



My generation, Generation X, grew up watching Sesame Street. I’m sorry if that makes some of you feel a little old! But there it is. It was OUR show, so much so, that my three younger brothers and I each strongly identified with particular characters.

Mine was Grover. He had enthusiasm, hope, and innocence, and he was constantly smashing, quite literally, into reality. Story of my life! “John” identified with Guy Smiley. To this day, he has a big presence, is prone to talking big about small stuff, loves to be the center of attention, and can win over most any crowd with his good looks, humor, and charm. “Henry” loved Cookie Monster. Both were equally adept at spilling milk, equally over the top in expressing joy or grief, and equally impulsive when it came to fulfilling any desire.

But “Timothy” identified with Oscar the Grouch. Timothy did everything he could to be like Oscar. He refused to wear anything but ripped clothes. Whether it was school, home, or church, he had to wear something that was, in his words, “Junky enough.” Drove my grandmothers crazy! AND he had his own personal garbage collection in his fort in the attic of the machine shed. His collection included hundreds of beer caps, a huge selection of empty beer bottles, broken appliances, old machinery parts and anything else that he fancied from the junk pile behind the barn. He built a creative system of pulleys and used baler twine to haul up larger heavy pieces, including an old barrel that became his living room couch. He did most of this alone. In fact, he was so quiet about this work, that we didn’t even KNOW about the existence of his garbage fort until it was done.

Timothy had a large inner world. It was hard to tell what he was thinking or feeling. Despite his quiet demeanor, he had the biggest temper of all of us. When it raged we ran. And so did he, actually. And in quintessential Timothy form, he usually expressed his anger privately, often withdrawing into the haymow and smashing things, like two by fours, with his bare hands.

I never really knew what caused those rages, and rather than find out, our family let him be. No one knew how to reach out to him anyways. So his rages were met with silence, which was pretty much the response to anything that rocked the emotional status quo of the Taves family. And in that, I think, we are not alone.

I imagine many of you would agree that it is much easier to respond to positive feelings like joy and contentment, than it is to respond authentically to negative feelings like anger, sadness, grief, or fear. While these are as much a part of being human as the good stuff, they are often met with uncomfortable silence. I imagine every single one of us has had that experience – either meeting silence in the face of our own pain, or being the one who is silent in the face of another’s pain.

But not Oscar the Grouch! And this, I think, is his charm. He has no shame in his feelings. He takes all that negative stuff and puts it right out there, and the kids love it. And so too, I think, do the adults. He makes it completely o.k. to be grouchy and miserable. His character takes this whole facet of human nature and makes it, almost, loveable! Not scary or dangerous at all. And what’s even greater, is that the good people of Sesame Street are nothing close to silent! They keep loving him. He’s included in everything that goes on, even when he’s yelling at them. Even when he’s furrowing his eyebrows. Even after he’s slammed down the lid of his garbage can for the ten thousandth time! (point to trash can



person!) They keep loving him. In a culture where we run from anger, and where children AND adults are so often taught that the receiving of love is connected with being good, what a comforting and reassuring message!

And maybe this is why his 1978 hit, “I HATE CHRISTMAS!” was so well-received. It offered another comforting rarely-expressed message, putting to words what many people are still afraid to say. Christmas is not always this great gushy glittery touchy feely time and you are not alone if there are times you would rather just skip the whole bloody thing!

For many people, the holidays are one of the most difficult times of the year! Why? Well some of it has to do with how commercialized the holiday has become. It’s become cheapened in some way. For some it’s because Christianity is the left behind religion of their childhood, and so this time brings with it conflicting emotions having a lot to do with a Christmas story that is hard to believe, childhood memories and perhaps an uncomfortable uncertainty with what to do with the faith you left behind. Christmas can also be hard because there is great pressure to live up to other people’s expectations. We all have our own ideal Christmas, and it’s hard not to get caught up pleasing other people, especially if you’re a people-pleasing kind of person.

But largely, holidays like Christmas are hard because holidays are about family, and most families, last time I looked, aren’t much like that hallmark image of peace and tranquility and harmony. The family is often the crucible for everything that’s good and not so good about humanity, the light and the dark, the said and the unsaid, the hopes and the fears, the blessings and the curses, the gifts and the disappointments, the forgiven and the unforgiven, the love that is given and the love that is taken away. Every family has its strengths and its weaknesses, and when you throw everyone together, which often happens during the holidays, it is not at all uncommon for tensions to rise, and whether those tensions are expressed or not, they are there and have their impact.

Let’s be honest, shall we? For some, the holidays are not filled with happy memories because they did not grow up in happy families, but rather in families characterized by abuse or addiction or some other love-denying force. Perhaps the reality of easy access to alcohol leaves you afraid and dreading the holidays. Perhaps time with family was or is fraught with emotional or physical danger and the potential of all hell breaking loose. Maybe you’re still in that life, maybe you’ve managed to build a new life for yourself. Still, memories of what used to be can resurface at this time, along with the painful feelings of long ago.

