

“WHICH CHRISTMAS DON’T YOU CELEBRATE?”
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Those of you who spend much time on the computer know what it means to “Google” someone or something. Created in a garage by two guys from Stanford University, Google has become the most popular of the Internet search engines – those programs that collect information and provide a list of resources on most anything or anyone. Useful as Google is for finding that out-of-print book about the mating habits of the Shakers, or, say, the various kinds of fruit Carmen Miranda sported on her shapely head, it’s also interesting to see what comes up when one Googles the big stuff.

Big stuff like Christmas. As I write these words, Google features no fewer than 451 million references to Christmas. There’s Christmas earrings, Christmas games, Christmas songs, Christmas recipes, puzzles and trivia games. And even Christmas underwear. There’s northpole.com, santas.net, happychristmas.com and even a christmascookies.com. There’s Christmas in Ireland (children use shoeboxes, not stockings by the fireplace), and Christmas in New Zealand (the Old Guy has to work in the summer heat, thus is left a cold beer, not hot cocoa.) What a total wonder, all this Christmas information that is ours simply by bringing home a box full of circuitry and hooking it up to the “Information Highway”! Amazing.

But all is not milk and cookies out there in cyberspace. Mixed in with all the yuletide cheer are those websites for anyone who flat-out hates this season. And there lurks at least one site that is dedicated to smearing all things Christmas. Brace yourself if you decide to visit...how shall I put this delicately...f _ _ _christmas.org. It’s a political rant that winds up condemning the holiday as totally artificial, a mishmash of cultures, myths and schlock. The best *repeatable* line to be found there is: “Modern American Christmas makes Michael Jackson

look positively organic.” I’ll risk this observation: the author is not a fan of Christmas.

But not so fast, I thought after reading that expletive-laced tirade. Which Christmas don’t you believe in, Mr. Grinch? Sure, the crusty author was, to my mind, making some very good points, but is there really only *one* Christmas – that behemoth spending spree that we rail against, even as we shop and drop? Is it just a time for arguing over crèches on courthouse lawns and wondering if it’s still politically correct to return the Salvation Army’s bell ringer’s “Merry Christmas?” Or is it a chance to renew that ongoing quarrel with the most dysfunctional member of our most dysfunctional family? And, if this is Christmas, what sane person would celebrate such a hollow and muddled holiday?

But what about the *real* Christmas, you say, the peace and goodwill and such? Isn’t the *original* Christmas still worth celebrating? Folks, spend more than an hour or so looking at the various traditions that have wrapped themselves around Christmas, and your head will spin like a Hanukkah dreidle! There are the Pagan influences overlaid by the early Christian mission to establish Jesus’ divinity, overlaid by two thousand years worth of practice and history and add-on customs in dozens of cultures. And then there are the North American traditions that have been created to combine the Santa Claus of a capitalist economy with the Jesus of a miracle-based faith. Indeed, back to our foul-mouthed author of the anti-Christmas website, perhaps he can be cut some slack if he has had enough of the holiday season!

But, I ask again, is this crass and pious Christmas the only one? As we inch closer to December 25th, I’d like to spend a few minutes with you in reflection on the many American Christmases that are underway. Some are real; others are fantasy. Some are life-giving; others set us up for bitter disappointment. My guiding question here is simple. When someone tells me she doesn’t believe in God, it’s fair to ask which God she’s talking about. When someone asks me if I

believe in Jesus, I want to know which Jesus he's referring to. So, taking the liberty of assuming that there is room in your head and heart for at least *some* kind of Christmas, tell me, which Christmas don't you celebrate?

What about Idealized Christmas – the one with the quaint Currier and Ives images of one-horse open sleighs, storybook children that crave sugar plums and silly songs about mommy's infidelity with Santa underneath the Christmas tree? Are we talking about the Christmas that comes wrapped in that strange nostalgia for a better age – a time past, when we were younger and things were simpler? When we really used the fabled fireplaces of song for our heat? When some fruit, a candy cane and a single gift were enough for the children? When everybody got together and still got along?

I'm of a certain age when there are fewer days ahead of me than behind. And in the face of this age, it can be mighty tempting to conjure up a Christmas from my past that was full of meaning and devoid of artifice – a holiday season where the treetops really did glisten, and the children really did listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow. But Bing Crosby be damned, Christmastime is also a cross-section of our lives, then as well as now. Sure, we miss family and loved ones, and it's certainly possible that life, and therefore, Christmas, was richer back then. But unless you were raised by Dr. Spock or June and Ward Cleaver, I'm willing to bet the proverbial ranch that those days were not without hardship or trouble or conflict. And I'll make that bet because, year-round, people are people and life is life.

