

# Simplifying the Holidays

Text By Nadine Goff

"CHRISTMAS WON'T BE CHRISTMAS WITHOUT any presents," grumbles Jo March in the opening sentence of "Little Women," Louisa May Alcott's novel about four sisters growing up during the American Civil War.

Today, Jo's lament might well be longer. For many people in the United States, Christmas isn't Christmas without a decorated Christmas tree, rounds of holiday baking, elaborate feasts, beautifully wrapped packages and seemingly endless bouts of shopping to find the perfect gifts for friends, family members, business associates and that person at the office whose name you've drawn for this year's "Secret Santa" ritual.

While there are other holidays and celebrations that take place in the weeks between Thanksgiving Day and New Year's Day – including Kwanzaa and Hanukkah – Christmas remains the most important holiday on our nation's calendar, especially since it has become increasingly secularized and commercialized.

Overwhelmed, frazzled and anxious, an increasing number of people are looking for ways to simplify the holiday season. "For many people, the holidays are a burden," writes Elaine St. James, author of "Simplify Your Christmas" (Andrews McMeel Publishing, ISBN: 0-8362-9785-0). "The obligations, the guilt, and the exhaustion of the season far outweigh the pleasures."

Financial planner Diane McCurdy concurs: "In our wistful imaginations, Christmas is a simple, joyful time of snowfall, sparkling trees and soft candlelight," says the author of "How Much Is Enough? Balancing Today's

Needs with Tomorrow's Retirement Goals" (Wiley, ISBN: 0-471-73871-9). But, McCurdy continues, in reality, "From a personal finance standpoint, Christmas has become a nightmare. Somehow we've come to think that we have to spend and spend every year and few of us can truly afford to do so."

If you want to simplify your holiday season, there are lots of people willing to offer clever-sounding tips and potential solutions; but as you wind your way through the thicket of "helpful" suggestions, you may find yourself overwhelmed and bewildered by advice from the self-appointed experts. Plus, you may encounter resistance from friends and family. Before you rush headlong into a frenzied campaign to simplify your holiday season, try starting with some very basic approaches.

"One of the first steps you can take to simplify Christmas is to rediscover the things you truly love about the holidays," says St. James. "Creating new holiday experiences around a few things you and your family love will go a long way toward simplifying Christmas," she adds. "Just don't try to incorporate all the things you love."

Getting better organized may help some people simplify the holidays. Don't wait until the last minute,

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counsel the organizing gurus. Buy a holiday planner. Make lists. Log on to your computer and visit <http://organizedchristmas.com> a website offering a free six-week Christmas organizing plan.

Or, alternately, pay heed to St. James, who says, "Stop trying to get organized." She argues that, "Simplifying the holidays is not the same thing as organizing them."

Organizing is about reshuffling, while simplifying is about eliminating, says St. James. "Simplifying is not about how to do more in less time," she writes. "It's about doing less so you'll enjoy it more."

If you're the person who does the majority of the shopping and food preparation associated with your family's Christmas celebration, McCurdy has a suggestion for doing less and enjoying it more: "If you're hosting the holiday feast, make it a potluck," she advises. "Unless you thrive on playing hostess, spread the work (and the cost) around."

It may not be easy to share responsibility for a holiday feast if you've been in charge for years and years, acknowledges St. James, especially if you believe this is a role other people expect you to fulfill. But, she says, "Often what we think are other people's expectations are ones we conjure up for ourselves." Instead of engaging

yourself in a competitive sport where you're primarily playing against yourself, St. James says, "If you no longer find the contest rewarding, quit for a year and see if anyone cares." For some people, simplifying the holiday season may involve what seem to be drastic changes. They may want to avoid holiday celebrations altogether and spend time alone, rather than indulging in exhausting excesses. "If you choose to have a quiet time on your own over the holidays, don't apologize for it, and don't make excuses," advises St. James. "It may be unusual, but it's not unnatural."

Whatever steps you may decide to take to simplify the holiday season, it's important to warn your family and friends in advance because challenging long-standing traditions isn't easy, even if those traditions no longer make sense. "Christmas causes us to examine our relationships with our families, our community, and our faith," writes historian Penne L. Restad, author of "Christmas in America" (Oxford University Press, ISBN: 0-19-509300-3). "At Christmastide, we must, directly, or even by omission, set our priorities, establish our tolerances, and square our hopes with reality."