

SOS for the Holidays

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Introduction

Holidays.

Thanksgiving and Christmas – the very words cause many people to cringe and break out in a sweat.

While this has never been my experience during the holidays, I do get it.

> *"You have no idea what my family is like. You don't know our history… how crazy everything gets when everybody gets together at Thanksgiving and Christmas!"*

You're right. I certainly don't know what your particular family situation is like, but I have worked with enough people over the years to know what it's like when it's bad.

And I will say this. In *rare* situations it is necessary for your own well-being or that of your immediate family that you stop participating in these larger extended-family gatherings. But this is *very* rare and is necessary only in extreme cases.

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Is there a way out? You bet there is! And you'll find the help you need here in this brief guide.

Inside these pages is a set of tools – six in fact – that, if applied, will give you what you need to change the way you experience the holidays.

Directly this material will not change *your family*. I don't believe in magic. *BUT*, if you will apply these tools, they will change *you*. That is for certain.

And who knows – it's more than just possible that the change in you will indirectly bring about a change in the dynamics of your family at large during the holidays.

These last two holidays of the year are special times. Family times.

And they can be wonderful times!

My hope for you is that what I am about to share will assist you in making the desired changes in your outlook that will make this your best Thanksgiving and Christmas ever!

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The Principle of Magnification

Year after year, and there have been more than 37 of them now, our appointment book puts on weight around the holidays. Calls inevitably increase in October from people wanting help with surviving the rapidly approaching months of November and December.

Just what is it about the holidays that generates such dread and angst?

Clinically, I get it. But I must admit to you that, on the personal level, I can't relate.

From my earliest recollections until now, the holidays have been filled with nothing but great family experiences and memories for me. And I am thankful for that.

But I realize this is not the case for a lot of people. So to that end, let's see if we can offer some help for the holiday season.

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Here is the starting point for understanding holiday doldrums. From my observation, this is the most critical point to the whole subject:

The holidays magnify your reality

In and of itself, there is nothing regrettable or unfortunate about this truth at all.

In fact, if you are like me and had wonderful holidays in your childhood – and now as an adult with the family you and your spouse have created – this is wonderful news! Our family loves the fact that the holidays magnify our family realities.

But for a great number of people, this cardinal principle – *that the holidays magnify our reality* – is a big problem.

For example:

- If there are family of origin issues and attitudes that have never been put to rest, their energies will intensify around holiday time.

- If there are tensions around spouses that have married into the family, you can bet those tensions will be stronger during the holidays.

- If there is a rebellious child or children in the family, that fact will likely amplify the tensions when

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intergenerational and extended family get-togethers around the holidays occur.

- If a loved one passed away during the previous year, the pain will be felt so intensely during the holidays that it will likely break your heart.

THE HOLIDAYS MAGNIFY YOUR FAMILY REALITIES.

In my experience, the principle of magnification is the most important factor contributing to family holiday gatherings.

And that principle plays out in either negative or positive ways, depending on the dynamics in your particular family.

Why is this? There is a core component of magnification that makes this so, namely –

magnification distorts both proportion and perspective

Now again, in and of itself, this is not bad news.

If your family has a great time around the holidays, magnification makes them even better. It puts the proverbial whip cream and cherry on top!

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Because the factors of *proportion* and *perspective* make these times even better. They intensify the joy, the pleasure!

If the contrary is true… they make things worse.

Magnification, and its two components *proportion* and *perspective*, have a deleterious effect that intensify the problem in unpleasant seasonal family gatherings.

I will explain this in the next two chapters as we delve further into the dynamics of proportion and perspective.

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Magnification… and Proportion

Proportion considers a part of a thing – a portion – in relation to the whole. In relationships, proportion has to do with the relative value of a part when seen in the light of the whole.

In other words – **the fact that the holidays magnify reality can make it very easy to blow things out of *proportion***.

Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about because you have experienced it firsthand.

When something is in proper proportion it possesses balance and symmetry.

As Thanksgiving and Christmas approach, it may be a good time to ask yourself: "Am I keeping the issue(s) that concern me regarding the holidays in proportion?"

