



OUTREACH & EXTENSION  
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI  
LINCOLN UNIVERSITY

Vol. 3, No. 6 • Nov. / Dec. 2001

# Life Times

A bimonthly publication to enhance the quality of life of individuals, families, and communities

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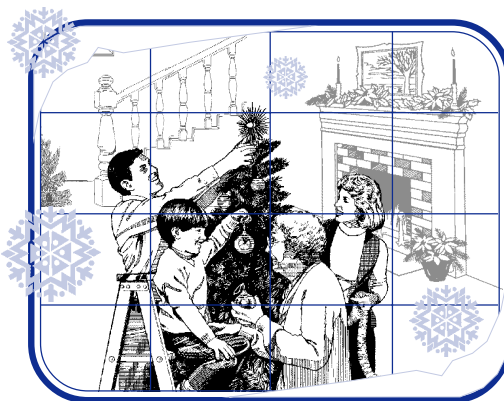


### Extension's Mission

*University Outreach and Extension serves Missouri by extending research-based knowledge and high-quality educational programs to address the high-priority needs of citizens at the local level.*

## The holidays: Keep them in perspective

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As pleasant as the holiday season can be, it often becomes a time of high stress and unrealistic expectations. We expect more of the season, and of ourselves, than can possibly be delivered. We are bombarded by television advertising and holiday displays even before Halloween.

Avoid letting the material aspect of the holidays overshadow the spiritual and traditional aspects. Keep the holidays in perspective--especially a financial perspective.

This is the time of year when most people spend more than they should. We are a nation of overspenders. Americans charge more than \$600 billion on credit cards each year. But the holidays don't have to mean drained savings accounts and bills to pay in January.

It isn't the price tag, flashing lights, and how big the box is that counts. It is often the simple things in life that mean the most. In the spirit of the season, here are a few gift ideas for the kids for not a lot of green:

Visit thrift stores, like the Salvation Army. Find wild dresses, uniforms,

hats, and jewelry. Put these treasures in a decorated cardboard box for games of "dress up."

Draw a picture of a special activity you will do with your children a few days after the holidays, like roller skating or sledding. Wrap it up and put it under the tree. Your children will look forward to spending time with you after the holiday rush is over.

What kids wouldn't like to get a coupon saying you will clean their room on demand? Then the next time you nag them to clean their room, they can hand you the coupon.

One of my fondest childhood memories was receiving a small doll. The best part of the gift was when my dad helped me make a cradle for her out of an oatmeal box. My mom made a blanket from some scrap flannel material, and I used cotton balls to stuff a little pillow.

It is okay to simplify your life, especially around the holidays. Doing so may save you some stress and some money--and help to put things in perspective.



## Holidays

# Capture the Magic

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**B**ah, humbug!" Do you think of a curmudgeon with pinched face, scowling at the world and bemoaning the holidays, when you hear that phrase? Scrooge, the central character in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, is probably as famous for those two words as he is for being stingy and selfish.

But Scrooge wasn't always like that. When the ghost spirits him back to the past, Scrooge remembers with awe the holiday seasons of his youth. He conjures memories of joy and excitement. Adulthood somehow jades his point of view.

*I wonder how many of us have our own views jaded by adulthood?* How many of us have uttered "Bah, humbug" and become a bit "scrooge-like" with the approaching holidays?

Do you remember the tingly excitement when you thought Santa was watching or when Hanukah was just around the corner? Do you recall the agonizing count of the ever-so-slowly-moving days? The time was magical.

While some still eagerly await the coming days, too many of us groan at the prospect. All those presents to buy; all those cards to send; all those lights to string; all those annoying relatives! Bah, humbug!

Something has happened to us between childhood and adulthood that caused this attitude shift. Something has robbed us of dreams where sugarplums danced in our heads. Something has stolen the wonder of the season.

The thief, of course, is *responsibility*. The magic that was ours has been diluted by the tasks at hand. We are no longer under the spell. We are, in fact, now the magicians. And, enchantment is a very tough job!

