

# Tis Better To Give Than Receive

December 10, 2006

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One of my favorite Christmas carols proclaims “it’s the most wonderful time of the year”. In one of my favorite stories, Charles Dickens writes of Ebenezer Scrooge, “it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well.” People will soon start asking – if they haven’t already - “do you have the Christmas spirit?” The commentators on television and in the newspapers, especially the religious commentators, will bemoan that we have forgotten the *true* meaning of the season. Some people will tell us that this is a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, some will say it is a time for children and an old man in a red suit, while others will say it is a time for the retailers to get rich.

The two questions I always wonder about in the weeks before Christmas are: what *is* the meaning of the season, especially for those of us who do not declare ourselves to be Christians, and what *does* it mean to carry the spirit of Christmas?

To find the answers to these questions, we have to look at the stories we tell this time of year. Chris Van Allsburg’s The Polar Express, a story we will tell at our family Christmas Eve service this year, ends with one of my favorite lines of all time. “Though I’ve grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe.” The man in the story is speaking about believing in Santa Claus and the magic of Christmas. I love these words because they have always made my heart tingle, they remind us to look at the world through the eyes of a child and they ask us to believe. But - and here is the question that will tell us what the spirit of the season really is - believe in what?

We are blessed with many different holidays and stories, both religious and secular, to believe in this time of year. We have Christmas with the birth of Jesus, Hanukah with the miracle of the eight days of oil, Kwanza with the celebration of the seven African-American principles and the Winter Solstice with the promise of longer days. We also have the stories of Santa Claus, Ebenezer Scrooge and George Bailey from It’s A Wonderful Life fame. The stories we choose to believe in, go a long way to determining what this time of year means to us.

The words of the biblical scholar and Jesus Seminar member, Marcus Borg, are especially helpful when we consider what to believe in this time of year. “Believe did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings; in both Greek and Latin its roots mean **to give one’s heart to.**”... To give one’s heart to. This is the decision we must make this time of year - what story, what message are we willing to give our hearts to?

When I look for a common message, a theme, to all the stories we tell this time of year I find only one that stands out: giving. Although the stories of Christmas, Hanukah and Kwanza are very different, each one includes giving as an important element of the holiday ritual. The wise men give presents to the baby Jesus. The oil gives off enough light to save the Maccabees. The sun gives more light beginning the day after the Winter Solstice. Santa Claus, or St. Nicholas, gives presents to the children of the world. The Ghosts of Christmas give Scrooge a new lease on life. Mary gives Jesus the gift of life. And we give gifts to each other.

The anthropologists say human beings have been doing this since the beginning of time. People around the world - from different cultures and religions - have always had one special time of the year when they have given gifts to each other. Giving is part of our human nature. Can you imagine living without giving? We give naturally, but sometimes we get so busy or focused on ourselves, that we forget.

Perhaps that is why the Bible tells us that it is more blessed to give than receive. Perhaps that is why the sacred stories we tell this time of year speak to us so deeply. I propose we give our hearts, and believe, in the spirit of giving as the true meaning of this season. Because no matter what religion or story we claim, each of us can celebrate and practice giving.

When I grew up, Christmas time was my favorite time of the year. Although my family hardly ever went to church, and I knew very little about the birth of Jesus, I celebrated and embraced Christmas as much as anyone I knew. While I, of course, looked forward to finding out what Santa would bring me and ripping the paper off of all my presents (receiving is also a part of the season!) –one of my favorite Christmas memories as a child, has nothing to do with getting presents.

I think I was 12 years old. Each year prior to that, I hand made presents which I gave to my family. I do not remember any of the things that I made but I can guess, based on my years as a dad, what they were. I imagine I gave lots of beautiful finger paintings, colorful drawings, macaroni angels, clay coffee cups and egg -carton Christmas tree ornaments. I know my family appreciated these gifts but things were going to be different for my 12<sup>th</sup> Christmas.

I had been saving quarters and dimes from my paper stand all year so I could *buy* presents and not make them like a little kid. My cousin drove me into downtown San Francisco and we set out to search for the most perfect presents 10 or 15 dollars could buy. I cannot tell you exactly what I got everyone on my Christmas list that year, but it would be a good bet that I wrapped up a lot of bubble bath, soap, perfume, powder and after-shave lotion. The gifts may not have been original or even very personal, but I still remember how good it felt when my mom, my sister and my grandparents opened their presents. I felt the joy of giving like I never had before. I wondered if that was how Santa Claus felt.

Depending on whom you talk to, Santa Claus is either one of the best parts of the Christmas tradition or one of the worst. Some people see in Santa the embodiment of the spirit of loving, laughing and giving that is the season. These people think of Santa as a symbol for children (and some adults) all over the world of selfless giving and the magic of Christmas. They remember the story of the Christian St. Nicholas who, legend has it, used all of his money to give gifts to children and poor people.

To others Santa is a symbol of what has gone wrong with Christmas. They see him as an outgrowth of the commercialization of the season. Their Santa is on TV commercials and in newspaper ads, asking us to buy a certain brand of soda pop, electric shaver or piece of jewelry. He has become a tool of corporate America and has helped spread the poison of consumerism and greed throughout the world – especially to children. His story has taken the place of the religious stories that give special meaning to this time of year.

