

I Still Believe In Santa Claus

From the time I was little, Christmas was the most magical time of year. Our house was filled with the sound of holiday cheer, from traditional selections like Nat King Cole singing *The Christmas Song*, or John Gary singing *O Holy Night*, to the jazzy instrumentals of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass and the Peanuts Christmas album, or the counter culture of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's *Happy Christmas*. It was saturated with the smells of Christmas confections of all sorts, most notably the best sugar cookies ever, and ginger bread cookies to decorate and hang on our tree. The later had an entire table dedicated to them at our annual Christmas Tree Trimming Party. And another table dedicated to hand made crafts. It was the merriest time of year, the most creative time of year, the most filled with family and friends visiting, and I loved every minute of it. But what our home and family life was not filled with at that time was religion, it was filled with the spirit of Santa Claus, and the giant stockings my mother had to fill were no joke. It wasn't easy being Santa.

I opened this service with a Chalice Reading taken from Luke Chapter 2:13-14, because it was important to give a nod to the actual reason for the season, but the choice of this particular verse is because it is one of the only biblical verses I know, and I have Linus in the Peanuts Christmas special to thank for it. The point is that for me, as for many Americans, Santa Claus is at the center of the Christmas celebration, and not Christ. I think that is because Christ should not be relegated to one season of the year, but rather cherished and celebrated year round. Santa, on the other hand, comes with his own particular brand of values, and he is celebrated through careful marketing, and only at Christmas time. So I'm not going to talk directly about any of the many myths of old men bringing gifts around the world, but the uniquely material American Santa Claus, and the pop culture celebration of *his* season.

Hollywood has done it's part to define Christmas, and the many holiday movies we've all come to love are part of why I love the season: *White Christmas*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *A Christmas Carol* and *Miracle on 34th Street*. These movies are about helping those who have fallen on hard times, about communities coming together to

show support and generosity to neighbors in trouble, and they ask us to grapple with our own values, human value, and the economic values of the money lenders. It's that last movie, however, that first had me grappling with the question of whether Santa Claus was real, as a young Natalie Wood is taught by her single mother Maureen O'Hara not to believe in fantasy, so when she meets Edmund Gwenn, who's been hired by her mother to be a Macy's department store Santa, she tells him that she doesn't believe in Santa Claus, even as she admits that he looks perfect for the part. So Gwenn's Kris Kringle spends the rest of the film trying to convince her to believe in him, and be a child again. As the plot twists, O'Hara's love interest and neighbor, an attorney played by John Payne, is able to demonstrate that the United States Postal service believes that Kris is the actual Santa Claus, because they deliver all the children of New York City's letters to Santa to him, showing that the government believes he is real, so the judge is given cover to rule that he is not crazy, but rather the actual embodiment of Santa Claus.

That scene always choked me up, because I never had any doubt in Santa Claus. Kringle wanted to be trusted, accepted, and admired for his generosity and caring, while his adversaries in the film wanted him to be thought of as crazy, dangerous, and greedy. And even as a child I could see that Santa was being used to sell products, because the filmmaker wanted me to see that, but the character was proven to be what he claimed to be, so it reaffirmed in my mind that Santa was real. I knew the movie wanted me to believe, and I knew at home Santa always ate the cookies, and drank the cocoa we left out every year, and filled the giant stockings, and I believed in the spirit of Christmas the character in the movie represented. The caring, generosity, playfulness, and the happiness that he embodied, were all very real to me. And I seemed to understand that it was important to believe in things that could not be proven.

