What Does Christmas Hold for the Ill Body?

To be sick at Christmas is a bummer. Sick with COVID would be worse.

January 24, 2022 By Adam Hayden

To be chronically ill at Christmas carries several more considerations like continuous glucose monitoring or crutches and canes.

And to be terminally ill, or ill with an incurable and life-limiting diagnosis, “casts all social interactions in the shadow of illness,” Havi Carel wrote.

Aging is another category we might reflect on, and aging, especially if aging alone, even if by choice, I would think is distinctly challenging.

Some of you reading may be widowed, and the loss of a loved one opens a gulf that no vessel can navigate without having been through it. Our care partners (caregivers) are here, too, and they are burdened with the weight of illness that is a yoke not often shared.

What acute illness, chronic illness, caregiving, and grief, share in common is an embodied distress. A distress that is something greater than the sum of its symptoms. The description of embodied distress is not fully exhausted by the description of events happening. It is an emergent thing. Like the neurons and glial cells in my brain give me consciousness, but those individual cells aren’t conscious themselves in the same way that I am.

Emergent.

Distress is like that.

Embodied.

A description not fully exhausted by the way things are. We feel it. It hits differently than big meetings with the boss or preparing dinner for a visit from the in-laws. It’s not, “I’m stressed out today”; instead, it’s, “My heart is racing, I’m sweating, and short of breath.” The distress I’m trying to get onto is that sort of thing; that sort of embodied thing. Something visceral that includes those symptoms but isn’t merely a list of the individual issues, it’s the greater state that arises from all of those particulars taken together.

Illness, stress, burden, and burnout are states of an ill body, and I think each of these are with us always, in different degrees, each the same kind of thing, if that makes sense. The same sorts of things, kinds of things, that's what we share, and only by the degree of intensity of presentation do we find the arbitrary line that we've drawn between the sick and the well. While maybe my body is sick in a technical sense because it can be viewed under a microscope, in an MRI machine, genetically, and given a diagnosis. The confluence of the outcomes of those studies produce a pathology, a discrete state defined by certain variables, that is sickness, but states of an ill body are not unique to sick people! Distress is a feature of the ill body, and after two years of chronic stress exposure during a pandemic entering its third year, I suspect that many of our bodies are in this ill state.

I want to ask, What Does Christmas Hold for the Ill Body?

It's an embodied thing, too: Christmas. Smells of candies and coffee cake. Crinkling paper and secret Santa. Hugs with masks and "What's your vaccination status?" We are buoyed by our family and lifted by our friends on FaceTime or face-to-face.

We forget ourselves for a moment suspended in time in a snow globe secluded from a harsh world, and we celebrate together with family, biological or chosen. Some rejoice in the birth of their Lord and others celebrate a reason to rest.

What does Christmas hold for the ill body? Affirmation you are loved, a warm blanket, a text from a friend. A day in the year that everyone feels something different, but everyone feels. An embodied thing. An emergent thing. That is Christmas, and my ill body gets a reprieve from the demands of regular life.

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