

the **green** mama puts the wonder back into winter holidays

by **Eco Aficionado**
and syndicated
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Q My husband and I just married and we bring together three young kids and two faiths. We both agree that the winter holidays should be celebrated, but how do we do this in a way that honours both of our upbringings and doesn't succumb to commercialism?

Congratulations on your family and on the joys of a first holiday together! If there is anything universal about faith these days, it's that everybody seems unsure what to do about Christmas. Even many Christian families struggle with this question, watching the entire holiday being pulled towards excessive consumerism with its associated spending and waste.

In my family, my husband and I represent four very different religious influences derived from our parents and what we agree on is that:

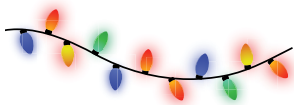
1. We do not want the holiday to be about *stuff*;
2. We do want to model the magic, love, and closeness that is possible when a family creates a ritual and shares it together year after year.

This year consumers plan to spend \$1,810 during the winter holidays – up 30 percent in just two years, as reported by the Bank of Montreal's Holiday Spending Outlook. Christmas toys alone account for 68.1 million metric tonnes of carbon, and wrapping paper another 284,493 according to Grist's 2011 article, "Green Christmas: Santa's Carbon Footprint." And that doesn't even account for all the garbage, such as the 545,000 tonnes of annual gift wrapping and shopping bag waste in Canada.

So, how do we get the holidays to encompass the magic of their potential with mouthwatering food, family and hope, and without the debt, frenzy, and waste? I often find a great deal of inspiration from traditions. We can

embrace traditions while finding new ways to assimilate them that reflect our multi-cultural society and diverse families. Indeed, across religions and cultures there is a motif of bringing light into the dark—both figuratively and literally—that can be a unifying theme of any holiday celebration. Perhaps understanding more about how the winter holidays are – and used to be – celebrated within different cultures will give you ideas to integrate into your own family customs. This can help to create a ritual out of whatever you do—keeping the same elements year after year—so the kids can know what to expect and use the experiences to mark the passage of time. You can add components as your own capacity and your children's needs grow. Here are some other samples to help inspire and guide you.

Advent is traditionally the time of preparation for Christmas and encompasses the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day. There are many ways to celebrate these four weeks and one of the most common is the advent calendar. I love the Waldorf-influenced tradition of having each week associated with living elements: stones (minerals, crystals, shells) in the first week; plants in the second week; animals in the third; and then humans in the fourth. Advent is about the spirit of peace, gentle preparation, and warmth. This is marked most beautifully in the **advent spiral**—another tradition adopted by Waldorf—in which cedar boughs (or something similar) are laid in a spiral pattern upon the floor or ground. The children then walk through the spiral to the centre where their candle is lit. They then walk back through, leaving their candle



within the spiral. Apples are often used as candle holders and the earth elements are often incorporated within the spiral as well. While I have seen many variations on the advent spiral (including one done on the solstice with hundreds of candles), it is always silent and meditative.

St. Nicholas' Day (December 6) is a celebration of St. Nicholas, a.k.a. the patron saint of children. In many parts of Europe where his feast day is prominent, this day is the primary gift giving time. Children will leave him their wish lists along with hay and carrots for his horses, and possibly a cookie for St. Nicholas, and he in turn leaves treats in the children's shoes or stockings.

Hanukkah is also known as the Festival of Lights and is the traditional winter celebration of the Jewish people. One candle is lit each night for eight days and thus the primary symbol of Hanukkah is the Menorah which holds the candles. Typically a family would light the candles and say a special prayer. The dreidel—or spinning top—has also come to be associated with Hanukkah as has the eating of potato pancakes, called latkes, and special jelly donuts called sufganiyot.

Bodhi Day (December 8) is the Day of Enlightenment in celebration of the Gautama Buddha receiving enlightenment. Many Buddhists celebrate for 30 days, starting on Bodhi day, with multicoloured lights (showing the many routes to enlightenment) and lighting a candle each night. The lights can be strung around the house or are often put on a ficus or other tree and a statue of Buddha can be put underneath to represent the Buddha meditating under the tree. It is a time to practice Buddhism by meditating, chanting, reading the sutras, reciting the five precepts of Buddhism, and performing acts of loving kindness. The foods associated with Bodhi day include a simple milk-rice porridge, like that which Buddha ate when weak from fasting, and cookies baked into the shape of the Bodhi tree leaf.

Solstice, also known as Yule or Yuletide, is celebrated on December 21st, the longest night of the year in Canada. Solstice is an ancient tradition and celebrated throughout the world and within many cultures. What many of these cultures share in their celebration of solstice is that it is a festive time—versus the reflective time that often comes before—and there is often the gifting and sharing of food with friends and family, songs and lights such as the Yule log, candles, bonfires, and tree lightings.

Dongzhi Festival (literally, "winter's arrival"), in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, is celebrated on the Winter Solstice and historically involved visiting the temple, sharing large meals, and eating the sweet, round dumplings called tang yuan served in pandan leaf with ginger infused syrup. Ah-loong, who is originally from Taiwan, recalls this festival as an occasion to make the dumplings out of pounded sticky rice stuffed with sweet red bean paste that the whole family would make together: "Roundness, smoothness, sweetness, togetherness, all very auspicious."