The 1994 remark of *Miracle on 34th Street* made that point even more clear with scenes of citizens flying banners in support of the embattled Santa Claus, played brilliantly by the great Sir Richard Attenborough, that simply said "I Believe". And this time Dylan McDermott played the young lawyer tasked with proving that Santa Claus exists at all, and he finds his proof that the United States government believes in things that cannot be proven by offering a

dollar bill into evidence that has printed beneath The United States of America, and above the giant word ONE, “In God we trust”, thus making a direct connection between Santa Claus and the money he generates. By this time I was a mother working in retail, which I had been doing since graduating from high school in 1980. As a working woman with no college education, I represented that largest percentage of working in the country, and with 14 years of retail experience I was paid just over \$8 an hour. And when I became a single mother in 1996, like Maureen O’Hara in 1947, or Elizabeth Perkins in 1994, I was part of a trend of working women becoming the majority of heads of households in America. I had acquired my current job working Eastern Mountain Sports by being hired as Christmas help, and they had held me on for my useful skills in merchandising, and I worked there for ten years, even as I studied through college. I left the company making \$11 an hour in 2001.

In 2018 the retail sector hired 700,000 temporary seasonal help, adding to a pool of about 16 million retail workers, which is about 23% of the entire retail workforce, and doesn’t even include the approximately 100,000 temporary UPS workers employed to ship all those gifts around the country. Retail workers became the largest concentration of American workers just after the turn of the 21st century when it outpaced manufacturing that had been gutted by globalization of the market, and NAFTA, which passed in January of 1993, a year before the movie remake hit the screens. But it was also at this time that I began to employ what I would come to call “The Miracle on 34th Street Principle”, which I had learned from the Santa in both versions of the film, and that was to serve the needs of the customer over the bottom line of the store. If I could help the customer find what they were looking for somewhere other than our store, I would do so, and the loyalty that instilled paid off all year long. Santa, and his principles of caring for people, always pays off.

Santa Claus first gained prominence in America in the wake of the industrial revolution, when our agricultural economy was shifting to a manufacturing economy. As we were perfecting production for surplus, and innovating into assembly line use to mass produce affordable products—it was the birth of a retail economy. In those early years, an anonymous poem was published in the Troy Sentinel on December 23, 1823 entitled *A Visit From St Nick*, which was

“reprinted frequently” in years to follow (wikipedia). It wasn’t until 1844, however, that the theological scholar Clement Clarke Moore first claimed authorship, by including it in an anthology of his poetry. He had written it for his children, and didn’t originally want to be associated with the children’s poem, because he feared it would tarnish his “public reputation as a professor of ancient languages”, and now it’s the only reason anyone remembers him at all. In what we now know as *’Twas the Night Before Christmas*, Moore described Santa Claus in the timeless poem as “chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf”. Interesting that he is among the elves in this telling, and not just using the elves as his labor force. Moore’s full description is quite detailed:

He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.
His eyes—how they twinkled! His dimples, how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow;
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath;
He had a broad face and a little round belly
that shook when he laughed like bowl full of jelly.

Then in 1881 popular caricaturist and editorial cartoonist Thomas Nast created an illustration of Santa Claus based on Moore’s poem for Harper’s Magazine, in which Santa’s suit first appears as red, and it is an image that is still in print in various forms. And in 1862 Nast illustrated an American flag adorned Santa as a peddler visiting union troops during the civil war, which appeared on the cover of Harper’s weekly. This prompted Lincoln to dub Santa “his best recruiting agent” (France-Amerique, Dec 2015). Santa sold a lot of magazines too, and by elevating the gift giving aspect of Christmas helped build up retail trade in America. Another of the most famous illustrations of Santa in his red suit was created for a coca cola ad campaign. In 1931 Coca Cola commissioned illustrator Haddon Sundblom to create an image of Santa Claus that was also based on Moore’s iconic poem.

This is another indication that Santa was fast becoming the ultimate spokes model.

