

Thin Places: Holidays, Family and Balance
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In the Oprah Magazine, Martha Beck, author and lecturer, wrote an article called, “5 Ways to Survive Your Next Family Gathering.”¹ She writes, “There's nothing in the world as messy as family. You can put half your life's savings into therapy—good therapy, effective therapy—and, 15 minutes into a holiday reunion, you still become hopelessly enmeshed in the same old crazy dynamics. A mere sigh from your mother or partner or offspring triggers an attack of codependency so severe you end up making promises you can never keep. So, what can we do before you head over the river and through the woods?”²

The last time I was home for a visit, I did so well for the first few days, put on my higher self and rather than focusing on what I needed to feel more loved, I focused on loving others. By day two, I was tired and sure enough, I got upset about some comment or lack of comment and I was off to the races, the same ones I run over and over again at every holiday.

I have considered that this holiday, I want to do this differently. But how? How to avoid the inevitable traps and triggers? How to show up as a person I admire? I read an interview about Diana Nyad who swam without a shark cage, from Cuba to Florida, a hundred and eleven miles, the equivalent of five English Channel crossings, and the longest open-ocean swim in history.

She was 60 years old at the time of this swim. She chose the treacherous swim from Cuba to Florida because she wanted the “thrill of commitment: a magnificent goal that would consume all self-doubt.”

She faced the unbearable with waves, wind, jellyfish, shark scares, getting enough food (the rules of the sport demand her support team on the boat feed her without touching her, as if feeding a dolphin). She was too sick to eat for 6 days after she made this swim, which took her 53 hours to complete. 53 hours in open seas.

She said she did it because she realized that she was not immortal, that time was limited. Her response to those who thought her crazy was: “Who have you become? Because this one-way street is hurtling toward the end now, and you better be the person you admire.”

What commitments can we make as we swim the often shark infested open seas of the holiday season? How can we agree to navigate this terrain without a shark cage, with open heartedness?

Brené Brown is an American scholar, author, and public speaker, and currently a research professor at the University of Houston College of Social Work. Over the last fifteen years she

¹ <https://www.oprah.com/omagazine/dealing-with-a-dysfunctional-family-during-the-holidays/all>

² Ibid.

has been involved in research on a range of topics, including vulnerability, courage, shame, and empathy. She is the author of: *The Gifts of Imperfection* (2010), *Daring Greatly* (2012), and *Rising Strong* (2015), *Braving the Wilderness*.

In a Tedx Talk called, “Listening to Shame”³ Brown discusses the “vulnerability hang over” she had after her first TedX talk, “The Power of Vulnerability ” when she discussed how really whole hearted people share certain traits, and then she realized that she didn’t have those traits. Some of the strongest traits of really whole hearted people include embracing vulnerability and not controlling and or predicting. Well, Brown is a researcher and she was attached to controlling and predicting and eliminating vulnerability.

So, when her data uncovered that being vulnerable and letting go of control and outcomes are the best and surest ways toward wholeheartedness or an existence in which creativity, innovation and change had room to thrive alongside of peace, she had a kind of break down.⁴

I understand this. We have worked so hard in our lives to look put together and in control, how can we place vulnerability and giving up control at the top of our to do list? But without it, without the capacity to let it go and show up with vulnerability, we remain in that same old trap that keeps us giving too much or too little or withdrawing or claiming center stage too often. Everyone I speak to wants to mint a new record, wants to have more bandwidth in family settings regardless of how others are behaving.

What is the formula for this? What are we missing?

Martha Beck from Oprah Magazine has some more tips for us. She begins with this one: Give Up Hope. She writes, “Even if we don't consciously realize it, we want our families to cease and desist from all the things that cause us suffering. We don't ask much—just socially appropriate behavior and minimal reparations for the more damaging incidents in our past. Although come to think of it, things would certainly go better if our relatives would listen openly, communicate honestly, and agree with us on all significant issues.”⁵ So when our families cannot give us all that we need, what then?

Pema Chodron in her course, This Sacred Journey, that Gary and I are listening to tells us: “We are not continuous. We are in process, more of a wave than a rock, more a verb than a noun.” Pema reminds us that our lives are an opportunity to wake up, to catch ourselves in our habitual behavior and with our habitual feelings and take responsibility for them, to learn who we are.

Giving up hope for Martha Beck is like giving up attachment for the Buddhists and Pema Chodron. Can we let others go through what is theirs to go through, knowing they too are

³ <https://brenebrown.com/videos/ted-talk-listening-to-shame/>

⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame/transcript?language=en

⁵ <https://www.oprah.com/omagazine/dealing-with-a-dysfunctional-family-during-the-holidays/all>

not rocks but waves, not finished but stories in progress, trapped as we are in reactions that get away from us? Can we accept ourselves enough to accept them too? Can we stay the course of generosity even when our old triggers pop up and we want to run or fight?

