



CHRISTMAS IS OPTIONAL



by Carolyn Spring

'Christmas is optional!' I announce, loudly and excitedly and with an uncharacteristic degree of gusto, at the beginning of my session. We haven't even sat down yet. Mostly sessions begin with a tense stand-off as I battle within myself to be present.

The therapist's eyes widen. I can tell she's wondering if I've switched to another part. In particular I have one whom I call 'Play' who is larger-than-life and copes with social occasions for me. She is skilled at banter, although not so skilled at reading social cues and divining if its recipients are edified by it. But this isn't 'Play'. This – surprisingly – is me.

'Explain?'

'Christmas is optional.'

Apparently this isn't an explanation. The therapist's superpowers of mind reading

have evidently dwindled in the run-up to the festive season, so I spell it out for her.

'Christmas is optional. There's not a law that says that unless you celebrate it in a certain way you'll go to prison. Or be a bad person. You don't have to do it if you don't want to. And you don't have to do it like other people do it. You don't even have to have a tree.'

I can tell from the look on her face that she already knows this, and maybe has always known it. Suddenly I feel embarrassed at my epiphany. As usual, I'm way behind the curve.

But then she adjusts her face and steps onto my trajectory. 'Go on? Why have you been thinking about this?'

'I know it sounds stupid ... but I only just realised it. Christmas is optional.'

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I always felt such a failure for not enjoying it. I always felt left out. Like there's something wrong with me. Like I'm inherently defective. Because I just don't get it. I don't get what all the fuss is about. I'd like to be able to enjoy it, but actually I hate it. I hate Christmas.'

I expect her to take a sharp intake of breath at my heresy, but of course she doesn't. She just smiles, maybe a little sadly.

'But it doesn't matter if I hate Christmas,' I add. 'Because it's optional. I don't have to do it. It's just another day. I've always wanted to belong, to fit in, to be 'normal', so struggling with Christmas has always made me feel a freak. But it's okay. Because it really is optional.'

'And there are lots of people who don't enjoy Christmas,' she adds, 'and lots of people, especially from other cultures and religions, who don't celebrate it at all.'

But suddenly I'm confused and I cock my head on one side, as if by doing so the thought will drop into the centre of my brain. 'But why do I hate Christmas?' I ask.

'Why would you enjoy it?' she counters.

I know she enjoys Christmas, because we've talked about this a little before. So she's not being cynical. It's a genuine question, albeit from an unusual perspective. *Why would I enjoy it?*

I think back to a conversation a couple of weeks previously with a friend significantly younger than me, whom I've known since she was a toddler. Now a nearly-adult, she adores Christmas. It's what pushed me onto this path of reflection. She waxed lyrical about Christmas jumpers and Christmas music and Christmas stockings and Christmas crackers and all the family together at Christmas ...

'Why would I enjoy it when it's reminiscent of 'all the family together at Christmas?'' I say, sadly. For my friend, this is unadulterated joy because of her family, and she is right to enjoy them, because they are - all of them - splendid. For me, it is ... the opposite. It's hard to get excited about the festive season when it means gathering a number of your abusers together in the same place.

'And Christmas jumpers, and Christmas music ... there are no positive associations for me,' I explain. We didn't do that as a family. So I don't mind them, because they're not triggers. But neither are they positive. They're just what other people do. I've got no happy memories of Christmas ...'

'So it makes sense that you don't get a dopamine rush in your brain when you think about Christmas, unlike people who have a glut of positive memories,' adds the therapist, appealing to my wannabe brain scientist.

'Is Christmas really optional though?'



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She seems unfazed by how quickly the confidence in my earlier assertion has leached out. This too, though undramatic, is the nature of dissociation. What I felt and thought just minutes ago is as if it never was; my brain has lost the connection to it. I have stepped through the wardrobe into Narnia.

‘Of course it is,’ she says gently.

I can’t meet her gaze because, unbidden, shame is lapping at my ankles. ‘Why can’t I just be normal? Why I can’t enjoy what other people enjoy?’ I want to split apart with sadness.

‘Because you’ve not had the same experiences. And anyway’ – she straightens in her chair, as if to counter the downward pull of my despair – ‘everyone enjoys different things. You enjoy football and I don’t.’

‘But even that’s weird!’ I protest. I always felt different for being the girl at school – at the time the *only* girl at school – who liked football.

‘It’s who you are. And it’s who I am not to like it. I like Poirot,’ she says, and she’s trying to find me.

I smile a little. ‘That’s *definitely* weird.’ We both chuckle softly.

‘How can Christmas be optional though,’ I continue, more seriously, ‘when it’s such an event? When in society it’s such

a big deal? It’s not like you can avoid it. It’s everywhere.’

‘Well, break it down instead. What is it really that people are celebrating at Christmas?’

I think for a bit. ‘In theory, it’s the birth of Jesus, but that’s definitely NOT what it’s about for most people. Family? – it’s this thing, isn’t it, in John Lewis and Waitrose adverts and so on, that it’s all about being with the people you care about?’

‘And that’s what makes you sad? Because it highlights the dysfunctionality of your family growing up, rather than being a cause of celebration?’

‘Yes.’

We both sit for a little, then she adds: ‘There’s no way around that. It is what it is. You’re going to have to grieve that.’

‘What does that mean?’ I ask, slightly irritated.

‘To grieve?’

‘Yes.’