So, which Christmas *don't* you celebrate? I'm hoping it's the one from the past that you're tempted to cling to, sapping the joy and potential from this one. Don't get me wrong, I'm hoping that everyone here has some good holiday memories, recollections to wrap around them like a warm and familiar family quilt. But we hold no power over time. We cannot live in Christmas Past. The only Christmas we have right now is *this* one. What will we do with it?

What about Commercial Christmas? Do you believe in the one that comes in luxury cars wrapped with pretty bows, where a diamond is the only way to show her the depth of your love and if you haven't yet managed to find a PLAYSTATION3 you're a spectacular failure as a parent?

Perhaps no version of Christmas is more maligned, yet more true to our national identity than this one. Let's be real here. It's not an easy thing to be a conscientious consumer the *rest* of the year, but the pressure to spend impulsively is multiplied many times over come Christmas. Our relative privilege amongst the world's peoples gives us more purchase power than any civilization in history. That's the good news, at least for us. But this wealth (not coincidentally) comes at a time when cheap labor abounds throughout most of Asia and parts of Africa, giving our dollars even more clout and possibilities. Given this great capacity to consume, it's left to you and me to decide how much is enough. And that responsibility is exposed, in spades, come Christmas.

I'm in no position to follow this haughty lesson in economics and ethics with some guilt trip about how much is enough: I, too, use my dollars in ways that betray the very values I espouse. But our shared imperfections are no cover so long as we claim to care about others. We say we do not take lightly the impact we make upon other human lives and environmental health. Thus Consumer Christmas confronts us all. And Consumer Christmas is instructive, if only because it lifts our chin and opens our eyes to the global reality that, small as it may be, we have a say in what kind of world this is.

Permit me one more point about Consumer Christmas. For the millions at home and worldwide who are affected by American advertising, yet cannot afford the cars and diamonds and video games, Consumer Christmas is sheer mockery. A pipe dream. A visual reminder – in high-definition – of who's on top and who's on the bottom.

It was true when Kristoffer Janson (Nora's first minister) said it in 1892, and it's true in 2006: in a capitalist economy our economic well-being is tied to our worth in the labor market. It's true for professional athletes, social workers and immigrant day laborers. Thus, in such a system, chronic poverty is often a sign that what one brings to the market isn't worth much. The inability to amass enough *capital* to afford the symbols of "success" says that something must be wrong with us, thus the signs of wealth – the designer clothes and brand name sneakers – are reserved for those who are found to be valuable, worthwhile, productive. So, to be poor is, in part, to be denied full human status. And just as surely as Hurricane Katrina unmasked the poor of New Orleans, Consumer Christmas exposes yearly a similar inequality on a national and global scale. That's nothing to celebrate.

Next up, what about Theological Christmas? What about the biblical account of the star that stays in one place so three men can find the right stable in the right village? What about the virgin birth? The Son of David, come to this earthly plane so that we might be redeemed from the seed of Adam?

"Jesus is the Reason for the Season!" proclaims a church sign, beckoning us to remember that Christmas, whatever else it may be, is the second holiest day of the Christian calendar. Fair enough, but we would ask, as religious liberals have been asking for centuries, how reliable is the Bible in general and the Gospels in particular? The open modern mind can't help but wonder about a woman who gives birth, yet remains a virgin. That mind can't help but wonder how, according to the timeline given in the Gospels, Herod could be dead and in pursuit of Joseph and Mary at the same time? Using that same timeline, moderns are hard-pressed to understand how Jesus would have to have been around ten years old when he was born. And the modern brain is taxed indeed to understand how an ordinary child of an otherwise ordinary observant Jewish couple gets promoted to the second person of the equally suspect doctrine of the Trinity. Hmmm...

On the other hand, only the hardest among us would discount the tender details various writers of the Gospels add to the birth narrative, and no ancient scribe should be criticized for tying the Nativity to both Pagan and Jewish holy days. It was a legitimate practice of the day. But lovely and comforting as the story may be, the fact remains that the Bible is to history what “Mother Goose” is to parenting. Theological Christmas, in order to be celebrated in its popular form, requires us to trade our brains for faith.

Then too, Theological Christmas has a reach far beyond its obvious assaults on reason. Take some time to read the lyrics of some songs, hymns or carols. I might be crazy here, but of all the Christmas themes we might sing about, how is it that the Santa of our music seems a bit like the God of our Bible, fickle and firm? Consider the Calvinistic influence of a Santa that makes a list in order to keep track of who’s been naughty and who’s been good, rewarding only those who conform. Consider my admittedly borderline-Marxist reading of a physically repulsive reindeer that evolves from outcast to hero once he serves a purpose that the tribe values. (I’ve always wondered why Santa didn’t intervene in what seems to me a clear case of bullying...) And, turning from folk music to the very real world of high-church liturgy, what are we to make of theology that once led to the castration of young boys in order to help them reach certain notes of the Christmas mass? Theological Christmas is all over our holiday music.