Yalda, which also begins on the Winter Solstice, is the "most famous Persian celebration," says Anahita who remembers it fondly as a time to celebrate with "families, food, winter fruits, and old meaningful poetry." Many also say that this is the birth night of Mithra, the Persian philosopher of light and truth. Like with other Solstice celebrations, food and family are the common themes on this night. Fresh fruits served in winter figure prominently and these are often eaten in conjunction with whimsical superstitions about the benefits conveyed upon the consumer. Watermelon eaten on this night is supposed to keep a person safe from excessive heat in summer and pomegranates are said to protect against scorpion bites.

Pancha Ganapati is another holiday that starts on the solstice and this one goes until Christmas. It is a newer holiday celebrated in North American Hindu homes in an effort to create ritual and relevance in lieu of Christmas. During each of the five days, a different spiritual practice is the focus. A shrine is made in the main living area with an image of the Hindu god Lord Ganesha and can be surrounded by pine boughs, lights, tinsel, and even ornaments and on each day a different colour is used: yellow, blue, red, green, and then orange. The days of celebration includes chants, songs, stories, home-made sweets, and gift-giving.

Kwanzaa begins on December 26 and ends on New Year's Day. It is a holiday created by Dr. Maulana Karenga in 1966 and was intended for the African diaspora community in the U.S. to create a Thanksgiving-like alternative to a Christmas tradition that even then was being described as overly commercial. During Kwanzaa, participants light a candle each night in recognition of the principles of unity, self-determination, collective responsibility, cooperative economics, a sense of purpose, creativity, and faith. Each of these principles is also recognized with a symbol such as the unity cup and the special kinara candle holder. The colours of

the festival are green, black, and red. Accompanying foods are those native to Africa as well as those that symbolize the "first fruits" of the year. Some families use Kwanzaa as a time to tell the story of their people and their history (similar to a Passover Seder in Judaism).

Christmas is actually the Twelve Days of Christmas in Christian tradition. It begins on December 25th and ends with the **Twelfth Night** and then the **Feast of the Epiphany** on January 6th. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ whom is considered the Son of God by Christians. There are many variations of Christmas now practiced but almost all include the sharing of food (with traditional favourites including plum pudding, choice meats, and fruit cake), lights and lighting a candle for each day, and gift-giving which can happen on Christmas Eve. Christmas, on each of the twelve days, or only on the last night. There are of course other well-known emblems of Christmas including decorations, the Christmas tree, stockings, Santa Claus, and lots and lots of Christmas songs.

PERFECTION ISN'T THE GOAL

Insiya, who grew up in a Muslim family in India, told me that one of her favourite memories of the holidays was going to Christmas mass with her Ayah every year. In my family, this time of year has been a real work in progress and some of our fondest times have been pretty untraditional. Like the year we spent Christmas on the train between Toronto and Vancouver. The train staff cut a branch of a spruce tree, put little gifts under it for each of the children on board, and invited all to sing songs and share time in the observation car. Similarly, Anna who grew up living all over Asia with her Taiwanese mother and Jewish father told me a story of one of her favourite holidays that was spent flying back from Asia on Christmas Day. She and her partner and young child ended up having 36 hours of Christmas—that began with an Indian version of fruitcake—and included three full-on Christmas dinners. All three of these stories are reminders that however you end up celebrating this winter holiday, it matters more that you make a gesture of celebration, reflection, and ritual than it does about getting it exactly "right".

However you end up celebrating this first winter time together as a family, I hope that it is joyous and I applaud you for starting traditions that will help nurture your new family. •

6 tips for getting more meaning into your winter holiday

- 1 Have a conversation with your partner and older children about the traditions and values that resonate most and that you want to celebrate and strengthen. Similarly, discuss what you don't want.
- 2 Learn more about the religious and cultural traditions of your own ancestors and others as well. Look for common themes and ideas that work within your own traditions.
- 3 Look for a community through school, family, or friends to share some of the festivities. In British Columbia, many communities do advent circles or something similar on Solstice and they are beautiful, introspective events that are easy to share even with those you don't know well.
- 4 Practice. Repeat. Add. Just pick one or two new things to do this year and make the most of them. Once you have established a new tradition, you can add new ones as you like.
- 5 Create a Wonder Box. Almost every traditional celebration has particular icons associated with it such as ornaments, candleholders and images. A few things that may work in your Winter Wonder Box regardless of your religious background: special lights or candles, beautiful window cut-outs, ornaments, music boxes, crystals, felted winter or fairy creatures, and seasonal books.
- 6 Pack-Away. Part of what makes the holidays wonderful is that there are special things reserved only for that time. Choose a day when your holiday is over and pack-away the special ornaments of the holiday. The packing-up can also be turned into a celebration with special foods eaten, songs that you sing, or other observances to make your own celebratory "Boxing Day".