"Am I taking a balanced view of things?"

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Remember, the holidays magnify your reality.

Remember also that this magnification can easily distort proportion – and take away a balanced assessment.

By the way, isn't it interesting that artistically speaking, proportion is a factor concerned with ***harmony****!*

WHEN SOMETHING IS IN PROPER *PROPORTION* IT POSSESSES *BALANCE* AND *SYMMETRY.*

In the next chapter we examine the second aspect of magnification – *perspective*.

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Magnification… and Perspective

Last chapter we looked at the impact of *proportion* (an aspect of magnification) on family gatherings.

Let's refresh a bit.

1. Remember that magnification is a neutral principle. That means it can work as an influence either for joy or frustration, happiness or sadness, elation or anger. It all depends on the nature of our family relationships.

2. As we consider this magnification principle, there is a crucial factor we are wise to also be aware of – how magnification affects both ***proportion*** and ***perspective***.

We covered *proportion* last time.

In this chapter I want to talk about the magnification principle of *perspective*.

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Perspective relates to the science of ***sight***.

For our purposes here, this is an important point. Why?

Because it tells us that *the way you **feel** about the holidays (and the people you're going to spend them with) has everything to do with the way you are **seeing** them.*

And when it comes to *perspective*, relationships are a key factor. The relationships between the parts themselves, and the relationships of the parts to the whole are central concerns.

When you consider the factor or factors that have you dreading the holidays, here are some important questions to ask yourself… questions that bring the connection between *perspective* and *seeing* into clearer view:

- *Am I over-blowing my complaints and criticisms?*
- *Are my complaints and criticisms valid?*
- *Am I being petty?*
- *Is my attitude being fueled by something I should have forgiven or simply dropped years ago?*
- *Am I putting a part (my perceptions, attitudes, feelings) ahead of the whole (the importance of family)?*
- *Is my focus (another aspect of magnification) on part of the picture distorting my view of the whole?*

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- *What positive changes might occur if I changed the way I see things?*

Working through these questions will take a little courage and a lot of honesty.

But they can often lead to very positive attitudinal and behavioral changes in you.

This naturally then translates to improvements in how you (and frequently those around you!) experience the holidays.

Restoring perspective to how you are seeing the upcoming holidays – and remember, ***perspective*** relates to the science of ***sight*** – can be a powerful tool for positive change.

HOW YOU *FEEL* ABOUT THE HOLIDAYS HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH THE WAY YOU'RE *SEEING* THEM.

In closing, I want to come back to our core premise – ***the holidays magnify your reality***.

There are families with terrific realities and the fact that the holidays magnify these is a wonderful gift.

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There are also families with sad and unfortunate realties, and the magnification principle of the holidays makes these worse.

A family with constant and destructive strife… where some members are so toxic you have to stay away from them for your own sanity… yes, these do exist.

But there is a third group as well. I can tell you firsthand that by far I've seen more examples from this category than the other two combined.

These are families in which proportion and perspective have been lost. And some or all family members are suffering because of this loss.

We will continue building the *SOS* tools available to help you with the holidays in the next chapter. But I want to close this segment with a true story.

A long time ago two brothers had a falling out in their younger years. So great was the rift that the younger brother, who had wronged the elder, feared that if his older brother ever saw him again it would be the death of him, literally. He was convinced that his older brother wanted to kill him.

Later in life, the two brothers did meet.

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Not only was no one murdered, but in a powerful showing of love and forgiveness, the enmity from long ago was resolved. Healing of the relationship occurred.

You can read the story of these two brothers and the family tragedy made right in Genesis 25-33.

I can think of no better time to move on from the past and restore family relationships and heal old wounds than these two holidays.

So first, I encourage you to look within yourself. Make any necessary adjustments in your attitude.

Then consider the weight of *proportion* you're giving to a matter – and your *perspective* on the issue.

Who knows, you might just be the catalyst for growth and change in your family this Thanksgiving and Christmas.

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The Holidays and Pre-Suffering

Several years back a husband/father in his 30's came to see me one day in March for a consult. After the usual pleasantries I asked what I could help him with.