Another strategy from Beck is: Lose Control. Beck writes, "You're in the middle of a holiday feast, enjoying your favorite pie and eggnog, when a relative leans over and whispers, "Honey, are you gaining weight?" Those six words may wither your very soul, challenging every ounce of self-acceptance you've gleaned from myriad self-help books, support groups, and several enlightened friends.

"You might feel desperate to make said relative recognize all the hard-won truths you've learned about the intrinsic value and beauty of your body. You'll want to argue, to explain, to get right in there and force your them to approve of your appearance."

Beck goes on, "The only way you can avoid getting stuck in other people's craziness is to follow codependency author Melody Beattie's counterintuitive advice: "Unhook from their systems by refusing to try to control them." Don't violate your own code of values and ethics, but don't waste energy trying to control an other's way of being in the world at the holidays...Feel what you feel, know what you know, and set your relatives free to do the same."⁶

As Pema Chodron says, "Train in non-resistance. So much of our suffering comes from pushing away what is. When we can open to what is happening (name it and still choose to be the person we admire), things change, we change." Pema encourages us to use all of life to awaken our hearts, our compassion, our empathy for ourselves and others. Inherent in non-resistance is the understanding that letting go of control and giving up hope that people will be exactly as we want them to be, gives us all more room to grow. When we see our own lives as fluid, as based on stories that are always under revision, we can allow that to others as well and get ourselves off the hook of reacting all over the place.

In her book, Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith Kathleen Norris writes about people who have opened themselves to one another, taken their suffering and turned it into compassion for themselves and others. She does not speak of holiness or becoming perfect in the usual ways we strive for, without flaws or shadows. Norris writes about perfection as "becoming mature enough to give ourselves to others...becoming mature enough to give ourselves to others."⁷

⁶ <https://www.oprah.com/omagazine/dealing-with-a-dysfunctional-family-during-the-holidays/all>

⁷ Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith, 57.

I like that definition of perfection. Giving ourselves over to life so fully, with all of its unpredictability and changes and losses and beauty, that we can show up for ourselves and others, in all of it, and risk allowing ourselves and others more room for new versions of the stories we tell.

This Christmas, I have a new strategy. I have decided that I will ask myself this question as many times as I can remember: *Who do you want to be today? What do you want to give?* I am hoping this question grounds me in my perfection, as Kathleen Norris describes it, or my ability to be open hearted for myself and others, what other perfection is worthy of striving for?

Without having to swim from Cuba to Florida with sharks and people popping food in my mouth without being able to touch me, I seek the “thrill of commitment: a magnificent goal that would consume all self-doubt.” Being who I decide I want to be at the holidays is a magnificent goal that almost rivals fighting off sharks from Cuba to Florida!

Can we learn to be loving in those moments that we do not feel loved in return? For me, this means sinking into my own and others’ vulnerability and allowing the feelings of confusion and fear that that I am not loveable arise, and still deciding who I will be and how I will be. I think that is it really.

If we can learn to be present with ourselves, lifting up the fear and shame and feelings of rejection we all feel until we can embrace our own humanity in all its complexity, we can make room to learn who others are while recognizing that we have enough and can risk giving more.

Brene Brown whom I mentioned earlier, says that whole hearted people just know they are loved beyond question, just know their right to exist is beyond question. My experience does not confirm this. I think those questions come and go, that they live in and between us at all times and it is this work, this courageous showing up, this courageous, wholehearted showing up and putting ourselves at risk of criticism and conversations we don't want to have- it is this showing up again and again that creates the possibility of believing that we are worthy. Whole heartedness is not a condition that one is born into or that is won once and for all. It is a way of life that slips into and out of one’s fingers each time we turn toward ourselves and each other with compassion and vulnerability and learn, one little bit at a time, that going on together is all that matters and to do so, we have to open to what is before us and allow ourselves to feel it all while still deciding who we will be in it.

Dominican father Simon Tugwell writes:

“[T]hose who have allowed themselves to be stripped of the old spirit, the spirit of...security...because they no longer seek to possess... (but) to loose themselves and all that is “theirs” in the ecstasy of simple receiving and simple giving again...in the simple being which is the authentic image in us...(which is the) divine ecstasy of being...”

The divine ecstasy of being requires of us all to see beyond what we are programmed to see, to leave open pages for new stories to arise and to be with ourselves so well and so thoroughly that we can make new decisions about who will be when with our chosen or given families.

So this Christmas, before you act out the role that follows you around like a shadow, sink into your own whole heartedness and vulnerability, let yourself feel it all and decide who you will be when the inevitable happens. When we can learn to swim in unpredictable waters, without needing cages to keep us safe, we can choreograph a new dance with new steps and possibilities. It’s time to cross this dance floor of the holidays in a tutu of our choosing, dancing to the music with steps that give our lives meaning while keeping an eye toward who else is there with us, and how we might just take another’s hand and twirl with them toward the divine ecstasy of being.

Amen.