

I had hoped that this would be the year our kids realized there is a spiritual meaning to Christmas beyond Linus' moving annual speech. And I mean *spiritual*, not just religious.

We've already given our kids the "Christ child, manger, Wise Men, little drummer boy" basics. For that matter, it's never been a completely materialistic decorating and procurement event around here. Our holiday home

isn't ripe with tension and as empty of value as a bowl of Lucky Charms. But we were considering going further this year and making that leap into the churchgoing set.

I do have very grave misgivings about the Church (read "Christianity") and its wholesale condemnation of women, gays, midwives—anyone who stood in its way of making money and gaining power, power, power (implied diabolical laugh). But there is that old baby and the bath water thing to think about.

Despite assurances from our friends who teach Sunday school that their church isn't a brainwashing enterprise of the sort unseen since the days of Manson and Fromme, we still haven't gone. We have, however, found a compromise that works pretty well for the moment and may even see us through the holidays with our souls intact and our family connected. We have reinvented the Sabbath for ourselves.

This idea has been on our back burner for a

In the gratitude mood

The spirituality of the holidays can inspire even more thanks than a plateful of turkey



long time, to take one day a week and demand it have no errands, no chores—no responsibilities to get in the way of being together.

We've had many a conversation about the lost virtues of "blue laws," though goodness knows I don't even fully know what they are and probably wouldn't like them if I did. All I

know is that if businesses were closed on Sunday—or any day, pick a day—at least there'd be one day a week when you couldn't scurry around avoiding close human interaction. There'd be no open video stores. No recreational shopping. No hopping down to the A&P to put off that little discussion with Junior about his dope-smoking problem.

Contrary to our children's perceptions, we are not the rulers of the universe, so we're in this on our own. Of course, our version is our version. Not everyone's Sabbath would include an hour and a half of Batman and Superman cartoons.

Of course it's about more than just a few cartoons. It's about all those things you say you're going to do with your kids or your spouse. The games you'll play, the puzzles you'll do, the books you'll read. On our day, we can't get out of paying attention to each other, like it or not.

And since this month we'll be having our Sabbath in the light of a well-endowed, if eclectic, tree surrounded by the detritus of Christmas past, present and future, there will be a lot to ponder.

For me, gratitude is the driving force behind the Sabbath. It gives an opportunity to see the blessings rather than the work, to stop and smell the brownies. And be glad there's a kitchen here to cook them in. This is especially true during the holidays.

I've had a couple well-needed slaps in the face about how this time of year not only brings out the best and worst in families, it also highlights with Day-Glo colors the difference between poor and even moderate means. It brings into exquisite focus the inequities between a supportive family and one that is a source of sorrow. Because "that white dude" doesn't visit every family, as someone recently reminded me. Because not getting a child support check can mean the end of innocence for a 7-year-old and make those brown paper turkeys in class merely a reminder of what won't be sitting on her kitchen table. Because a "Home for the Holidays" slogan doesn't mean a hill of beans if you've been asked not to come home for the holidays, especially if you insist on bringing that lover of yours along. Because the endless barrage of toy ads must be a burning reminder to all the parents who have been denied access to their children by a court system that is only beginning to recognize our rights.

These are things I don't always remember, embarrassing as that is. The burden of the world's injustices seemed too heavy when I added children, and I let it slip. The kids seemed like a world of responsibility all on their own. And though no one can do it all—and it makes a person crazy trying to think of everyone and every issue all the time—still, a little context is a good thing.

Though I will knock wood, cross my fingers, and work hard, really hard, to keep that thing we call our life going strong, I've got to appreciate the basics: food, shelter, health, the blessing of family support and shared love. And pass a sense of gratitude, and understanding, on to the next generation.

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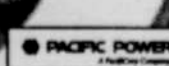
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