He said he needed some insights from me to help with getting through the upcoming holiday.

I can still remember the mental processes this started in me.

As I listened to him elaborate on his concerns I was having the following internal dialogue:

> *"(What holiday? The only thing on the horizon is Easter and I have never heard of Easter being an anxiety-ridden holiday for anyone. As a Christian I love Easter – it is one of our most cherished holidays. And while I know that isn't true for everyone, still I've never heard of families having knockdown – drag outs on Easter. This is a first!)"*

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My inner conversation continued:

> *"(Surely I'm missing something here. Or maybe I'm assuming something. While I guess there are families out there who hate Easter get-togethers, I've just never heard firsthand of this being a problem. This just seems odd. I'm gonna have to ask the obvious question.)"*

So without couching it in a leading-question way, I simply asked (all the while expecting to hear – "Easter of course… what did you think!"), *"Exactly which holiday are you concerned about?"*

To my surprise he said, *"Oh, I'm sorry. I should have said right away."* And then he told me.

Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving was eight-and-a-half months away from the time of our session.

That's 35 weeks.

245 days.

This brings us to the subject for this chapter.

If you want to thrive through this holiday season:

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Refuse to Pre-Suffer

Pre-suffering is a straight-ahead concept. No elaboration is needed on this term because it means just what it says: *pre-suffering = suffering ahead of time.*

There is no human alive whose existence would not be markedly improved if he or she would practice this one principle – *don't pre-suffer*.

We could be talking about next week's dental appointment, tomorrow's presentation at work, that blind date a friend has arranged for you for this Friday, or any other event in which it's easy to allow ourselves to pre-suffer.

But here we are applying the concept to holiday gatherings.

There are a number of problems with pre-suffering, but the most obvious is this – *it is unnecessary pain*.

Borrowed trouble.

Pre-suffering infects today with tomorrow's anxiety or dread.

It robs us of life in the only time in which it exists – *NOW*.

Let me say a specific word here to my fellow Christians. We are promised access to grace and strength for *today*.

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If we take on the dread of a day that lies 245 days… 35 weeks… out into the future – we're on our own. God will not join us in our neuroses.

Take a page from my client's book.

He was wise (if premature) to seek needed help in developing new strategies and skills for dealing with holiday family dynamics.

He was unwise in letting it cause him to *pre-suffer*.

It is more than possible to do the former without allowing yourself to experience the latter.

If the holiday family gatherings are something you dread, I suggest you take the path my client followed.

If you sense you need some further help with the holidays, find a book that speaks to your concerns or seek the help of a professional. There's still time.

But I would encourage you to refuse to pre-suffer. This does nothing to help you with that future day you're dreading right now.

It only robs you of the joy of today.

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PRE-SUFFERING INFECTS TODAY WITH TOMORROW'S ANXIETY OR DREAD, ROBBING US OF LIFE IN THE ONLY TIME IN WHICH IT EXISTS – *NOW.*

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Memories, Maps, and Misery

In 1985 I went behind the then-existent Iron Curtain to meet with persecuted spiritual and social leaders, and to do a bit of teaching.

As we journeyed through what was then Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, and Hungary in our Volkswagen Westfalia Vanagon, my two traveling companions and I soon discovered a valuable piece of information.

Maps made by the Soviet Union were all but worthless.

We traveled streets that did not exist on the maps… and could find no physical evidence of some roads that did.

Distance information was often useless.

A bad map may beat nothing. But not by much.

And whether it does at all is up for debate.

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Just as a map can plot geographic territories, it can also plot the *territories* of a family.

A map shows the relative positions of the parts of a territory and the relationships of the parts not only to each other, but to the whole as well.

Where there is conflict and tension in families, there is almost always a bad map involved.

Most commonly, it is an old map – often an inaccurate map – that plots the family of origin dynamics and the continuance of realities long gone.

Usually, this map is on full display in families experiencing holiday tensions.

Old maps show old realities and old perceptions. They may not even have accurately described the terrain *then*. They most certainly do not *now*.

But that does not prevent families from continuing to use them.

