

SAUNDERS PONDERERS

by Bruce Saunders

Wishing you a modestly pleasant Mid Winter Season. I won't bully you into having a "Merry one, nor a splendid "Barbie Dreamland Christmas" or even a "Wonderful Life" spiritual reawakening. I just wish you to run the gauntlet of the season as unscathed as possible.

A lot of people love the season, prepare for it way ahead and bask in the social whirl and excess. But Christmas is an ordeal for many, even those with Lota bucks. Our society has whipped up Christmas into such a fever of expectation, of consumer gratification, of spiritual transcendence, of joy, of family closeness ...all those fine things that are expected to culminate in one glorious climax around Christmas and springboard us into the New Year. If we're lucky some of the above can be enjoyed by some of us, but many crash and burn trying, hoping, wishing.

Sound like humbuggery? No, just practicality. I'm one who literally barely survived the crisis of the season. Six years ago, my ongoing struggle with depression led me to a near-fatal suicide attempt. The whole season had been a fraud in my eyes, the New Year did not dawn happily.

I've always been appalled at our local psychiatric hospital closing one of its three wards during the holidays. The rationale seemed to be a hard-hearted fiscal drive to save the extra costs of overtime on that cluster of *stat* holidays. Why, at the time when all the pressures caused by the "Xmas Spin doctors" are mercilessly driving us crazy, would there be less room at the inn?

Upon inquiry, however, Gail Simpson at Canadian/Capital Mental Health and Phillippa Doherty of the Need Crisis Line, surprised me with a response. Statistically it is not the most psychiatrically calamitous time of the year. The crisis line is quieter. Patients willingly do go home for the holidays and family rally for the occasion. The need and tradition to attempt to *do Christmas properly* is a powerful motivator. There's a hopefulness and a goodwill that gets people through. For the homeless and hungry there is a generosity that wells up to feed people and to supply clothes and toys. Special events are thrown and the goodwill really is shared during the season. People hang in.

Unfortunately things seize up as soon as life returns to normal. Everyone gave at Christmas and now the bills are rolling in. The generosity is not sustainable...the bubble pops. Perhaps the hope of Christmas and the promise of a New Year don't bear out. Back to the grind.

Eight years ago, I hung on through the New Year, but needed a bed in Eric Martin Pavilion the first week in January. Every year now I try to keep a perspective, keep things in scale, pass on the hype. Every year the rising tide still gets my socks wet. Even with this new perspective, the marketing hype begins in October (the inch thick Sears Wish Book actually arrived in September) and builds to December 24th with ever-greater deposits of flyers at the door, ads on the airwaves - everyone vigorously celebrating the season - I feel like a Scrooge for not rising to the occasion. I feel I'm missing that ecstasy that everyone else is enjoying ... Aren't they?

Last year, as I dropped around to various customers and acquaintances, I noticed that if I mentioned my dissent, my doubt about this Yuletide fever, everyone, *everyone*, quietly admitted they hated the zoo it's all become, preferring the routine and gentle pleasures of their regular lives. My casual poll revealed that those who were *really* enjoying the season were the few who had sidestepped the whole circus, decided not to celebrate Christmas and were **light heartedly** observing the mayhem around them, especially the rampant consumerism.

Too many people run up on the rocks of expectation. This season is the most stressful of the year. Realizing *that* can protect you from undue disappointment. Phillippa wisely remarked that even realizing you are going to be extra stressed, probably stretched financially, can help keep a healthy perspective. "Plan to stay within your priorities and comfort zone. Self preservation should be a priority." So, bottom line: don't let the hype get to you. Keep your sanity, "... when all about you are losing theirs (and blaming it on you)". *Rudyard Kipling*

Keep the integrity of your life. Enjoy the modest pleasures that come your way. Be a little generous and a little thoughtful. Help those around you get through unscathed. I'll try too! Let's compare notes after the holidays.



Need Crisis Line gives support too -- 24 hrs: 386-6323

