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Negotiating the Holidays

We've all seen the comedies and horror stories about going home for the holidays. And unfortunately too many of them are based on real experiences. Because in this country the holidays (including Christmas, Hanukkah, Festival of Lights, New Years, and others) are meaningful and unavoidable (starting before Halloween), they must be reckoned with if not simply enjoyed--regardless of what they do or don't mean to us.

And while there are fewer stories about *not* going home for the holidays, this too can be a challenging experience. So, toward the goal of enjoying the next few weeks as much as possible, here are some thoughts and suggestions.

Returning home

For those who are returning home for the first time, this reunion can be the most enjoyable, difficult, and significant of all. But most people will agree that "going home" at any age, especially for holidays, is a mixed bag. However, what people often forget to add is that with some planning this reconnection can be more enjoyable, or at least not as bad.

Essentially, there are a few land mines that we're all in danger of setting off, but which may be avoided:

Being treated like a child--After having been away at school for the first time, the student returns home with a whole new set of experiences, all in the context of a newfound independence. You have managed your own time and friendships, dressed as you wanted, and taken care of your day-to-day needs on your own. Typically, however, parents act as though you only vanished from space/time for a few months and have reappeared unchanged. Even those returning home for the nth time can experience this. And so ensue the typical battles around freedom and control: Parents can get angry about their unruly child; and the child can get indignant about his or her right to independence. And at the same time, the returning student can expect to have all former privileges as well, and no new responsibilities.

It can be difficult on both sides, but you can soften the potential conflict by remembering that this is an adjustment for your parents as well. They haven't been with you as you've learned how to take care of yourself. And somewhere in their hearts they're probably mourning a little about the loss of their boy or girl, who (appropriately) does not need them as much. So this needs to be a time of compromise and understanding. And showing you are capable of this will likely help your family to see the changes you've made.

Acting like a child--Again, no matter our age, when we get back with our families we regress. That is, we start acting like we did when we lived there from day to day, or at least we are vulnerable to having our "buttons" pushed. Whereas with friends and co-workers we can usually act like the person we want to be, when home a simple word, look, or sigh can trigger automatic responses of rage, envy, or tears--as well as the positive experiences of hilarity, joy, silliness, and understanding.

Probably the biggest help in dealing with regression is accepting that it's beyond our control--to some degree. And by giving ourselves some slack, it's then easier to hold on to who we

want to be, remembering that we're caught in conflicting and changing roles: from dependent child to independent adult. This is a time of transition for everyone involved.

Now, most people have core complaints about their family, and may dread having to face "her insensitivity," or "his anger," or "their drinking." And for these problems, you may want to get some skilled help. Remember, if you can deal with your family as a mature adult, you can probably handle anyone. And on the reverse side, if you can't handle core issues at home, you'll keep running into them in your own life. Getting away is not getting better (although it may be a necessary first step.)

Expectations/Obligations--While the holidays are advertised as the season of loving and giving, too often they're experienced as oppressive. It is crazy-making to find the perfect gifts, wade through herds of shoppers, make travel arrangements and travel, only to find yourself with people you might not choose as friends. This is not to say that the holiday season can't be great fun, but its quality depends on how realistic you are and how well you take care of yourself. Gifts can't be perfect, and maybe some aren't necessary; in many cases gift certificates will do the job; getting Want Lists can simplify shopping immensely; and it's not necessary to attend every party, or to give one. Decide for yourself how you need the holidays to be and then creatively determine how to respect others' needs while respecting yourself as well. Only Santa can race around making gifts and pleasing everyone and not be a mess by the end of the year.

Loneliness--For many people, going home means reuniting with the people you love the most and who understand you the best. For others, though, going home means facing difficult relationships and leaving friends. Going home *for the first time* can sometimes be a shock because our old friends aren't there anymore, or they've changed. But there are ways to deal with these possibilities.

Think ahead. Try to make plans with the people you want to see. Find out who will be home. Bring some meaningful part of your life with you: a book; a hobby; a friend; your journal. In moving between worlds, our sense of self can get lost, so reminders can help us feel more confident and real. While at home, remember that you can write, email, and/or call people you want to be with. It's easy to forget that our relationships don't disappear with distance.

On the more active side, maybe you can bring some new life or positive changes to your family. Living apart can provide opportunities to relate in new ways and to understand each other differently. Rather than simply react, be proactive by suggesting things to do that you enjoy--games, day trips, movies--and see if others respond. If they don't, you can do them anyway. See yourself as an active agent in your family, one who can contribute as well as respond.

For those who stay at school

Similar principles apply to how bad or good the holidays will be: plan ahead; be proactive; maintain contact with those you love; be aware of your needs and respect them. As well, there are some specific ideas that can help.

If this is not your home culture but it is a holiday (or holy) season for you, do what you can to recreate your home rituals and traditions. (This is a good idea even if this *is* your home culture.) Most temples and churches can be found in the LA area. It is particularly important to be with others, and best to gather with others from your home land. Often, families from Caltech and Pasadena invite international students to spend the holidays with them. And the [International Students Program](#) office can help you with this and other activities. Use the many resources available to you here.

Another way of celebrating the holidays is to volunteer to help others. In the past, students have traveled to Mexico to build homes and orphanages, others have helped deliver meals

to the homebound, or assisted serving Christmas dinner at Union Station. It is not just a meaningless cliché that giving to others can be a gift to ourselves and a way to give new meaning to this season.

Being on campus away from home and friends during the holidays is probably the hardest situation to endure. It's very easy to feel lonely and become depressed. For this reason, start planning now to create the holiday season and vacation you want. Even though it may not be ideal, it can still be good. And then again, it can be great.

Thinking about the dark side of the "season of light" isn't fun, but it's the best way to prevent the loneliness, stress, and disappointment that are all too common at this time of year. By planning ahead, being creative, and taking an active role--with our families and with ourselves--we all can best negotiate the challenges of the holidays. Here's to a peaceful and enjoyable holiday season, and to being renewed and ready for the New Year.

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