

Making new holiday traditions goes back to basics

BY HEATHER JOHNSON DUROCHER
Special to the Record-Eagle

Choosing the perfect Christmas tree, attending "wrapping parties" to chat with friends, elaborately decorating the house both inside and out with family — all of these holiday activities are about strengthening relationships, but according to a recent study, are drawing more people away from traditional Christian-based activities.

In the past 10 years, family outings and gift shopping have slowly chipped away at church services, spiritual reflection and charitable giving, according to the survey by the National Christmas Tree Association.

The association credits this trend in part to Generation Y — those born between 1978 and 1994 and nearly 72 million strong, the largest generation since the baby boomers — because of the generation's apparent interest in all things family. Some say this generation is more like their grandparents than parents, going back to the family experiences and family memories

they maybe missed out on as kids and desire for their own children.

Dr. Lori Gray Boothroyd, a Traverse City doctoral psychologist and wellness coach, is encouraged to hear stories of more families and friends connecting during the hectic holiday season. What's important, she says, is for us to choose to engage in meaningful activities — which certainly may and include spiritual reflection and activities — and not those that will only add to our too-often highly-stressed pace of life this time of year.

"Holidays in our modern age have increasingly become a time in which we yearn for more meaningful traditions and customs," says Boothroyd, who recently opened a private practice, Life Expansion Psychological Services, in Building 50. "Perhaps we are inundated and overwhelmed with the materialistic aspects of the season. It is time to step back and evaluate how we spend our resources — time, money, energy — during this season so that we may enter the new year filled with peace, gratitude and a renewed

spirit."

It's easy to get caught up in the shopping sales and frenzy or say "yes" when you really want to say "no," Boothroyd acknowledges, but changing your holiday habits will get easier each year you do it.

"Obviously, we can't do a complete makeover of the holidays ... But if we can make even the smallest shift or change, it can make a significant impact," she says.

Even now, with the holidays on top of us, it's not too late to alter plans to ensure the season is more meaningful.

"Sit down with your family and ask, 'How do we want to spend the season?'" she suggested.

Boothroyd, 33, does her best to personally incorporate into her life this way of thinking. A small but significant activity for her is making treats for squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons and birds; she sets the food around a pine tree outside her house.

"It's Christmas for the animals. It's meaningful to me because I love the wildlife around our home," she said.

Another important tradi-

tion is carving out time with a close friend — not an easy task given that her friend, Kristy, lives downstate.

But for the past five years, the friends have set aside one full day, "a special quiet day," when the two of them reconnect in person.

"We have a fire; we listen to music; we might bake cookies," Boothroyd said. "She's my dearest friend, and it's our day to renew and celebrate our friendship."

Spending most of our free time on activities which "tend to what our spirit and heart needs," is the goal.

Other suggestions for bringing "meaningful traditions" to the holidays, from Boothroyd:

■ Keep aspects of the old traditions, but also create new ones.

Carefully evaluate which traditions continue to be meaningful and also the customs that have lost their value. Be creative and include new generations in creating some new customs that revitalize the meaning and true joys of the holiday season. For example, start a new tradition of making your own holiday gifts for

family members instead of shopping at the mall.

■ Give the gift of your time.

Simply spending time together to share and reflect on the year we will soon leave behind and the new year to come is a powerful and deeply meaningful way to give and nourish our relationships. Try forgoing "power shopping" with friends and family and instead slowing down and creating a holiday "retreat" — take a day off to nourish yourself and those you love through a "holiday sabbatical."

■ Volunteer as a family — create a tradition of giving back to communities in need.

There are many opportunities to give back and to spend deeply meaningful and memorable time together in charity. Some families spend each Christmas Eve distributing toys to children who have no gifts for Christmas Day, serving meals to the homeless or visiting elderly in their homes.

"My family gathers together on Christmas Eve to visit the elderly and disabled,"

Boothroyd said. "We sing Christmas carols and distribute much needed hugs. This is also a powerful way to teach children about the true meaning of the holiday season and detracts from the dizzying materialistic aspects of Christmas."

■ Simplify, simplify, simplify!

Whatever it takes, find ways to limit the exhaustion of your resources during the holidays.

"This special season is not something to survive, but an opportunity to nurture our relationships and flourish, to savor beauty and meaning, wherever we find it and however we can create it," Boothroyd said. "Be original and keep your deepest values at heart. Limit social gatherings if they are not nourishing to you. Make your gifts to each other simple and meaningful. Be mindful of your spirit as you move through this holiday season. This is the best gift we can give to those we love."

For more information, go to www.coachingwellness.com or www.drboothroyd.com.
Heather Johnson Durocher is a local freelance writer.

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