Perhaps I’m overreaching a bit, but the point remains that the beauty of the Bethlehem story comes polluted by some very shoddy theology – theology that tries to hammer mythical literature into literal truth. Theological Christmas reeks of uninformed religious thinking that co-opts the Nativity story as a commercial for its rigid worldview. It’s no mystery that religious conservatives have to keep reminding the rest of us that Jesus is the reason for the season; seen through the lens of scholarship, reason and human experience, their version of Christmas is a mighty hard sell.

Grim Christmases, the Idealistic, Commercial and Theological ones. But what does that leave us? No nostalgia? No gifts? No religion? My quick response is that we make memories of Christmastime that will endure in the minds of our young, memories of a wise and compassionate soul that knew something about celebrating Christmas. We give gifts that lend voice to our values as well as our love, gifts that are personal and creative and worthy of both giver and recipient. And we see in the birth narrative a transcendent plea for a world at peace – a world without the death and maiming and refugees of war. A world where bellies are full and guns are empty. Then, more practically, we see in Christmas the opportunity to be good to somebody in the belief that we just may be the only Christmas they'll get this year. That's what I recommend we do with Christmas.

Early in my career I learned to recognize when another has already given voice to what I want to say. I don't want you leaving this service wondering what Christmas might look like were we to give less attention to the three versions I just discussed, so I'm going to include here the admonitions of two insightful UU ministers, Suzanne Meyer and Victoria Safford. See if they stir you as they do me.

Recognizing that Christmas often needs a annual tweaking for cantankerous folks like us, Suzanne Meyer says, "The question is...not whether to celebrate but rather *how* to celebrate...Rather than expecting the holidays to "give us" something, we might begin with the premise that we can expect to *get* from the December holidays what we are willing to *give* to them. You have to take the reindeer by the antlers and *give yourself* to Christmas:

Take your "inner child" shopping and buy him/her the gift you always wanted. Wrap it up and give it to charity.

Can't stand the thought of another big Christmas dinner? Spend Christmas Day with an organization that feeds the homeless.

Take an elderly neighbor to hear a presentation of the Messiah. Invite a child to see the “Nutcracker.” Even if you have seen both performed countless times before, enjoy them again by sharing them with someone else.

Sell Christmas trees for a charity...Stroll through a festive department store. Take a plate of homemade cookies over to one of the fire stations. Rent “It’s a Wonderful Life” and/or “White Christmas” at the video store. Have your picture taken with Santa. Drive around to see the lights...Stop and say “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!” to absolutely everyone you meet on the street...Pass out candy canes. Fix a gourmet supper and take it to someone who has to work on New Year’s Eve.”

Suzanne Meyer winds up with some straight talk: “Prescription for the holidays; get over yourself and get out of the house. There are people out there who need you. Quit brooding over old memories of past holidays that will never come again and go out there and make a beautiful memory for someone else.”

Tough, but sane ideas.

And from Victoria Safford comes a list of things that were never mentioned in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth, but I somehow think he’d recognize the spiritual urge behind them:

Mend a quarrel.

Seek out a forgotten friend.

Replace suspicion with trust.

Write a love letter.

Share some treasure.

Give a soft answer.

Encourage youth.

Keep a promise.

Find the time.

Listen.

Examine your demands on others.

Laugh a little.

Then laugh a little more.

Deserve confidence.

Welcome a stranger.

Gladden the heart of a child.

Take pleasure in the beauty and wonder of the world.

Speak your love. Speak it again.

Speak it still once again.

I've omitted a few things from the list, but I bet you get the idea that I believe my colleague was trying to express: Christmas is a rare opportunity. Take it. Today. My dad used to get attention, year after year, when he'd say that he had a feeling that that year's Christmas would be his last. (Twenty-some years later, it came true. The law of averages finally caught up with my old man.)

At the risk of sounding like my father, for all we know this could be our last Christmas on earth. Life is just that fragile. (As writer and teacher Barbara Brown Taylor put it, it can't hurt to treat this season like it's our last shot at feeling "...struck dumb by the gift of being human".) But if this really is our last or just one of many more, what say we let go of all the versions of Christmas that just don't do it for us anymore? What say we up and let ourselves be struck dumb by the gift of being human? Is that not Christmas enough to celebrate?