In fact, much holiday pain and frustration comes when someone metaphorically rolls out the old map and then proceeds to try to force the present *terrain* to fit that map, rather than creating a new map to fit the current terrain.

This reminds me of Christ's warning to not put new wine in old wineskins.

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It doesn't work.

The childhood family *clown* of 20 years ago is expected to don his greasepaint and get into role.

The *black sheep* endures a 15-year-old story iterated yet again by her father, causing her to feel the same humiliation and rage now as she did back then.

And now we're off and running!

Old maps can be hard to discard.

I've heard any number of clients testify to this.

> *"I even went in [to the family gathering] aware of our old habits and patterns, as you and I discussed. And still, before I knew it, I was playing out the old scripts, just like we talked about in session."*

One client said the above to me in her next session after she and her family had gone home for Thanksgiving.

Something primitive and automatic takes over, like some kind of psychological family thralldom.

Everyone plays their role. It's not just the parents. And it's not just the kids. It's a family dance.

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IT'S UNWISE TO TRY TO FORCE THE PRESENT FAMILY *TERRAIN* TO FIT AN OLD MAP, INSTEAD OF CREATING A NEW MAP TO FIT THE CURRENT TERRAIN.

IT'S LIKE THE WARNING NOT TO PUT NEW WINE IN OLD WINESKINS. IT DOESN'T WORK.

What to do?

First thing is to inform yourself with the insights we've talked about here. Understand the concept of family maps in general, and your family map in particular.

See if you can identify the relative positions of the parts of your family *territory* – and the relationship of the parts to each other as well as to the whole.

Take charge of your part of the map. Rewrite your section so that it more adequately describes the terrain as it is *now*.

(And face the fact that if little or no change in the map is needed, then you have not grown very much either as a person or as far as your family of origin is concerned.)

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Remember, you are only responsible for your part of the map… and enjoy the fact that with that responsibility comes the power to do something about it.

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What Lens Ya Shootin' With?

My family is blessed to live near the Smoky Mountains (or Smokey Mountains, if you're on the North Carolina side) and hiking the Smokies has long been a love of ours.

Those beautiful panoramas just beg to be photographed!

I couldn't begin to tell you how many pictures our family has taken of the Smokies over the years.

For some reason, thinking of those pictures gave me the idea for this sixth and final chapter on dealing with holiday stress and anxiety.

When preparing for those holiday family visits, I encourage you to shoot with a wide-angle lens.

Leave the zoom lens in the bag.

What do I mean?

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Just this. When you think of the holiday visits and the family dynamics that will come into play, what pictures or video clips begin to roll in your mind?

To *think* is to form pictures in your mind.

For example, If I tell you to think of a tree, you instantly see a picture of a tree in your mind. Even if you see the word *tree* spelled out in your mind, you still see pictures – you see a picture of a *t*, an *r*, an *e*, and another *e*.

You cannot think of anything without pictures (or video clips) appearing in your mind. Socrates taught us that.

So take great care in choosing the lens you use to shoot those pictures.

Which leads me again to reinforce the suggestion given earlier. Be sure you shoot those holiday mental pictures with a wide-angle lens, and not a zoom.

Why?

A couple of reasons.

For one, wide-angle lenses take in more of the panorama, more of the ***whole***.

(In fact, like our human eyes, a wide-angle lens allows us to have a field of vision that takes in nearly half of the 360˚ surrounding us. We therefore get more, much more in the shot.)

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Most anxiety around holiday family gatherings comes from using a mental zoom lens –

- you keep playing over and over in your mind what someone said at Christmas three years ago that hurt you
- you remember a certain characteristic behavior of this or that person that drives you nuts
- you dread seeing your rich cousins
- Dave and Mary's child makes you want to scream
- you're still focused on your map from childhood

When you use a zoom lens, you're limited as to what you can take in.

A wide-angle lets you shoot more of the whole.

Now let's consider the above scenarios from a wider angle.

