



Why Christmas Stinks Sometimes

By Michael Monroe

It was the third day in a row, or maybe the fourth. I don't exactly recall. I do, however, vividly remember coming home from work and being met by my normally patient and long-suffering wife declaring in an overly frustrated tone "Here, you deal with him. I'm done!"

The kids were home for Christmas break and one son in particular was being more than a handful. This was uncharacteristic for him. The first day we thought it was simply childhood Christmas excitement. By the second day, we were beginning to lose our patience. When I arrived home this day my wife was at her wits' end. Nagging, whining, crying, bug-

ging siblings, arguing, you name it. But why? Didn't he know Christmas was almost here? Had he forgotten that Santa was "making his list and checking it twice?" Wasn't he aware of how much mom and dad had to do in order to get ready for Christmas? For so many reasons, now was not the time for him to be acting this way.

What I did next doesn't come naturally to me. Try as I might to "practice what I preach," I admit that my default reaction in situations like this is to "lay down the law." But something told me that there was much, much more going on than simply bad behavior. Call it what you will, I like to think of it as my

God-given "adoptive dad instinct." So I said to my son, "Let's go for a walk." And after a little cajoling, he agreed and off we went.

We walked for a while engaged in nothing but small talk. Eventually I changed the subject. "So what's going on?" I asked.

"Nothing," he answered.

"Of course," I thought sarcastically to myself. But I persisted.

"Mom says you've really been acting up the last few days," I continued. He nodded in agreement. "That's not really like you. Is

something wrong? Are you worried about something? Maybe upset about something?"

This time he shrugged his shoulders and just kinda hung his head and shook it side to side, ever so slightly. I'd seen that look before. It told me I was on the right track. And then he gave it away.

"Do I have to tell you?" he asked. This is the tell-tale question he typically asks when he has something he needs to talk about, but is a little afraid to bring it up. More often than not the subject is adoption-related. So I gave him the response I typically give when he asks me this question. "Of course you don't have to, but you know I always want to hear what you are thinking — no matter what it is."

And then he practically blurted it out. "Dad, Christmas just stinks!" he exclaimed. "I know I am supposed to love it and be having fun and all, but I just hate it. I really do."

It instantly occurred to me that somehow I managed to have the only elementary school-aged child in all of America who actually hates Christmas. But I quickly asked the obvious question, "Why?"

"Because it makes me really sad," he said. "It makes me think about my birth mom and my birth family. I wonder what they are doing. Do you think they think about me?"

"I bet they do," I replied. "No... I am sure they do. And did you know something else? You're not the only kid that thinks Christmas stinks because of that very same reason."

"I'm not?" he said, finally slowing down to look directly at me.

I reached for his hand and we continued. "No. You know Ms. Melanie, the woman who was adopted when she was a little girl?" I asked.

"Yeh," he replied.

"She's told me a million times that special occasions, like Christmas, birthdays, even Mother's Day and Father's Day, can be really difficult for her. She even has a special name

for those times that make her kinda sad and make her think of her birth parents and her birth family. She calls them 'trigger moments.' This happens to a lot of people who were adopted, and not just when they are kids. She says that even though she is an adult now, it still happens to her sometimes," I explained.

I've always heard the expression "the weight of the world being lifted off of your shoul-

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ders," but I don't think I'd ever witnessed it happen until this moment. It was as though my son realized in an instant that everything he had been feeling and thinking was not only "OK," it was also real and quite normal. And the fact that I was understanding, even if it could not fully understand, that was all he seemed to need.

Our walk lasted more than an hour as we continued talking about what he had been feeling and processing during the past several days. We talked about how it was "OK" to feel these things, but it wasn't "OK" to act the way he had been acting. Instead, he needed to find a way to talk with mom or me about it. As important, I assured him we would do a better job of being available for him, especially during times like these.

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Amidst all of the tinsel and lights, and despite the excitement of being out of school and the anticipation of the gifts and fun of Christmas day, the reality is my kids — not unlike other kids who were adopted — still have profound losses that cannot be erased and must not be ignored. And sometimes, even against their own wishes, the realities of their past and

all they have lost come crashing in. Even at happy times like Christmas.

In the face of all this, my job — whether at Christmas, on birthdays, on Father's Day or whenever — is to always be available for my kids. To be open and willing to listen and talk, and allow all of who they are to become part of our holidays and special occasions. As we do this, I realize more and more that rather than taking away from these happy times, embracing them and all of their past allows them to be more fully present — and allows us, as a family, to be more connected as we move forward.

After learning from my son why Christmas stinks sometimes, I no longer look at Christmas quite the same as I once did. But of course I wouldn't have it any other way.

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