

Families That Thrive

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

Balance and the Blues

The approach of Christmas and winter break from school gives me the occasion to reflect on the blues. Unfortunately, I am not writing about the kind of blues that I like listening to: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, and Billie Holiday. Singing the blues is different from being blue. I'm talking about being blue.

Sometimes being blue can give way to depression, and depression is difficult to crawl out of. In my office at the university, I have several pictures on the wall. One is of Winston Churchill. He suffered with severe depression. Sometimes, he just plain couldn't see out. Too often, he felt just awful.

Now that I serve in a university, what with the approach of Christmas and winter break, I am seeing a lot of people who are beginning to struggle with the blues. During Thanksgiving break, I noticed that I was blue. When I reflected on why that was, I learned something about myself: I need a sufficient amount of structure in my life. I can be a fairly spontaneous person. That's a good thing, as long as I don't let my spontaneity gene infiltrate the control center of my mind and take charge. One of the things that I like about the university is that I have lots of structure. For me, the structure works. It provides just the right kind of order that I need to succeed as a human being.

Then along came the holidays. Don't get me wrong; I love the holidays. I look forward to them just as much as anyone else. A part of my problem with the past holiday was that I had too much I wanted to catch up on. In retrospect, there was no way I was going to accomplish everything on my list, but that didn't keep me from trying! A part of my problem was that I tried to take on too much. Another part was that I didn't have enough structure in which to operate.

There's also the issue of rest. I would probably have been better off if I had spent more time doing nothing! All of us need sufficient rest. I have become especially aware of this teaching in a university. As the semester wears on, the students are more and more tired. Many of the students who went home for Thanksgiving just slept. They needed it, and I am thrilled that they had the opportunity. Every one of us needs sufficient rest for the refreshment of the soul!

This brings us back to the issue of balance. I think that when it comes to the blues, an inadequate balance between structure and spontaneity is partly responsible. In retrospect, I realize that I had the blues because too much structure disappeared from my life during the holidays. One of the best things we can do for our young people is to help them discover the right balance between rest and structure—a balance that works for them.

For better, for worse, I like to be productive. There are important things I want to accomplish. I need a certain amount of structure if I am to get things done. I need a plan, and I need a schedule. I don't have to be enslaved to it, but structure helps guide me.

I'm not suggesting that we reduce our lives to mere structure or that we allow structure to be the all-controlling factor that drives us. If we become slaves of structure, we run the risk of becoming depressed for want of freedom. We need room to breathe! And we need time just to reflect. Nor am I suggesting that we stress out over the problem

of finding balance. I am simply learning that if I become too passive—if I become a couch potato—I risk contracting a bad case of the blues. I'd hate to see us blue during Christmas. I'd hate for us to fail to celebrate the birth of our Lord. I'd rather we thrive together.