The usual advice is to simplify the season. Certainly, we have tried. Cookies are cut from rolls; family summaries are sent to the list; mall elves wrap our gifts; and cranberries come from cans. Still, we are stressed by the frenetic activity that whirls us round, spinning calmness and serenity to a distant realm.

**I've come to believe that stress at this time of the year is inevitable.** After all, if we try to add more to an already full schedule, we are bound to feel stressed. Yet, who among us will refuse to cast the spell for those who have grown to love our brand of wizardry?

The solution, then, may not be simplification, but *rediscovering the magic*. The wands we wave will vary for each of us. Here are some things that work for me:

### **Surround yourself with children.**

Children see the world with wonder and awe. Little things amaze them that adults no longer notice: the veins in a leaf, the wings of a butterfly, the petals forming a flower. Recently my 4-year-old granddaughter was flying with her mother to St. Louis. They were between cloud layers when Angie noticed Ryleigh waving out the window. "Who are you waving to?"

asked Angie. "I thought," said Ryleigh, reflectively, "that as long as we were this close to heaven, I would wave to Tymber." (Tymber was our 13-year-old golden retriever that became very ill two Christmases ago.) If you are willing to take the trip, small children will transport you to their magical realm where, you, too, can experience the awe.

### **Surround yourself with nature.**

"What is life?" asks Crowfoot in his dying moments. "It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of the buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset." It is not necessary to visit the Grand Canyon to witness this delight. When was the last time you observed the flash of a firefly or witnessed the dance of a humming bird or laughed at the comic antics of a chipmunk in your own yard?

**Surround yourself with quiet.** Try sitting in a room alone, clear your head of the daily debris, and attempt to keep your mind quiet for five minutes. I'll bet you can't do it! If you are like me, you'll be inundated with the cacophony of day before 30 seconds expire. "Only in quiet waters," says Hans Margolius, "do things mirror themselves undistorted. Only in a quiet mind is adequate perception of the world." Quieting our mind has a profound influence on the rest of our existence. It allows us to touch the spirituality that we all have. It helps us feel the magic. We must practice harder!

*(continued on page 4)*



## Freezing tips

**Label it.** Write the food's name, amount, and the date it was frozen on each package. Consider adding a suggested "use by" date based on information in this article. Also divide foods according to events. For example: Package and label one container of cookies for your Dec. 1 party and another for the Dec. 10 get-together. Keep a written list of frozen holiday baked goods.

**Freeze it.** Freeze food at 0 degrees F or below. Avoid overloading your freezer with too much food for freezing at one time. Add only about 10 percent of the freezer's available capacity at a time. Leave space between packages for air to circulate around them. Once frozen, restack food closer together.

**Thaw it.** Most precooked breads, cakes and cookies can be thawed safely at room temperature. Thaw cheesecake, casseroles, and moist foods containing meat, poultry, eggs or dairy products in the refrigerator. Thaw most food in its freezer wrap. Source: Adapted from *Food Reflections*, University of Nebraska, Nov/Dec 1999.

**For a list of foods that freeze well, call your local extension office and request Guide Sheet GH1505, *Freezing Home-Prepared Foods*, University of Missouri Outreach and Extension.**

# Prepare holiday feasts without last-minute fuss

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When holiday preparations threaten to overwhelm you, it's time to simplify, plan ahead, and enjoy quiet time with family and friends.

A well-stocked freezer can help feed either a few or a crowd without much fuss. Here are some tips:

**Double up.** When preparing meals over the next several weeks, prepare a double batch of your favorite soup, casserole, or chili recipe. Serve half, and freeze the other half to enjoy later.

**Shop now, feast later.** Buy desserts, breads, and cookies ahead of time, then store in the freezer.

**Shift tasks.** Shape meatloaf, stir-up cookie dough, and roll piecrusts in October or November. Freeze. Finish cooking and dine in December.

**Work ahead.** Prepare candies, cookies, and breads for holiday gift baskets ahead of time and freeze.

**To keep the freezer feast tasty, try the following:**

**Wrap it.** Proper packaging prevents freezer burn and off-flavors. Use heavy-duty aluminum foil, freezer paper, plastic freezer bags, or plastic wrap designed for freezing. Some brands of freezer bags are available in 2- and 2½-gallon sizes.



