacation this month. Our daughters are growing up. My husband and I figure that time away with them is better than any gift. iPods are nice, but memories last a lot longer. ■

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