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FROM THE HEART Column

Giving Up Ghosts of Christmas Past

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The busy, bustling holidays are over and our lives are beginning to return to business as usual. For most, the savoring of precious holiday celebrations with family and friends will linger well into the New Year. For others, the holiday experience with family not only lingers but requires some recovery and regrouping.

When we think of the holidays, we tend to envision and anticipate traditional Norman Rockwell family gatherings where everyone is full of love, peace, and good cheer. The famous Rockwell painting that often comes to mind depicts a happy family gathered around the holiday table. Father watches admiringly as mother brings the roasted turkey to an appreciative, smiling family. While Mr. Rockwell's painting certainly captures the essence of many gatherings, for some families the holiday table often looks quite different. In contrast, it may serve as a backdrop for family drama and chaos, reopening old wounds and bringing out the worst in family relationships.

Problematic family members rarely behave differently during the holidays. And for those wanting to break free from the usual dysfunctional family dance, maneuvering holiday celebrations can be a painful exercise. Anyone daring to alter or challenge unhealthy behavior may find themselves characterized as a problem. Hurting families do not always respond kindly to renegades rocking the boat or in some cases, a sinking ship.

If your holiday experience with family was not what you bargained for, it's not too early to consider ways to alter the script for the next holiday season. Here are some ways to prepare:

- Adjust your expectations. Holiday celebrations often play out the same old predictable family script and without major change, history tends to repeat itself.
- Decide in advance what your boundaries will be with difficult family members and begin establishing them now. You have the right to live your life in a way that is healthy for you without waiting on someone else to act healthy, get help or admit there is a problem.
- Give yourself permission to avoid family holiday functions that typically leave you hurt, angry, or emotionally drained. If you attend an event, bring a supportive friend and be ready to leave if a family member's behavior becomes unacceptable.
- Start your own new holiday traditions with supportive family and friends. Rather than continue inflexible, unpleasant traditions, begin new ones that celebrate life and your willingness to move forward.

In an imperfect world, there are no perfect families. But when Mr. Rockwell created his famous painting, he knew that America needed a vision of the ideal—a snapshot of what we are shooting for. After all, if we don't know where we are going, it's hard to get there.

And if our family is less than perfect, it does not have to control our holiday experience. We can always choose to bring something different to the table—even if not all family members will consider it palatable.