



## Learning the attitude of gratitude for the holidays

"Last year I gave myself one hundred and eight celebrations--besides the ones they close school for," writes Byrd Baylor in her children's book, "I'm in Charge of Celebrations." She pronounces an August day as "The Time of the Falling Stars." February 6 is "Green Cloud Day," and March 11 is "Dust Devil Day." Baylor's New Year begins in spring. "That's when I feel like starting new. . . . It always makes me think I ought to bloom myself," she declares.

All of us (especially those in recovery from alcoholism or other addictive behaviors) might do well to adopt Baylor's practice as we approach the more traditional holidays (the ones they *do* close school for). Often, the holidays are laden with unrealistic expectations that can add stress and threaten sobriety. Maybe *this* year we'll get through a family meal without fighting. Maybe *this* year, Uncle Ted won't get drunk. Maybe *this* year, mom won't pressure me to eat and eat and eat.

Television specials broadcast idealistic portraits of happy and harmonious families gathered together in the spirit of love and charity. We forget that these are actors who get paid well to emulate domestic tranquility. When our experience doesn't match their portrayal, we risk feeling let down, anxious, depressed, or lonely. Worse yet, we might be tempted to take a drink, medicate our worries, overeat, or engage in some other unhealthy behavior to dull our misery or emptiness.

People in Twelve Step mutual-help groups learn to adopt an "attitude of gratitude," an openness of heart and mind that allows them to notice and appreciate the gifts they are given each day. Chief among these is the gift of recovery. These presents--be they a soft winter's snow, the excited smile of a child on Christmas morning, the honest exchange of feelings at an AA meeting, or another day of abstinence--make it easier to give unconditionally, without expecting anything in return. In this way gratitude doesn't become something reserved for a holiday present exchange. It is a way of being each day, every day.

Annie Dillard once wrote that "each day is a god." Recovering people learn to live in the moment, and they learn to trust that a Higher Power (which could mean God, a sacred spirit, nature, or the energy of their mutual-help group, etc.) lives with them each day. It is easy to lose sight of our spiritual grounding in the glitter and commercialism of the holidays. Viewing each day as God-filled and thinking "holy days" instead of "holidays" could keep us better connected to our Higher Power when we most need that connection.

And as lovely as some traditions may be, we do not have to be held captive by holiday routines that may make us miserable or threaten recovery. Like Byrd Baylor, we can be in charge of our own celebrations. We can adopt new traditions such as serving meals for the homeless on Christmas or hosting an alcohol-free party. We can even opt out of a tension-filled family gathering and meet with friends instead or go to a mutual-help meeting. We can reduce the pressure of gift exchanges by creating new and fun practices. Friends could agree that no one spends more than \$5 on a gift and that the gift has to come from a second-hand store. Families could choose to donate money to a charity instead of giving expensive gifts to each other. Our "New Year" could become our own or a loved one's sobriety anniversary instead of Jan. 1.

Call it a paradigm shift; call it an opportunity. Instead of thinking of a holiday period, how about imagining 365 "holy days" each ripe with the possibility of celebration, each day a precious gift to be treasured *and* shared?

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Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).