



This was the title of a book written 20 years ago. It was turned into a musical revue.



Reflections of a River Rat: My Christmas survival guide: Keep it light, keep it joyous

I might be the Christmas dinosaur. I still write a holiday letter, still prefer religious carols over wailing Kelly Clarkson numbers, and never shop before we make cold turkey sandwiches out of the Thanksgiving leftovers.

That doesn't mean everybody should adopt my take on the holidays. But I have learned to spot the traps to emphasize Silent Nights over humbug behavior. It has taken several years of observation and training at the hand of my spouse, but I have endured my share of awkward holiday moments. I have made progress faster than Tiny Tim can blurt out, "God bless us, everyone."

With a few shopping days left until Christmas and your family gathering looming, perhaps it's time to share some Christmas/holiday insight, a holiday survival guide:

24/7 MUSIC



John Tesh seems to read inane advice on the air.



Delilah

I have two presets on the car radio playing holiday tunes. When John Tesh launches into a brainless spiel, I flip the channel. If Tesh were to make commercials, he would usurp Captain Obvious.

A quick check of Tesh's website revealed the depth of his insight.

- *"How looking sideways keeps you alert on the road."*
Hmm, you mean look both ways? I learned that at 16 during driver's ed with Ray Kondrat.
- *"Why your 'cuddle hormone' disappears 3 years into a relationship."* Yeah, it's called marriage. Children, mortgage, school concerts. Save the romance for those scripted Hallmark Christmas movies that all seem to carry the same plot – Jilted NYC ad exec/smalltown girl returns home to meet boy/surprisingly single, handsome, mid-30s contractor. They'll endure a conflict or two but will be engaged by Christmas Eve as a light snow falls. Don't make cracks or ask to turn to the hockey game. It will irk your sisters or spouse.

Once I have flipped to the competing station, I remain there until Delilah breaks into the music with her relationship advice and song dedications for love affairs gone wrong. When that unfolds, I flip back to the Tesh channel, hoping he is off air.

KEEPING CHRIST IN CHRISTMAS

Much ado about nothing. The term remains Merry Christmas, the reason for the season. There's nothing wrong with Happy Holidays too – my Jewish neighbors have always appreciated that. A little respect and tolerance go a long way.



The holiday snapshot gone wrong. Parents good intentions ended badly.

THE HOLIDAY LETTER

Notice the subtitle? That's because I just received a lovely card from the Tanzman clan ahead of this week's Hanukkah celebration. They send one every year at Christmas. Their gesture recognizes Christmas and Hanukkah. I'll even throw in a Feliz Navidad. Inclusion folks.

Holiday letters may be following the velociraptor into extinction, unless you're a Jurassic Park fan, but I still write one. A lot of folks have switched to the family collage on a postcard, figuring their news already has surfaced on Facebook or Instagram. But I am supposed to be good at this writing thing. A few words of caution:

- Holiday puns do not sleigh me.

- Brief and positive beats lengthy and negative. A friend used to send me a four-page missive with every emotion and malady for each month of the year. Recount the touchdowns, not the play-by-play.
- Two don'ts (bragging and minutiae) and three do's (pictures, pictures, pictures).



An New Zealand photographer aimed for humor but ended with a demeaning, sexist photo.

- The humorous and sarcastic are the best. I just uncovered our letter from 1994 when my son Liam, then 3 years old, quoted Yul Brynner from "The King and I." Unhappy with directions at the dinner table, he told his mother: "You are difficult woman!"
Lastly, don't wear out the exclamation mark on your keyboard!!!

POLITICS

I learned this one from my brother, Fran, who chauffeurs travelers in his Florida retirement. Whenever driving, he talks about local history, weather, hometowns, perhaps even the accomplishments of his former students.

In case a passenger wanders into something about Biden's memory lapses or Trump's trading cards, he switches topics.

Same goes around the holidays. Don't answer directly. You can always discuss the upcoming bowl games or ask about your favorite childhood recollections of Christmas.

Rising early helps too. Switch the TV from the right-wing conservative station to something more generic like the TODAY show.

CHRISTMAS DINNER

Covid remains a hot issue, especially among the deniers. My cousin Rosemary hosts several family members each year. Last year, she insisted her unvaccinated siblings take a Covid test if they wanted to attend. Although they were all vaccinated, a brother still contracted Covid.

She would make a great referee. Regardless of the complaining, she stuck by her rule.

Similarly, we attended a summer wedding where the bride's godparents didn't show because she insisted on vaccinations. The family couldn't connect at Thanksgiving for the same reason.

Regardless of your stance on Covid, an invitation is a gift. You don't get to set the conditions.

I could keep going ... the debate over the best Christmas movie, protocols for estranged family members, cheating at a board game, ignoring a wish list.

Remember during the Twelve Days of Christmas, it's about celebrating the birth of Christ. Keep it joyous.

Morristown native Jim Holleran is a retired teacher and sports editor from Rochester. Reach him at jimholleran29@gmail.com or view past columns under "Reflections of River Rat" at <https://hollerangetsitwrite.com/blog/>