



## Family Man



### A Holiday from Divorce

By Michael Wayland

#### Parents, take a holiday from your divorce...

You can give your child the gift of peace during a holiday. Depending on where you are reading this article, your family will have certain special celebrations throughout the year - Rosh Hashanah, Christmas, King's Day, and Kwanza, for example. Because of the "family" nature of the holidays, it has the potential to be a healing time or a hurting time for children of divorce.

#### The Hurting

Parents who experience a "high conflict" divorce, which we define as any adversarial or litigated divorce (as opposed to a collaborative or mediated divorce) often continue the divorce battle into their post-divorce lives. For some parents, even if just subconsciously, they continue to fight the skirmishes, battles and wars. For some, this can result in Parental Alienation Syndrome (see International Family Magazine November 2006). For others, the smaller skirmishes are constant. The children are always caught in the middle.

#### Let's Be Honest

Warring parents frequently use holidays as a weapon. They fight over who will see the children and when. This really is a battle about reducing the amount of time the other parent can spend with the children, which in turn is really an attack against the other parent and an attempt to gain control.

Whatever the holiday you are celebrating, it is important to keep focused on the real meaning of it – spirituality, giving, generosity of spirit, fasting, and feasting. Warring parents often take the "holy" out of holiday and make it a contest of presents. They try to buy the children's love by "out-gifting" the other parent or demeaning the gifts of the other parent in order to increase the perceived value of their own gift. Children always want gifts, but unfortunately, often view gifts as a proxy for love. Whether a parent demeans the other parent's gift or attempts to elevate their own gift, the result is in all practicality the same. It sends a message that the other parent loves the child less because the gift is less. Where is the spirit of giving and love in that gesture? If your focus is only on the fight, you lose this opportunity to teach your child. In fact, you teach your children something very, very different.

## **Don't Underestimate Your Children**

When one of the parents and the children get together for the holidays with that parent's respective family and friends, there is always conversation that occurs between the adults. When the parent talks about the absent parent, children will usually overhear the conversation. This is often used as an opportunity to tell everyone how terrible the absent parent is, but it also sends and reinforces a message to the kids; the other parent is a "bad parent", whereas "I'm a good parent". Of course this can happen all year at places like church, school, and neighborhood gatherings, but the familial nature of the holidays provides an opportunity to form coalitions within the family and demonstrate to the kids that "see, all of your significant relatives agree with me that your other parent is bad." Have you ever tried to imagine your child's heart as he or she tries to learn how to temporarily suspend love for the other parent or even act hateful and say things they don't mean in order to receive your love?

## **Helping**

There are many things parents can do to protect and help their children during the holidays. First, remember first and foremost that the word Holiday derives from the words 'Holy Days'. Start by keeping that in mind and acting consistent with "holy days" rather than "fighting days". You are your child's primary teacher of how to live, love, grow and negotiate. Choose to teach peace.

Next, don't fall into the traps discussed above in the section on hurting. Begin by realizing that the war is over. You are divorced now. You no longer have to win. Your focus needs to shift from winning the divorce war to winning the battle to raise Godly children against all the odds placed against that. Shifting your focus will help you not fight the small battles such as "out gifting" the other parent to prove you love the kids more. It will help you realize that children need time with both parents, if possible with both parents together, even if it is just for a very short time.

## **The War is Over**

Realizing the war is over will help you realize that you could actually attempt to maximize the time both parents spend with the children over the holidays. If you fought a contested divorce this may seem impossible but remember that even after World War II, mortal enemies, The United States, England, Germany and Japan became allies. Kids really want and need both parents to be allies in raising them. They need the maximum amount of time, love and affection from both parents. Structuring ways to maximize time is important.

If the war is over, you don't need to wage the war of words either. Never let the children hear you or anyone else say anything negative about the other parent. This may be difficult if you are already in the pattern of negative speak. It will take determination to accomplish it. It will also most likely seem unnatural, especially if you have already built coalitions, enlisted family and fought a tough war of words. Even more so if your spouse is equally engaged in fighting the war. But here is an opportunity to teach your child conflict resolution. When we tell our children to "be the better person and walk away", what does that say to them if we refuse to walk away?

## **Don't Play Victim**

Be sure that you don't play the victim to your child if your visitation schedule does not "give" the child to you on the holiday. Children should not be made to feel sorry for you, anxious for your well-being, or guilty for you being alone. Make sure the kids know you are going to be OK and you have plans that will make you comfortable. You don't want your children to spend their holiday worrying about you. This kind of feeling sorry for yourself

in front of the children is just as damaging to their psyche as a fight. They need you, you should not need them. Be the adult in all situations.

### **Plan Ahead**

You can also plan the holiday way in advance so the children know what to expect. Think big picture. The holidays are not just one day for a child but include the days leading up to it. Think of the excitement and anticipation a child has in the weeks leading up to a Christmas. You can plan special events within the confines of your existing parenting plan/ visitation schedule. When the kids come back from doing something special with the other parent, show you are positive and excited for them (even if you are not). Remember it is about the children, not the hurt you experienced.

If you are recently divorced, realize that the absence of the other parent will be a noticeable void for the children. They may not verbalize it; they may not even overtly realize it, but the hurt of the void will be there. The hurt may manifest itself in acting out, behavioral, mood or sleep problems. Keep this in mind as you consider discipline, changing schedules, and interaction with the kids.

Finally, if you used a litigated or adversarial divorce process, you may want to consider revising your visitation plan and parenting agreement through a non-adversarial process like mediation. Most people assume that once they have a court ordered visitation or parenting plan that all is over. The reality is that parents can agree to mediate a new agreement and have it made an order of the court, superseding the initial order. When I mediate parenting plans I attempt to ensure everything that the parents believe is important is included. In one visitation/ parenting plan I recently mediated it was extremely important to the mother to include a clause agreeing that the daughter would go to church every Easter and would wear a white Easter dress. We included this in the agreement. With the help of a mediator, you can revise the parenting plan to include the positive components of parenting not just who gets who when.

### **Give Yourself the Gift of Good Parenting**

Parenting is one of the greatest challenges with magnificent rewards and gruesome consequences. Make it easy on the kids and go easy on you. You can make the holidays a positive experience for your children despite being divorced. You can put aside the war and enjoy the holiday celebration for yourself. Who knows, maybe we can make Christmas happen all year long.