

A season for more conscious and creative celebrations



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Millions of people in India this year celebrated Diwali, the Hindu festival of light, at the birthplace of the deity Ram. The huge crowds gathering by a (very polluted) sacred river, lit over 2 million earthen oil lamps, even with concerns about air pollution. As reported by the Associated Press: "The festival came as worries about air quality in India rose. A 'hazardous' 400-500

level was recorded...more than 10 times the global safety threshold, which can cause acute and chronic bronchitis and asthma attacks." ("Millions of Indians set a new world record celebrating Diwali as worries about air pollution rise," AP, Nov. 12, 2023). Enormous fireworks at the end of the celebrations raised more concerns. Then there were all the extra trains and vehicles used to transport the millions of attendees.

We can't pick on Hindus though, can we? Think of the environmental impact of holiday travel, decorations, packages and feasting we have in America. I sometimes wonder if December holidays are the worst assault on our environment. Without throwing a wet blanket over winter celebrations, I think it may enhance our festive feelings to step back a bit to reflect on

the wider affect of these annual occasions.

The Psalms proclaim: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24. Quoted in First Corinthians 10). It's always been puzzling to me observing people of faith disregarding, even disrespecting, the land, and all who dwell on the land, without a thought for the clear teachings of their own scriptures. It seems to me the way you treat "the Lord's earth" and those He apparently loves so much, says just about everything about the sincerity of one's faith. Some may try to justify "using" the natural world based on a narrow interpretation of the Genesis instruction to "have dominion" and "subdue" the earth.

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What gets forgotten is the “goodness” of the creation, and domination does not necessarily mean exploiting or disrespecting less powerful species (there are, of course, many problems with this hierarchy). Responsible, conscious inter-relationship may be a wiser alternative.

It may be distasteful to contemplate, but think of all the animals sacrificed in our annual rituals “celebrating life.” Is this reminiscent of the blood sacrifices of ancient Israel, or the “sacrificial Lamb” of the Christian story? I wouldn’t put down the meaningful sharing of a meal where traditional dishes and stories are passed from hand to hand, generation to generation. Yet I would suggest we seriously consider what we do and how it may have harmful rather than healthy effects far beyond the table we gather around.

As a former believer in the supernatural, I suspect many religious people who celebrate various holy days

are, perhaps unconsciously, assenting to old and frankly unnatural beliefs. The thinking goes: since there is another world superior to this world, and this world is passing away — and that’s a good thing — therefore we can do whatever is necessary to enjoy our sacred celebrations. This seems shortsighted and thoughtless. Shouldn’t a holy day be a time, perhaps the best time, to be more reflective (prayerful?) and lead us to greater enlightenment in heart and mind? If so, wouldn’t we welcome the opportunity, at least once a year, to seek a deeper connection, a more empathetic relationship, with all creatures and creation, including ourselves and our loved ones?

What if we were committed to simplicity, reducing wastefulness, enhancing kindness and compassion for all living things by focusing greater attention on the center of celebrations? What renewable resources of human empathy might we draw from the original stories of light, goodwill, peace and the spirit of giving? Without taking anything away from traditional rituals, secular experience of the seasons offers some hints for a more earthbound way of celebrating (with a Christmas birthday myself, I’ve often thought “presence” is

more valuable than presents). A little less emphasis on food, less shopping, fewer loud and crowded noisy gatherings, all could help reduce the waste and the overuse of resources. A creative adjustment to how we “do holidays” can bring the stress level down as well (my daughter and her husband donate to local charities instead of exchanging a lot of unnecessary gifts). Why not try new things, start fresh traditions, that could potentially make the old traditions brighter and more relevant?

Celebrating the birth of a season or a savior, can be a quieter, calmer time of year. We can look deeper to honor those around us in the human and non-human community, and discover the heart of the holidays, kindling a sensible sense of the season. There is much more to explore and adore in these days of transition, as we toast the dance between darkness and light.

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