**Use plastic, glass, foil pans, and ceramic containers labeled suitable for freezing.** Milk and cottage cheese cartons are not moisture-vapor proof and do not make good containers for freezing. Do not use regular glass or ceramic containers, since they may break in the freezer.

**Thoroughly cool baked goods before freezing.** Or they'll become soggy. Place food on a wire cooling rack to allow air to circulate around the food and promote faster cooling. Cool perishable foods like cheesecakes in the refrigerator before freezing.

**Choose a container that fits the amount of food you're freezing.** Pack food compactly and try to get as much air out of the package as possible. The quality of food declines faster when excess air is left in the package. Wrap well and seal tightly to keep moisture in, drying air out.

Freezer burn appears as a whitish color and causes a dry, tough texture on food that occurs when moisture on the surface evaporates. Proper cooling, air removal, moisture-vapor-resistant packaging, a tight seal and an appropriate length of storage help prevent freezer burn.

# Plan ahead and keep track!

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Certainly the holidays are a time of joyful celebration with family and friends, but they are also a time of increased spending. Often, when we plan for holiday expenses, we tend to think of gifts as the main expense. Unfortunately, gifts aren't the only expenses incurred during the holidays.

Other expenses include items such as decorations, food for holiday dinner and parties, wrapping paper, cards, postage, clothing, long distance phone charges, extra expenses for company and guests who come to visit, and travel to visit with family members.

If you have not considered and planned for all these holiday-related expenses, the effect on your budget will be less than joyful when the bills come due. There are two keys to keeping your holiday budget in line: plan ahead and keep track. The following steps should help you control your holiday spending.

**1) Agree on spending limits ahead of time.** Sit down with your spouse and/or family and decide

what will be spent in each category (decorations, travel, cards, gifts, holiday food, etc.).

**2) Once budget limits are set, decide how purchases will be made and for what amount.** For example, Tommy's new bike will be purchased with a credit card, but his new winter coat will be bought with cash. Sandy needs \$50 in cash to buy the gifts she wants for family members. When individual family members know how much they can spend, they are often better shoppers.

**3) Devise a record-keeping system for your purchases.** For credit cards, create a log of purchases that includes name of the card, how much is budgeted, type of purchase and actual cost. When the item is purchased, fill in the information. This will help you keep a tab on how close actual expenses are to your budgeted amounts. Do this for holiday expenses paid by check or cash as well.

If you don't keep track of your expenses, you might be surprised when you receive the bills in January. It's very easy to lose track of what you are actually spending. By following the two keys of planning ahead and keeping track, you will know exactly what you are spending.

You also will be able to adjust agreed-upon expenses. For example, if Tommy's bike costs \$20 less than you budgeted, you can make adjustments to other holiday expenses. By keeping track, you will have better control of your spending, and you'll also be able to avoid temptation and advertising gimmicks.

Don't spend the first few months of 2002 paying for the 2001 holidays. Plan ahead and keep track!



## Capture the Magic *(continued from page 2)*

**Surround yourself with music.** It's ironic, don't you think, that magic can be found in noise, as well as in quiet. But not just any noise. It requires noise that lifts our spirits and stirs our souls. Listen, without distraction, to the theme song from "Lawrence of Arabia" or Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" and become enchanted. It's almost impossible not to. Close your eyes, feel the pulsing beat and

experience the energy. I think it helps to direct that imaginary orchestra before you. If small children are in the vicinity, let them help you! Magic is most spectacular in giggles.

Scrooge wasted many years before understanding that the holidays are about warmth and love and family. But in the end, "his own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him." May your "hearts laugh" with the magic of the coming season.

### LifeTimes

LifeTimes is written by University Outreach and Extension specialists for individuals and families living in East Central Missouri. This newsletter is provided by your local Outreach and Extension Council. **Articles may be reprinted for educational purposes only. Please credit as follows:** By (author's name), (author's title), University of Missouri Outreach and Extension.

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