

It is ironic how the rest of us let Christmas become a pretty hard time, what with the pressure to entertain, be entertaining, to make sure to remember everyone with cards, small gifts and somehow ignore the sounds of compounding interest on your over-burdened credit cards. With the papers stuffed to bursting with flyers and your favourite television show interrupted every five minutes with 10 minutes of ads for all sorts of great things you simply must get for your loved ones (if you really do love them), it is easy to forget what the third week of January will be like after two weeks of pancakes or macaroni dinners. Not even the good macaroni, either. Here are a few things I like to keep in mind while tripping through the tinsel laden, muzak filled halls of malls, business and banquets.

First of all, like my mother, there are many people who don't like Christmas. Not because of any religious or moral objections to a christian based monopoly of a few days on the calendar but because it has unhappy memories associated with it. While Christmas decorations and lights mark a time of joy for most of us, it serves to remind them of the loss of a close family member or some other tragic event. And, whether it is because of the long dark days of December or a need to hold on through terminal pain long enough to mark the passing of another year, this is the time a substantial number of people chose to make their exit from this mortal coil.

It's hard to carry the burden of grief's continuing echoes when everywhere the message is what a happy time this is for one and all. Express anything less than unbridled cheer and you run the risk of being labeled a grinch, a Scrooge, a humbug. It is okay to complain about all the shopping and baking; how hard it is to find the time to get the house clean before the invasion of guests; even to say that just a few more days would be of help. Everyone feels that way. To say out loud that you would like to climb into bed, pull the covers over your head and stay there until January sometime, however,

is not the proper, approved, festive way to complain of seasonal anxiety.

My grandfather died just after Christmas when I was seven years old. After that, mom would still clean the house and buy presents but her heart wasn't in it. I became the driving force behind dragging dad out to buy a tree and nagging him into putting up the lights on the house. After a few years mom retreated almost completely from the whole thing. In retrospect I know it wasn't a matter of wanting to deprive my sister and I of a normal Christmas or of hating the season itself. If we could have shifted Christmas to mid-July, I'm sure she would have been out decking the halls with the best of them.

There are also people who find themselves away from family, alone and feeling otherwise abandoned at a time when everywhere you look, the emphasis is on how wonderful it is to be with family and friends right now. A lot of these people know quite well how wonderful it would be but for whatever reason, aren't able to bask in the warmth of their family. I'm pretty sure most of them are right in there with the blanket over the head until mid-January crowd.

From experience I know there really isn't anything you can do for either of these groups of people or for those who have other demons haunting their memories at this time of year. You can't undo what was done or happened but you can give that less than jolly person a bit of space when they ask for it. They usually don't want to bring their negative 'vibes' to the party and will join in the fun when they're ready.

It's also a good idea to go a little easy on yourself at this time of year. If you can't find that perfect gift, it wasn't so perfect after all, was it? Besides, there's always birthdays and what-the-hell days when that certain someone will be just as happy to receive that perfect whatnot - and at considerably

reduced pressure on your finances.

Before I sign off with the traditional wish for good cheer and a good year, I have to let this little part of the world know about yet another gang episode at Esquimalt High School. There is an old gent, just turned 100 but apparently looks like a spring chicken of 80 years, who lives in the near the school. He isn't a staff member or engaged in any official capacity but everyone knows Ernie. Every morning he slowly goes around the school checking all the doors to ensure they're unlocked so the kids can get inside. Then at night, just as slowly, Ernie goes around making sure the same doors are locked again. He always wears an orange safety vest so no one will hit him as he makes his way across the street to the school and leans heavily on a walker that has reached an age and state it's almost in need of a walker itself.

Well, before you start drawing the usual conclusion about what happens when teen-agers with a world-wide reputation for thuggery meet up with a helpless old person, remember this is a Christmas story. A teacher started a collection that went to every classroom in the school and at the Santa's breakfast on Friday, Ernie was invited to attend. You can now recognize the old gent by his orange vest and very new, very shiny walker complete with a little seat so he can take a rest as he performs his daily rounds. Oh, and by the big smile.

So now you can go off and have a Merry Christmas, Hannukah, Kwanza, Solstice, Turkey Day or a long winter nap. Whatever you call, do it well and I'll see you in the neighborhood in the New Year.

