



Reflections on the 2021 holiday season

Description

Use this time to renew friendships and strive to be a better person

By Irwin Rapoport

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This has been our second consecutive COVID Christmas and, for many, the way we celebrate the holiday season in this pandemic is becoming second nature and all too normal. This reflects how many of us take COVID seriously and do not want to spread the virus and be infected. Just when many of us thought that we could enjoy more normal celebrations, the Omicron variant arrived like [Krampus](#) and put a damper on large holiday gatherings that would be more carefree, especially as many of us have already been double vaxxed and some have had their boosters.

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On December 18, excellent friends of mine, George and Danka, held their 20th annual Christmas Party. For the second year, it was a Zoom event and while we were all pleased to see each other and catch up, it did not match the experience of being there in person. The celebration, for many, is the highlight of the season as these parties bring together a diverse group of people that have become friends, with some only seeing each other once a year but when we do meet, it is as if we only spoke yesterday. People immediately recognize each other and welcome new attendees.

George and Danka's parties not only offer excellent company, but feature fine food; plenty to drink, especially the rum and vodka shots, cosmos, and fine wines and spirits; and karaoke – starting in 2017, which was extremely popular and led to great performances and many of us bonding – my fears of singing in public were greatly set aside and I fondly recall singing David Bowie's *Modern Love* with Darryl and Johnny Cash's *Ring of Fire* with Jeff



and taking on some Doors tunes solo.

The point being is that you knew the holidays were truly here when George and Danka's party was held and everyone enjoyed every second of it, and those you cared about and longed to see were present. This year, there were fewer people, but those who attended were grateful that we had an opportunity to speak and catch up. A whole bunch of us were chatting until 4 am. For about two hours the conversation centred on COVID and how it impacted us individually, at work, and socially. I remarked that, in 2019, such a conversation could not have been predicted in a million years and that the best film and television screenwriters could not have imagined the dialogue. What was crystal clear is that we would have much preferred to see each other in person than on Zoom.

No doubt many of us have friends and relatives like Danka and George who do their utmost to say "thank you" to their friends and give people an opportunity to share in the joys of the season. It was also an opportunity for me to present holiday gifts and my long Christmas cards that used up almost every bit of blank space to recount the last year and offer my best wishes for the holidays.

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At this year's party, one friend expressed his view that COVID had to be a man-made virus and that Dr. Anthony Fauci should be jailed for his actions throughout COVID; and another friend opined that the January 6 storming of Capital Hill was not an insurrection, but merely trespassing, which led to a sharp discussion. But that is all water under the bridge. Even when we hold opposing views, we can agree to disagree. What does make their parties interesting is the wide range of discussions that bring up unexpected topics that allow us to introduce many obscure references of people, places, and events, and link what is going on today to colourful characters in the past, such as [Lucius Licinius Lucullus](#) and [Pope Alexander VI](#), one of my favourites. Check out both of these individuals. And how often does one hear about the [Plague of Athens](#), which occurred shortly after the start of the [Peloponnesian War](#)?

Darryl and Susan have been holding an annual New Year's Eve party, inspired by George and Danka, for their good friends for the past ten years, and that has become an event not to be missed. This gathering, which has been put on hold for the last two years, lets us start the new year on a very positive note and Susan and Darryl, like George and Danka, whom they also know, cherish their friends and go all out to make sure that everyone feels welcome. The conversation at their parties is also interesting and varied and leads in directions one would never have expected. This is positive and amusing. The gatherings went on deep into the night and all returned home satisfied and feeling good about the new year. I and others look forward to the day when their parties are resumed. Hopefully, we can make up for their loss with summer gatherings

In the days before Christmas Eve and the coming government restrictions, I did as much Christmas shopping as I could while meeting work deadlines. It was not easy, but it was nice to go downtown. During the afternoon on Christmas Eve, two good friends dropped by to deliver a Christmas gift – I was given a stellar bottle of wine and a lovely card. It meant a lot to me and, more importantly, it renewed a friendship that I had thought was lost due to some sharp disagreements regarding COVID after it became a major problem in Canada. Receiving the wine was appreciated but the real and true gift was knowing that our friendship remained intact and that steps will be taken to ensure we speak to each other more often.

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believe that many of us truly don't appreciate the value of friendship and how powerful this is, whether you know someone for decades or have just recently met.'

Since Christmas Eve, I have attended a few small gatherings that followed social distancing rules and ensured all the guests were doubled vaxxed. I have received calls from good friends and wonderful messages on Facebook. One friend called from Mexico, and it was as if we were sitting down for a drink and catching up.

I feel very blessed for having amazing family and friends, and the holiday season is a great way to renew and strengthen bonds that mean so much to us all. We often receive wonderful gifts – books, wine, clothes, etc., but I believe that many of us truly don't appreciate the value of friendship and how powerful this is, whether you know someone for decades or have just recently met. In one of *Aesop's Fables*, Socrates is mocked when someone points out that his newly constructed home is very small. In response, the philosopher responds, "I only hope that I have enough good friends to fill it." That was the perfect response, and it is still true today. Good friends are not only there for us daily but are capable of unexpected acts of generosity and caring.

While we cannot see our friends daily, we can call them and say "hello" – one does not need a reason or excuse whatsoever to just say, "Hi. It's been a while. How are you?" When you call, they may have some great news to tell you about or may need an ear to listen to their concerns and fears. You never know what to expect, but a call says that you care and want to know what is happening. Messages on Facebook and emails have a role, but a voice makes a difference. In the next few days, I'll be making several calls and hopefully getting in a few walks with friends.

One new friend I made this year, who has a wonderful spirit and exemplifies the best in humanity, has not had a great Christmas. This individual lost a sister recently, and just before Christmas, learned that a brother suddenly passed away. This person is a pillar of her community in the Eastern Townships and is a ferocious friend – if you do something great, she will congratulate you and thank you, and if you do something that she thinks is wrong, will let you know and urge you to be better than that. She appreciates good deeds and kind thoughts and wants each of her friends and acquaintances to make the world a better place.

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I deliberately have not mentioned her name but when she reads this, she will know whom I am referring to. I bring her up as she is a new friend and means a lot to me for her support and pearls of wisdom. She can easily inspire and remains cheerful despite some memories she would prefer to forget. We can all use such friends and when you find one like her, don't lose them.

To say "enjoy the holiday season to the fullest" is often stated and, in many cases, loses its impact but the message still holds true and "in the time of COVID," which has also become a cliché, is one that we should take to heart.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge was given a chance to mend his ways and save himself. The tribulation he underwent restored his humanity and he became a better person, living the spirit of Christmas daily. Charles Dickens shared a universal message via his powerful story and urged us to demonstrate our better nature and be excellent to each other every minute of the day. His tale, regardless of what religion one follows or not, should take his advice to heart.

The holiday season is a time for us to relax, but also one to take stock of where we are and what we should like to accomplish. Use this time to renew friendships and strive to be a better person. If many undertake such individual



actions, the world could easily be a better place.

Image: holiday gathering in normal times, by Nicole Michalou

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