From the time American manufacturing began to rival Europe's ability for mass production, small shops on main street began to thrive, and Santa Claus provided the motivation for hard working Americans to spend money they had toiled for all year long in celebration of the Christmas holiday. Like in the poem, children were at the core. From carols sang at school, to sweets and treats made plentiful, we were all encouraged in this post-harvest season to celebrate with abandon. We've heard before about the importance of the bounty of the harvest to the forming of cultural rituals and celebrations, but to me, Santa's rise as a marketing tool has elevated this ritual power to actually empower human toil. Some may see it as a time of over consumption and waste that ignores human suffering, and it is true that many of the products sold and consumed at Christmas time will contribute to the 230 million tons of trash produced annually in America. But it is also true that main street economy has long rested on the broad shoulders of that "right jolly old elf."

Overall, holiday sales represent about 20% of annual retail sales each year, but the figure can be higher for some retailers. Hobby, toy and game stores report the highest share at about 30%. The Friday after Thanksgiving is one of the most profitable days of the year. Accountants use black to signify profit when recording each day's book entries. They use red to indicate loss. So, Black Friday means a profitable Friday to retailing and to the economy writ large. Retail and consumer spending drive almost 70% of U.S. gross domestic product. Much of the retail trade is conducted on credit, as the retailer must first purchase the goods to sell, prompting them to go into debt, and then reap the benefits of their careful purchasing at the end of the year when the demand for goods is at its highest. This is not so different from the agricultural market, where farmers take on debt to purchase the means of producing the food that will generate their profit at harvest time. So from very early on our American Santa Claus was not only encouraging us to spend in our time of plenty at the end of the year, but providing the employment that would give us the means to save or consume as we see fit. And more importantly, over time, Santa was also marketed as a symbol of giving to charity, and recognizing the need to tend to the less fortunate.

“In 1891, Captain Joseph McFee of the Salvation Army was distraught because so many poor individuals in San Francisco were going hungry. So he made a commitment to provide 1,000 of San Francisco's poorest inhabitants with Christmas dinner. He only had one major hurdle to overcome -- funding the project. He remembered how at Stage Landing in Liverpool, where the boats came in, there was a large, iron kettle called ‘Simpson's Pot’ into which passers-by tossed a coin or two to help the poor. The next day Captain McFee placed a similar pot at the Oakland Ferry Landing at the foot of Market Street. Beside the pot, he placed a sign that read, "Keep the Pot Boiling." He soon had the money to see that the needy people were properly fed at Christmas.” Over a third of all the Salvation Army donations now come through the Red Kettle Program championed by the spirit (and sometimes even the image) of Santa Claus ringing a bell, pulling in \$142.7 million dollars at the end of 2018 out of a year's end total of \$433.7 million. And volunteers in Santa Suits distribute millions of gifts and toys each year on behalf of the US Marine Corp. In 2014 it was reported that Toys for Tots distributes 7 million gifts annually, but it was also noted that with 14.7 million children living in poverty that year, they were reaching just under half of those in need. But I still believe that it is the concept of Santa, and the need to provide that holiday cheer at Christmas time that drives these kinds of charitable giving that might otherwise never occur.

Charles Dickens captured it best in his depiction of the Spirit of Christmas Present in his iconic short story *A Christmas Carol*. First published in December of 1843, when he was one of England's most popular author's, but not yet one of their most notable. Dickens insisted that the story be published as a stand alone book, rather than buried in a collection of his other works, and so the publishers Chapman & Hall struck a deal to have Dickens pay for the printing up front himself. In the end it became a shrewd business deal, as *A Christmas Carol* became the most successful book of the 1843 holiday season, and Dickens reaped the profits.

Before his protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by any spirits, he is depicted as “a man of business”, who measures all value by their monetary worth. When visited in his place of business by his nephew Fred, he challenges his Christmas cheer by asking:

“‘What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough.’ To which Fred responds gaily: ‘Come then uncle, what right have you to be dismal? What

reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough." Leaving Scrooge no other response than: 'Bah! Humbug!'"

