

The Life Coach

Francine Campone

"I'm Taking a Personal Day"

The case for more holidays in our lives

AMERICANS LOVE HOLIDAYS. Days off are fine, holiday sales are great but the true purpose of a holiday is to periodically align groups of people toward a shared focus for reflection and introspection. Special days which are designated on the calendar year after year, with ingrained patterns and associations, habituate us to take time out and do what we might not otherwise do. It is worthwhile to look at the patterns of holidays and the functions they fulfill and consider how we might use the idea of "holiday" to reflect and celebrate in more personal ways.

A look at any calendar shows a cluster of religious holidays which take place in the Fall. The Jewish holy days- including the harvest celebration of Shavuoth, Christian celebrations of All Saints and All Souls days, traditional celebrations of All Hallows Eve: all bring closure to the growing and harvesting season and provide a context for the approaching darkness of winter. Christmas, Winter Solstice, Hanukkah, Kwanza and Diwali offer a midwinter reprieve with a celebration of light and acknowledgement of the incipient return of the sun's full power. Springtime festivals coincide with the spring equinox and serve to remind celebrants of the ever-turning seasonal wheel of the year.

Commemorative holidays such as President's Day, Independence Day, Martin Luther King Day, Labor Day, Memorial Day, Cinco di Mayo are sprinkled throughout the year, reminders of our collective roots and history. Celebrating past events reconnects us with predecessors and helps to relocate our feet on this soil, in this place and time in an unbroken link with history and tradition. Historical holidays remind us of our place in a larger and more enduring picture.

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Many communities also share quirky and unique holidays and celebrations which are often mini-versions of the classic American melting pot. The annual Italian street festivals in New York City are packed with the full spectrum of the city's ethnic mix. African-Americans, Latinos, Italians, Germans, Pakistanis and Eastern Europeans jam the streets to eat calzone and sfingi, play games of chance and watch the parades of saint statues. Pow-wows similarly bring diverse people together to appreciate Native American cultures. Local festivals also celebrate the eccentricities of human spirit and invention. The annual "Punkin Chunkin" competition in Sussex County, Delaware and the Purdue Bug Bowl in Indiana are just a few examples of how human beings invent reasons to break loose.

As I write, the year is only one-third over and people are already caught up in the accelerating pace of the calendar and the shadows of war, tight economic times, and constant uncertainty. While few of us are in a position to give ourselves the day off, I encourage readers to maintain and extend the holiday spirit and to create some personal holidays to be noted on the calendar and celebrated in meaningful ways. Here are some suggestions.

- 1) Designate one day a month in which you put time aside for reflection on the big questions of your life. On your personal "inner quest day", take the phone off the hook, find a quiet space (even if your celebration lasts only an hour) and consider: the purpose of your life, how true you are to your inner goals and values, what's next- creating a vision for the next ten years. Some people who do this find it useful to keep a special journal. They create little rituals to help them settle in and get a strong focus. I encourage designating a specific day of the month (e.g. the second Saturday). Give your monthly reflection day a name, put it in your date book and treat it with a level of attention appropriate to your birthday.

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- 2) Thanksgiving Day is a national holiday and already loaded with its own obligations and traditions: turkey, a parade with large balloons and football. A more individual version of this might be an occasionally scheduled "thank you day". The focus of this individual holiday is to acknowledge the contributions of others in your life and to appreciate your own accomplishments. It's a celebration of interdependence and a chance to acknowledge a collection of small, often-overlooked achievements. Some celebrants of my acquaintance have been very creative with this personal holiday. One woman I know designates an occasional day and sets out to say "thank you" at least thirty times. Another woman transfers items she's completed from her "to do" list over to her "have done this" list and once a week sets aside time to review and celebrate progress toward meeting her personal goals. Designating "Joe Appreciation Day" provides an excuse to surprise a spouse or friend with a special dinner, a silly gift or a funny card tucked into a jacket pocket.

- 3) One of a Kind Day. Many small towns have festivals celebrating local produce (Idaho's Potato Days, the Garlic Festival in Gilroy, California) or events which invite enjoyment of the local scenery (like the Sturgis Rally). Why not a day set aside to celebrate your own unique qualities or talents? Rugged individualism is a trait that American culture appreciates and values, yet there's great pressure to conform, to fit into local norms. Your personal One-of-a-Kind Day would require you to identify your special ways of contributing to the fabric of family, friends and community, what you are or do that no one else can. Your designated day would be an opportunity to acknowledge, celebrate, make fun of or otherwise call attention to those qualities and invite others to do the same. Like Mardi Gras, which sanctions crazy costumes and stepping out of normal roles and conventions, One-of-a-Kind Day encourages stepping out of usual behaviors intended to help one to fit in, to not make waves or be noticed. It can provide a healthy venue for self-appreciation and exploration of underutilized talents or interests.

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Every year has three hundred and sixty-four full days and some extra hours. There's plenty of room for a few extra holidays to balance against the majority of ordinary days focused on work, life's routines and stresses. Designate today "start celebrating life" day and get out your calendar.

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