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Every couple has to decide how, or if, to celebrate Christmas



BARB GUY

When Chris and I got together, among the many things we had to settle as a couple beginning to live in the same house was what to do about Christmas.

We were both raised Methodist, and the fact that we each chose a Methodist kid to spend life with, while a total fluke, pleased our parents.

But religion played no part in our lives as young adults. It was already clear that we wouldn't ever be going to church, and I'd be leaving out something important if I didn't also add that the very idea of God was one that we rarely pondered.

We both had noticed that religious people can do some exceedingly nasty things, while agnostics and atheists can have exemplary moral values. One's personal goodness seems irrespective of religion. We pretty much left it at that.

Then what to do about Christmas? Not what should anyone else do, but what makes sense for us as a new couple. When Chris first raised the question in 1987, we had survived eight months or so of cohabitation. We had already learned who cares whether the bed gets made and who thinks the spice rack should be alphabetized. We were finding our way.

So Christmas. This Christian, religious holy day. Are we hypocrites if we participate? Curmudgeons if we don't? If we do celebrate it, is it appropriate to bend it to fit our particular ethos? What to do about friends of non-Christian faiths - or no faith at all?

I remember answering Chris by saying that I was inspired by how John Lennon celebrated Christmas. I wanted to focus on world peace, kindness toward other people, giving gifts to friends and family, laughing, spending time together. Any holiday that comes around each year and reminds you to love, to give, and to celebrate seems like something worth embracing.

When I returned the Christmas question, Chris, who is a scientist, said that he believes there really was someone named Jesus who was known far and wide for his goodness, his charity

and his advocacy for the less fortunate, and that only good could come from us working to emulate that kindness.

That was our start. Philosophically we were on board, if in a way many others would not appreciate. That first year we made our own holiday card, a collage of pictures and sentiments honoring every tradition from Hanukkah and Kwanzaa to Solstice and Three Kings Day. We were determined that no one should be marginalized. The sheet of recycled paper was folded into thirds, sealed with a jaunty sticker and mailed sans envelope to ensure a nice Christmas for at least some of the trees of this world.

In fact, trees were the crux of our trouble that year. I knew that chopping down a live tree, no matter how farmed, would not work for Chris, and, just a few years before, I had unexpectedly burst into tears in a Christmas tree lot while shopping with my mom. So a cut tree was out.

We both held the belief that there's too much manufactured crap in this world, too many unnecessary plastic items, too much emphasis on disposable things when nothing really is disposable. So a fake tree seemed like a bad choice, too.

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Holding in my heart the perfect solution, a live tree planted in a pot, I approached my ecologist. He didn't love it. Too expensive and too much drama to get it in the house.

These days, 18 years later, we have a fake tree. We've had it for twice as long as it was projected to last and it still looks fine. Also, in our backyard we have a live tree more than 20 feet tall, one of three live, potted trees that spent Christmases in our house, despite the expense and drama.

This year, for the first time, our holiday cards actually mention Christmas (and only Christmas). I didn't even notice when I bought them; I just liked the depiction of the dove with an olive branch on the front and the message of peace inside.

Chris and I are still together, still making our way. We've gone a long distance only to end up with a tradition that looks pretty much like our childhoods, but without church and family, the pinnacles of the celebration for most.

I have no family left, apart from cousins in other states. My dad died on Christmas Eve 11 years ago and this is my second Christmas without my mom, although it's been much longer since she was able to enjoy it. Chris's family members are all far away.

Counting the year we were dating, this is our 20th Christmas. The decisions we

made in the beginning are our traditions now. Things may have evolved a bit, but we still like to focus on charity, friendship, giving, celebration and laughter. And, like every year, we still wish for peace in this world.

Barb Guy writes a column every other week for the Sunday Opinion section.
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