My concept is that it’s about crying, which I’m not very good at – hence my irritation. I feel in this moment that she’s setting me up for failure.

‘Grieving is about rearranging your life.’



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I spin a little.

'I thought it was about crying?'

'Crying is a symptom of grieving, not grieving itself.'

How does she know this stuff? Is she right?

'What do you mean?'

'Grieving is about coming to terms with the loss of something. That something has changed and that you can do nothing about it. You can't unchange it. And so very often there's an emotional reaction to that – hence tears. But you can cry without grieving, and you can grieve without crying.'

This therapist is a one-woman meme machine.

But no meme will communicate the humanness of this encounter, because she is inviting me into her place whilst simultaneously sitting right with me in mine. There's a warmth in her words, and her manner, and her very being, making her words palatable.

'Grieving is about re-drawing the map of the world in your head. It's realising that it's constructed differently, and getting used to that. It's a process.'

I'm grappling with this, because it feels important. 'So it's like if you move the furniture in your lounge, for a while every time you walk in you're surprised?'

'Yes, that surprise is one emotional reaction. If you had a favourite armchair with lots of positive memories and associations, the emotion triggered might be sadness. But your brain works largely from habits, and when those habits are no longer appropriate – such as going to sit in that armchair before realising that it's no longer there – then it's disruptive and emotionally difficult. It will take time for the habit to change, for you to stop looking to sit in that chair.'

'What has this got to do with Christmas?' I ask and for once it is me who is bringing the conversation back on track.

'Your family, your Christmasses as a child, were not what you wanted them to be. You need to accept that the armchair isn't there. And maybe you need to buy a new one.'

I'm not quite following her, but buying a new armchair, even as a metaphor, had never occurred to me. *I don't deserve new armchairs, do I?*

'How do you mean?'

'If you have to sit on the floor all the time, your brain will focus on the absence or the lack of the armchair. If you get a new armchair – or even a piano! – then the brain will have a different focus.'

I am a little lost in this world of metaphors, because I derive comfort from literalness. Speaking in images is



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an effort for my under-developed right brain. So I make it real.

'I have to develop my own kind of Christmas?'

'Yes.'

'I can't just avoid it altogether?'

'You can if you want to. But there are probably more successful strategies than never going into the lounge.'

Did you not get the memo? We're not doing metaphors, lady!

'How could I have a Christmas that I enjoy?' I ask this because I literally have no idea.

'I don't know,' she says. 'How could you?'

I realise, as probably she does, that she's been doing most of the thinking and talking and it's evidently now my turn.

How could I enjoy Christmas?

It's a novel thought – bright, spanking, shiny new. I realise that I have never pondered it. I have never defined what Christmas could look like, or what I might want it to be. I had only gone so far as trying to believe it to be optional.

What is Christmas all about? We didn't quite finish that thought, and it's relevant now. For most people, it's not about the baby Jesus in a stable. It's

largely about family. But what's that really about? Because for some people, that just involves a lot of stress, a lot of drama and even domestic violence. *The grass isn't always greener ...*

'You enjoy Christmas,' I say, piercing into her eyes with my thought. She nods, but she hasn't got my point. 'You enjoy Christmas,' I say again, with added emphasis.

'Yes,' she says. 'I actively enjoy it.'

'So is Christmas about enjoying yourself?'

She shrugs. 'It should be!'

'So what would I do to enjoy Christmas?'

I'm not sure why I'm asking her, but really I want her to ask the next question.

'What do you enjoy doing the rest of the year?'

It has never occurred to me before to take Christmas out of Christmas, and replace it simply with enjoyment. It feels like it's breaking the rules. *But if Christmas is optional ...* I remind myself. *Yes, of course ...*

'I could do anything!' I say, suddenly excited. It feels like an engine has combusted to life. 'I could do anything at all, as long as I enjoy it!'



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A big smile spreads broadly across her face. 'Yes!'

I like this new rule.

'And it doesn't have to be the same each year ...'

'Absolutely not. Traditions - things we do each year - are good if they evoke positive feelings. So if you find something that you want to do each year, and it has that effect, then that's fine. But otherwise you're free to do whatever you like, a selection of things ...'

I thought it was my turn?

'Yes, because there are lots of things I could do to enjoy myself' - the significance of this statement smacks me in the face, because not so long previously this wasn't true; it has been a hard battle to win the right to enjoy myself - 'and so some time off at Christmas is a chance to do the things I want to do. I can use what society offers in terms of public holidays and time off work to do whatever I want to do ...'

A warm fuzz is growing between my ribs. Can this really be true?

'But ...' - there is always a but - '... but ... but won't people think I'm weird if I do my own thing at Christmas?'

She laughs explosively and then looks embarrassed, as if she knows she really shouldn't say what she's about to say. 'People think you're weird anyway ...'

I'm paying to be told I'm weird?

There is warmth and humour in her eyes and I'm able to connect with it and remain unoffended. And actually, she has a point. All my attempts in life to fit in and 'be normal' have so far failed: people *do* think I'm weird, whatever I do. So I shrug to myself.

'I guess it's better to be weird and enjoying myself than be normal and not be enjoying myself ...'

'And the norm at Christmas actually is for an awful lot of people to *not* enjoy themselves ... that's what's truly weird,' she says.

I feel a little trickle of pleasure start on the inside of me. *I'm going to enjoy myself at Christmas, I think. What an original idea.* •

