



MY WEEK

Alvin Hall



Think outside the box to make it a better Christmas

My grandmother rarely talked about the past. When asked about it, especially her own past, she would always say, “Why are you so concerned about what happened yesterday? Focus on the future because that’s where you can make changes, where you can make your life better.” My grandmother and my parents strongly believed that the only parts of the past that any of us should carry forward are the insights and wisdom experience imparts.

Like everyone, I know this coming Christmas will be different. I am not allowing myself to think about what would have been a tightly packed schedule of wondrous pre-Christmas parties. Only on really cold days have I thought about the holiday season vacation I usually spend in sunny Barbados relaxing and enjoying the hospitality and camaraderie of long-time friends. Rather than wasting time being

nostalgic with yearning, bored with repetition, or even annoyed at the inconvenience, I decided to channel my grandmother’s advice. I am using the insights and wisdom my past experiences have given me to think outside the proverbial and traditional beribboned box and find activities that will make this different Christmas better.

I relish the theatre. I honestly miss the revelation, discovery and thrill that comes with being in the audience. My solution: I’m reading plays – long-time favourites and new ones I don’t know much about. I started all over the place: Shakespeare (of course), Eugene O’Neill, Sondheim, Caryl Churchill, Lin-Manuel Miranda. But recently I decided to focus on one playwright at a time. This approach has given me many epiphanies. Suddenly I understand a classic line from a play, by Tom Stoppard or Tennessee Williams, for example, in a fuller, deeper, often more nuanced manner. And the way I see the play in my imagination has been, pun intended, eye-opening and expanding.

I delight in delicious food, and a good cocktail too. I want to avoid repeating familiar dishes every week. My solution: I’ve begun expanding my repertoire by going through cookbooks during breaks in my working-from-home routine and at

night when I get into bed. I’m rather besotted with two cookbooks and one new appliance. *Genius Recipes* by Kristen Miglore and *Simple* by Yotam Ottolenghi have diversified and improved the pleasures of making and eating my daily meal. And my new air fryer, the only lockdown gift and the first new appliance I’ve bought in more than a decade, has made me want to experiment in new ways. It reminds me of the Christmas when my parents bought me a simple chemistry set. This year my experimental focus will be on the Christmas meal.

Like everyone, I have been texting and writing emails more during this period. My solution: I’ve decided to go forward by being retro. In my travels, I accumulated lots of postcards. Starting with my Christmas card list and continuing throughout 2021, I have begun writing at least two cards every day. I let the image on the postcard inspire me about the recipient and the content. I find that just thinking about what amusing seasonal quip or information I might squeeze onto a postcard in small print is an exercise that often brings a smile to my day and, I hope, to the recipients as well.

The key has been to push myself, to be open to changing my approach. My mantra is Frank Figgers’ quote that ends my podcast series, *Driving the Green Book*: “I’m going to do what I can, with what I have, where I am in order to make a better life.”

For this holiday season, my immediate goal is to just make this a better Christmas.

A NEW BEGINNING

These days the most common refrain among people I know is: “I didn’t know how much stress the election was causing in my mind and body until it was over.” We had all made contributions to or volunteered for campaigns. We had worried that too many Americans would not be horrified enough by the last four years to do the right thing, if not morally at least for the common good. We worried people would use the performance of their stock market portfolios as an excuse to stay the course, putting money above morality. The final tally showed how many people, knowingly or unknowingly, were willing to be complicit, willing to let fear overwhelm reason, willing not just to avert their eyes but to embrace deliberate, calculated falsehoods.

As an avid reader, contemporary experiences often bring to mind passages from the literary world. It could be Shakespeare or, as often happens for me, writers from the American South, especially those who have dealt with peculiar moral conflicts. Recent events have me dwelling on a quote from a Tennessee Williams play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: *What’s that smell in this room? Didn’t you notice it, Brick? Didn’t you notice a powerful and obnoxious odor of mendacity in this room? There ain’t nothin’ more powerful than the odor of mendacity. You can smell it. It smells like death.*

This line is delivered by a character named Big Daddy, played memorably by Burl Ives in the film that also starred Paul Newman and Elizabeth Taylor. It only takes a few word substitutions to understand why so many Americans, like myself, were worried about the election. As each day passes since 3 November, we’re breathing, thankfully, with a little more ease and hope.