

So, I want to talk today a little bit about, um, a subject that's been written about probably for a hundred years, which is the commercialization of Christmas. And my slant on it is going to be to focus on the nature of the suffering and what I see in my clinical practice as the depression that often surrounds this holiday. And, of course, you know, my caseload explodes around Christmas, and the melancholy and sense of, uh, sadness or grief or disappointment and despair is amplified in much of my clinical work. So, I've thought a lot about it, and I'd like to talk about some of my insights, uh, into the causes of today. And I want to preface it by saying that this is a very complicated subject, if you were to just look at it socially and culturally. Because, for instance, there are many Jews that feel out of it, displaced, they don't belong. Muslims, other faiths, and people that don't buy into the Christian myth and story can feel like they don't belong, and that could be accompanied by melancholy or sadness or grief or anything like that. So, that's a complex situation. Many people would say that's not their issue at all. It's not a big deal. Some people in other faiths are even relieved around Christmas because they don't feel like they belong in the story, but it frees them of a certain sense of responsibility. And so, I'm not saying that this is cut and dried or it's a black and white issue of being Christian or not. But, having said that, there is an upsurge of depression around Christmas. And, of course, it has to be related to the commercialization of Christmas, which has been talked about for forever, in which, you know, the capitalist marketplace goes into a frenzy around this time of year, bombarding us with, um, advertising and pushing Christmas, uh, cheer as a way to sell commodities. So, our appetites, our consumer appetites, are continually stimulated, and the promise of their satisfaction dangled in front of us everywhere we look. And, of course, this, these messages are subtle, they're corrupt, they're cynical. But they're there, and it's hard to be completely immune to them. You know, Saturday Night Live in 2013 did a great skit, um, featuring a, a faux commercial for KTEL Records promoting an album called Dysfunctional Family Christmas, on which you could find hits like, uh, Can't You Let It Drop It's Christmas? Or, uh, I've got my drinking under control for the holidays? Or, uh, one I like, which is a song, Let's Pretend We Like Each Other. So, it's something we have to endure, and some of us do it better than others. But on a psychological level, I think the reason that Christmas evokes depression is often that it rekindles childhood trauma. The child inside the adult suffers at Christmas, and the suffering is expressed in adult life as a kind of depression. Now, the heart of the issue is that, is this, that for most people growing up with the tradition of Christmas, the giving and receiving of presents is emotionally loaded and problematic. On a symbolic level, not to seem too reductionistic, which this will probably seem to some of you, but on an emotional symbolic level, presents equal love. They represent the ways that one is special or, unfortunately, not, to one's parents. So, expectations are raised to impossible heights by our culture, and the presents under the tree offer a tantalizing promise of what of happiness. The holiday, in other words, tells us, I think, that it's acceptable to imagine gratifying our wildest desires. The result being that the degree to which one's desires are met readily becomes a measure of how much we're loved and how deserving we are of love. It, it's a fact of human life, and especially of childhood life, that our most extreme longings for perfect love and understanding are very often, wait for it, not met. And so, when this conflict between our, what shrinks would call our wishes, and reality, when this conflict surfaces in a dramatic way around Christmas, the resulting disappointment becomes fuel for the development, um, and exaggeration of certain painful beliefs, like the depressing belief that one is not special or not as special as someone else, as a sibling or a

peer. See, our culture invites us to let ourselves experience, I think, certain forbidden wishes for perfect love and to frustrate them on the shores of reality. This becomes the core of a kind of grim and depressing story about one's self-worth. It's a story sometimes of deprivation, of loss, of neglect, or even of, uh, rejection. It's a story of sibling rivalry and later of keeping up with the Joneses in terms of material consumption. And when maternal, when not maternal, when material gifts are equated symbolically with love, then such comparisons often evoke feelings of envy and worthlessness. Even the Christian story of the birth of Jesus is, is only that, there is only one special child who gets and has everything. Now, you know, I mean, it can be alienating for lots of reasons for lots of people. And I don't mean that to reduce this to on parade and say that this is the core of everybody's relation to Christmas. Because many people can handle it okay, and some people even can enjoy it. But there's enough undercurrent, I think, of pressure and disappointment and cynicism and grief that emerges at least in the patients I see that I think this is really worth, uh, calling out.