Using the very same points, here's how a wide-angle lens will benefit you:

- *yes, I was hurt by what she said, but deep down I know she didn't* ***intend*** *to hurt me*
- *yes, it bugs me when he does that, but he has a lot of qualities as well… and no doubt in some ways I bug him*

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- *they're rich alright, but they are great people – I'm the one with the issue about it*

- *I'm giving a whole lot of emotional energy to that child*

- *what better time for a fresh look at things – a new map – than the holidays*

You see, a wide-angle lens lets you take in more of the whole. It gives you a fuller and more accurate context. And this is important because a lack of context almost always leads to imbalance and extremes.

Another reason to shoot your holiday mind photos with a wide-angle lens is that it allows for a deeper **level of focus** (called *depth of field* in photography) than a zoom lens.

This results in more of your mental *shot* being in focus.

As wonderful as it is in its proper usage, a zoom lens flattens perspective.

For *shooting* the holidays in your mind… that's not an asset.

As I said in the first chapter of this guide – *magnification distorts perspective.*

Whether the subject is literal photo shooting or the thought shots we hold in our mind, zooming distorts perspective.

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SHOOTING WITH A WIDE-ANGLE LENS (YOUR THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS) ALLOWS YOU TO TAKE IN MORE OF THE WHOLE PICTURE AND HAVE A BETTER FOCUS.

Back away a bit – broaden your perspective.

Take a sweeping view as opposed to honing in on a trouble spot. This perspective allows you to see things like:

1. Yes they, like me, aren't perfect. But there's a lot to love about my family.

2. The discomfort isn't only on my side. I'm sure there are ways in which I'm no piece of cake for them.

3. When I look deeper, there is so much more to this family than just the problem spots.

4. I wonder how things could change this year if I changed my attitude?

5. What if I took some time to see *her*, and not just my grievance against her?

When it comes to your family holiday *field of vision*, what lens are you shooting with in your mind?

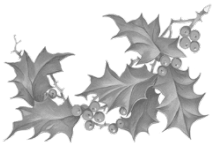
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Are you *zooming* in on unproductive and even petty particulars and thereby distorting the scene?

Shoot with a wide-angle lens.

It allows you to see more of the whole… and to keep that whole in better focus.

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Conclusion

Family get-togethers around the holidays are harrowing for many people.

While you have no power to change anyone else, you have all the power necessary to make a change in *you*.

Understanding that the holidays have a way of ***magnifying*** family realities arms you with wisdom going into the holidays.

It allows you to understand why you are feeling what you're feeling.

If we keep ***proportion*** in mind we can resist allowing things to become overblown. And we'll be aware of it when we fail to do so.

Proportion helps us keep emotionally-charged issues in balance.

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Perspective relates to the science of *sight*.

Perspective teaches us that we ***feel*** *the way we do about the holidays (and the people we're going to spend them with) because of how we* ***see*** *them*.

Said another way, if you want to change the way you feel about holiday family gatherings, change the way you look at them.

You realize now that ***pre-suffering*** is senseless pain.

It's self-inflicted foolishness.

In fact, I can think of only one legitimate reason to choose to pre-suffer –

> If you simply find life too easy, if you find that life does not present you with enough challenge, then you might want to intentionally choose to pre-suffer to bring balance to your existence.

For the rest of us however, it is a behavior we'd be wise to avoid.

Remember that journeying through your family travels is the same as taking a long road trip.

Both require accurate and up-to-date ***maps***.

Distorted memories and unreliable maps lead to misery.

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Keep your personal psychology up to date!

The lens you use to shoot your mental pictures with will determine the attributes of your photos (thoughts).

It's a good idea to use a ***wide-angle lens***. This will allow you to take in more of the whole. It combats relational myopia.

Also, a wide-angle lens is useful because it results in more of your mental *shot* being in focus, giving a more accurate representation of reality.

Add these six tools to your life-skills toolbox and you will get a new lease on holiday family gatherings:

1. The principle of magnification
2. Magnification and proportion
3. Magnification and perspective
4. The holidays and pre-suffering
5. Memories, maps, and misery
6. What lens ya shootin' with?

As I said earlier, while you cannot change others, you *can* change you.

And who knows? This may lead to a change in the attitudes and experiences of other members of your family as well!

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Happy Thanksgiving to you and your family… and Merry Christmas!



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