When asked to contribute to the poor at Christmas, Scrooge complains: "A poor excuse to pick a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!" And he shows an utter disdain for the season of giving by stating emphatically: "Every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart." And while the ghost of Christmas past began to open Scrooge's mind, by showing him times in his past when he too enjoyed the Christmas cheer and benefitted from the generosity of his former employer Fezziwig, it was the breadth of human suffering shown him in the present that carried the greatest weight in convincing him that his avarice ways were wrong. And the Ghost of Christmas present is depicted much like England's father Christmas, who is their version of Santa Claus, though he begins the night looking much younger than either is usually depicted.

" . . . clothed in one simple green robe, or mantle, bordered with white fur. This garment hung so loosely on the figure that its capacious breast was bare, as if disdaining to be warded or concealed by any artifice. Its feet, observable beneath the ample folds of the garment, were also bare; and on its head it wore no other covering than a holy wreath, set here and there with shining icicles. Its dark brown curls were long and free; free as its genial face, its sparkling eye, its open hand, its cheery voice, its unconstrained demeanor, and its joyful air."

You can almost hear the echoes of Moore's Santa Claus in this description, and as Nast often drew Santa in a green suit as well as red, the German born artist was likely drawing on many depictions of this spirit in his illustrations of Santa Claus. And Dicken's indicates that he becomes more like father Christmas over time, as the spirit ages during their time together:

the Ghost grew older, clearly older. Scrooge had observed this change, but never spoke of it, until . . . looking at the Spirit as they stood together in an open place, he noticed that its hair was grey.
(Stave III)

It is at this end of the spirit's time on earth that Scrooge sees something protruding from the spirit's robes:

From the foldings of its robe, it brought two children; wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable. They knelt down at its feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment.

“Oh, Man! look here. Look, look, down here!” exclaimed the Ghost. They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.

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“Spirit! are they yours?” Scrooge could say no more.

“They are Man’s,” said the Spirit, looking down upon them. “And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. Deny it!” cried the Spirit, stretching out its hand towards the city. “Slander those who tell it ye! Admit it for your factious purposes, and make it worse. And bide the end!”

“Have they no refuge or resource?” cried Scrooge.

“Are there no prisons?” said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. “Are there no workhouses?”

Are there no cages? I might add today.

According to Chris Priestly, author of the illustrated children’s book *The Last of the Spirits: A dazzling reinvention of A Christmas Carol*, this “is a brief moment in the story, but surely a key moment—and a big part of why the story is still so relevant. Ignorance and Want remain the prime movers behind so many of the world’s ills.” He goes on to say: “Dickens was . . . chastising [his readers] about their own ignorance—an ignorance that was in many cases a willful ignoring of the plight of their fellow Londoners.”

Though Dickens’ readers came to some extent from the growing middle class, as they would share the books and read aloud in groups, those who

could afford to buy the books for their own collection, like many of today's middle class in America, were separate from the truly poor and disenfranchised. They had either gained enough trade or educational knowledge to escape a life of want, or they were born to wealth, and had no experience or knowledge of it at all.

It is too easy to become a Scrooge judging all by their value to the market. Many spend most of the year ignoring the want of others these days, often because we are working so hard to avoid falling into that class, and have little to spare ourselves. But it is this spirit of Christmas, the giving of Santa Claus, the time of all seasons to be dedicated to sharing and generosity, that helps us to raise our heads above the mindset of scarcity, and toss a few coins in a red kettle, or a toy in a collection box for tots. And while it is true that many of us, like Santa's elves, feel over worked and underappreciated— and like our retail employers, go into debt to keep this cycle of retail turning, we still find the ability, like Scrooge's nephew Fred, to be merry in this time of giving, and to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in our hearts. And we welcome the work of Christmas.

I know as I inherited the task of filling the giant stockings that is a Christmas tradition in our family, I inherited the mantle of Santa Claus. So when the small face of one of my children would question his existence, or ask me if he was real, I would always respond: "I still believe in Santa Claus" and would quietly, in the dark of night as they slept, make him manifest.