

THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT

Youth is given. One must put it away like a doll in a closet, take it out and play with it only on holidays. May Swenson

The sum of human happiness would not necessarily be reduced if for ten years every physical and chemical laboratory were closed and the patient and resourceful energy displayed in them transferred to the lost art of getting together and finding the formula for making both ends meet in the scale of human life. Much, of course, we should lose by this universal scientific holiday.... But human happiness would not necessarily suffer. Edward Arthur Burroughs, Bishop of Ripon

*The holiest of all holidays are those
Kept by ourselves in silence and apart;
The secret anniversaries of the heart.
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

*Who first invented work, and bound the free and holiday rejoicing down?
Charles Lamb*

Gamda and Zilla were space explorers. They often dined together. It gave them an opportunity to recount the various oddities they had encountered during their many voyages to a range of galaxies. Each tried to outdo the other. After much exhortation, Gamda convinced Zilla to accompany him on a voyage to a distant planet, of a solar system contained in a remote galaxy. This planet was the third from its sun and contained all the necessary ingredients for life, which it had in abundant supply.

Rendering themselves invisible, they spent about a year learning what they could about the various customs the inhabitants practiced. Zilla was flabbergasted by what they discovered. He conceded that Gamda had indeed found the oddest group of any planet they had visited.

“There is a definite disconnect between the advances made in the Art, Sciences and Humanities with the overall behaviour of these so-called civilized beings. Violence seems to be the usual order of the day accompanied by massive buildups of weapons powerful enough to obliterate all life. The planet’s populace remains torn due to separate races, ethnic groups, religions, genders, political creeds, economic distinctions and sexual preferences. There is no lack of ill feeling between them although on numerous occasions two or more of these subdivisions would unite to confront those that, for one reason or another, they felt were threatening them. Of course, today’s enemies often became tomorrow’s friends. The language used to justify their repugnant behaviour makes no sense whatsoever and consists of trite slogans such as “My Country, Right or Wrong”. The only evident reason that this world had not gone down to mutual nuclear destruction was that the balance of power was such, no one dared to use the available life-threatening means. It appears that these personages collectively suffered from a sort of split personality, or schizophrenia. On numerous occasions great actions accompanied by great words occurred. Unfortunately,

on many more instances the actions did not measure up to the language. Indeed not only did they belie them but were frequently used to inflame the general population.

Perhaps the most incongruous and on occasion a most appealing activity was the enjoyment of 'Holidays'. While many celebrations were not holidays, all holidays were celebrations of something or other. Originally they may have come about because of the annual climatic cycles which determined the when and how of agricultural practices that provided nearly all of life's necessities. A cause for rejoicing and celebrating was when the weather behaved predictably so that food was in abundant supply. These occasions became holidays that the populaces used to thank their various deities. At least these were rather benevolent events. It was when religions became organized and incorporated into the political structure of nation states that the 'Holidays' started to take on a different coloration. While some of the old, joyous and fun holidays remained, no one took them seriously and all they became were nothing more than commercial opportunities. Pity!

Holidays became celebrations of military and political victories as well as supposed sacred religious occurrences. The rituals, rites and symbols that arose were so impressive that the majority of people were either seduced or coerced into becoming believers and/or patriots. These ceremonies and their accompanying paraphernalia and customs often became more important than what they supposedly represented. Faith replaced reason. Confessing all one's sins seemed to provide permission to reengage in them. Celebrating military victories really meant that one's enemies paid a greater price in terms of lives lost and soldiers wounded. Is this a cause for celebration? The belief in a primal cause for existence makes some sense. The belief that God created the beings of this planet in his image does not. It places them on a par with 'God'. It certainly does not say much for the rest of life that exists on other worlds. Holidays promoting these beliefs are a celebration of superstitions.

It is possible that I have been too analytical vis-a- vis holidays. They do provide a break from the monotony of day to day existence while allowing the celebrants to engage in aesthetically pleasing and pleasurable activities. We, on the other hand, do not celebrate anything. All our necessities are provided by robots. Our recorded history has had no conflicts. Our time is spent in either intellectual exploratory pursuits or in some form or other of narcissism. Perhaps it is time that we introduced the concept of holidays to our world."

Gamda enthusiastically agreed. "It is a terrific idea. However we have one problem. What are we going to celebrate? Nothing special has ever happened in all our recorded history. We have to find something worthwhile. Let us return to our home planet and put the problem to others far wiser than us."

Upon their return, a panel of recognized sages was convened. Gamda and Zilla presented their findings as well as their perceived need for holidays. All agreed but they too were stumped as to what to celebrate. No one spoke for about an hour as they contemplated the dilemma before them. Then Zilla, somewhat apologetically and timidly made the following suggestion.

"There is one thing we all have in common that is worth celebrating. We are alive because we were born. None of us know the exact date of our birth. Why don't we select a fixed day each year to celebrate all our birthdays as a universal holiday?"

Agreement was unanimous, although most of the intelligentsia present ruefully wondered why they had not thought of it. Since they could not agree on a date for the holiday they decided to let the robots select one randomly.

For the next three years the birthday holiday was a resounding success. A movement arose urging the creation of more holidays. As one advocate put it, "Since we now celebrate our birth which is another way of observing our existence, why don't we mark it by creating reasons for it or its cause."

While everybody thought it was a great idea, there was wide disagreement about the primal source for existence and the manner in which it should be commemorated. An indeterminate number of sects arose, each with their own beliefs and rituals. Inevitably, animosity became so intense that, on occasion, it manifested as violent exchanges. This was a first in that planet's recorded history. It probably would have grown to horrendous proportions had the robots not immediately put a stop to it and issued the following edict.

1. Raising questions publicly that have no possibility of answers is prohibited. Beliefs, professed publicly, have to be based upon accepted and demonstrated facts and data. This does not mean that such beliefs held privately are forbidden. They simply may not be publicized or imposed.
2. All holidays are banned with the following exceptions:
 - a) The original holiday celebrating a universal birthday. This one unifies. It is not divisive.
 - b) It is recommended that a holiday celebrating 'wisdom' be created. A carefully monitored panel of experts will determine what is wise and what is not. The holiday should emphasize the joyful striving for wisdom.
 - c) It is recommended that a holiday celebrating 'mystery', in other words, our ignorance, be founded. Humility should be the hallmark of this event.
 - d) It is suggested that the previous holiday recommendations more truly measure up to an enjoyable and benign holiday spirit which should be of benefit to all.
3. Anyone who inflicts pain on anyone or anything, for reasons other than medical, will be severely punished.

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