For others, the issue is not so much the past, but the present. The first holiday after the death of a loved one is very hard. You see and feel their absence everywhere and it can rub raw what was starting to heal. Particularly if the death comes with a lack of closure, all that unresolved stuff can come back fresh and tender. There are also those anticipating the death of a loved one, wondering if this will be the last Christmas together. Loss and anticipated loss can easily grow and feel more tender at this time.

The first holiday after a divorce or a family crisis or some kind of loss is similarly difficult. Anything that seriously rocked your life during the year can impact your psychological state upon entering the holidays.



And if you don't have any family or are estranged from your family, the holidays, with their emphasis on family, do a pretty good job of reminding you of that fact.

Whatever's going on in your life doesn't stop at the holidays, and sometimes the expectation to put on a happy face and go with the flow and do the fa-la-la- thing is a painful reminder that not all is well in your life or your soul, and no quantity of pretty lights or carols or dessert will dull that feeling.

Well, the truth of the matter is, that you are not alone. This season is a bittersweet one for many. Often joy and sadness, grief and gratitude, sit side by side. Several years ago, at the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, where I became a Unitarian Universalist, ministers Mark and Donna Morrison-Reid began a tradition. The early Christmas Eve service was always called Blue Christmas, and it was a special service for those who had difficulty feeling joy at the holidays. Blue Christmas services have popped up in many churches and chapels across the continent. And are generally very well attended. Clearly, the service meets a deep spiritual need. For many, it speaks to what has remained unspoken for so many years. It can touch a place in the heart that may have been hurting for a long time and has never been openly acknowledged. The service has become a place of healing, where you don't have to pretend, where you don't have to bury your feelings, where you can just be who you are and where you are in your heart.

And isn't that what a religious home is supposed to be? Isn't that what true home is supposed to be? Not a place where you say you're fine when you're not. Not a place where you are expected to bury what's going on for the sake of preserving the status quo. Not a place where you are asked to deaden who you are so others won't be uncomfortable. Our religious homes should be places where we seek to honor the true wholeness of the human experience, to strip away the shame that is fuelled by silence.

And it doesn't mean that anything goes, or that the emotional state of one person should hold a whole church or family hostage. That's just more spiritual violence. But our covenantal commitment to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence means that we are to take seriously the universal truth that the pain of one is the pain of all.

There is so much healing in simple acknowledgement. There is so much freedom in emotional honesty. When the truth is spoken in love, many unbelievable things can happen. So how can we take back the holidays? How do we make them our own?

Accepting that there is nothing wrong with being in a hard place is a good start. Don't beat yourself up for feeling things that don't seem to belong at this time of the year. They absolutely belong here. Sadness and fear and grief and anxiety are acceptable feelings, anytime and also at this time. If you're grieving, let yourself grieve. Allow yourself to feel the anger, the disappointment, the anxiety. Burying these things only increases their power.

Other ways to reclaim these holidays - You don't have to believe the Christmas Story literally to enjoy its magic. If you've left Christianity, honor that it is part of your heritage and reframe the story any way you need to.

You don't have to let past memories rob you of living in the present. Don't give those memories any more power. Take your power back by creating the holiday you need for yourself. If that means



withdrawing from family or friends that reflect an old unhealthy way of living, then consider doing that. If that's not an option you want to consider, cultivate as best you can an inner peace so that when you are with family and friends, you are more likely to stay clear in yourself and not lose yourself to old patterns.

Perhaps taking back Christmas means not going to Christmas parties or dinners where you know there's going to be alcohol. Do something else, something that takes care of you and celebrates your new life. Taking back Christmas may mean letting others be responsible for their own happiness. With the exception of young children, you are not responsible for other people's happiness or unhappiness. It doesn't mean not caring about them; you can still be caring and detached.

There are so many ways to take back Christmas and only you can figure that out for yourself. But that doesn't mean you have to do it alone. We are meant for solitude. We are not meant for loneliness.

And that's why a few years ago I did something that was long overdue. I called my brother Timothy and asked him to tell me what had happened so long ago that left him so angry. And he told me, and it wasn't easy for either of us. What he said is less important than the fact that he said it and that I was able to hear it, and neither of us ran from the other. It was an important moment in our relationship and we have slowly become closer and are now involved in each others lives in a way that simply couldn't exist before.

This is my wish for you this Christmas season. May you find some peace, even if just for a moment. May you celebrate Christmas in whatever way you are able to celebrate. May you and yours feel in some way the blessings and goodwill of the season. May you be kind to yourself and kind to those in your closest circles. And even in the darkest of night, may you find comfort in the truth that you are not alone.

Amen and Blessed Be.