The way we answer the question, who *is* Santa, can say a lot about how we view this time of year and how we view giving. At least it has for me.

I started seriously caring about people's perceptions about Santa in December of 1982. I was living by myself and on my own for the first time at Christmas. I had just broken up with a woman who I thought might be *the* one. I was feeling lonely, depressed and I did not want to have anything to do with Christmas and I sure did not want to give presents to anybody. I *did* want to feel sorry for myself and cancel the holidays. I am sure you can all think of at least one year when you have felt the same way.

I don't remember who, or what, made me think of it, but somehow I got the idea that maybe there were people who were feeling as bad -or even worse than I was - and that maybe I would feel better if I did something for them. One day I went down to the costume shop and picked out the best Santa Claus suit I could find, charged it to my Visa card and decided I would join the ranks of Santa's helpers. I dressed up in red head to toe and visited abused kids at a Christmas party, surprised friends by knocking at their door in the middle of night and spent Christmas day driving around with a friend dressed in an elf costume, delivering gifts and food to friends and people on the streets. I had one of the best Christmases I have ever had.

I learned a lot about giving - and loving - when I put on my fake whiskers and red suit. I discovered that everybody who saw me, I mean Santa, smiled and waved no matter how old they were or how much money they had. I saw joy and love in faces as I never had seen before. I learned that sometimes the best medicine when we are feeling down and out, is to do something special for someone else.

I also learned that believing in Santa was sort of like believing in God. My image of Santa had to make sense to me and be about love, compassion and caring. It took a leap of faith to believe in someone or something that I hadn't *really* seen but I knew had felt in my heart and had seen in everyone's sparkling eyes.

The last lesson I learned that year was that the best presents we give do not have to be wrapped up and put under the tree. In fact some of the best ones cannot be bought at all because they come directly from our hearts. I would like to tell you about four of them this morning that you can give this holiday season or any time of the year.

The first is the gift of forgiveness. Forgiveness is one of those gifts that we sometimes say we will only give, if someone gives it to us first. We view the gift of forgiveness kind of like the secret Santa game we play at work. We ask "How much are you going to spend on me so I know how much I should spend on you?" We play the same game when it comes to forgiveness. "How much are you going to forgive me so I know how much I should forgive you?"

This year I suggest that we play the game a little differently. Take a moment now to think about someone you know who has hurt you recently or in your more distant past. (PAUSE) Usually this is not hard to do during this time of year when our emotions and memories are at their peak efficiency. Imagine what it would be like to forgive them for the hurt they have caused you. Would you be giving too much away by forgiving them or would you be receiving too much in return? One of the saddest parts of the holiday season is that we spend so much time and money on gifts people will soon forget, when we could spend far less money and time giving a gift that will always be cherished, the gift of forgiveness. Try it and see what happens.

Forgiveness can be a very hard gift to give but this second gift will be even harder for some of you. The second gift I want you to give is asking someone for help. For those of you who love to spend hours finding the perfect gift to give to other people, who demand to decorate the house all by yourself and will not let anybody else bake the cookies or cook the holiday meal this gift might be the most difficult you could give. Many people, you see, are professional givers who can give and give but have never gotten very good at the receiving end of the season, or of life - in fact they are downright lousy at it. That's why I want you to give the gift of asking for someone's help.

I would not be surprised if some of you are feeling a little down these days. Maybe the stress of all the giving is taking its toll on you, maybe you are feeling sick and are struggling to keep up with everything you have to do, maybe this is your first year away from family or friends and you are feeling lonely or maybe you are grieving our hurting planet or the ongoing despair of Iraq and do not have the will or energy to celebrate anything.

The biggest danger with all the giving that goes on at this time of year, is that people do not want to feel as if they are burdening others by asking for help. We decide to tough it out and do it ourselves. This is the most important time of year to ask for help. Think about how great you feel when a friend confides in you and asks for your help. What a wonderful gift it is to be given a chance to help someone who needs it! One of the gifts of this community is that there are people willing and able to give help – give them, and yourself, the gift of asking for it.

The third gift I invite you to share this year and always, is inspired by the story we tell each Christmas, the miracle someone celebrates every few seconds each day and is the greatest gift we have ever received. This gift is the gift of life. We might have different perspectives on what role the divine had in giving us this gift, but we can all agree that Mary gave this gift to Jesus and our mothers gave it to us.

Some gifts come with a responsibility to give something to others; and so it is with life. How well are we sharing the gifts we have received with the rest of the world? Is fear or embarrassment stopping us from doing something we really want to do? Something like writing, painting, going back to school or telling someone we love them. The question all of us need to ask ourselves is, *how are we using our gifts?*

All of us have unique talents, skills and dreams that we have not begun to tap into. Why not make this the year that we begin to share what we have with more people, more of the time? Last Sunday my good friend Peter Morales charged me to be Don. I charge each of you to be who you are and to share who you are more widely with us and with the world.

The final gift I invite you to give is something we all have more of than we use - the gift of love. We may reach the limit on our credit cards at the mall this year but we have no limit on the amount of love we can give away. The presents we give to our friends and family are tokens for the love we feel, but sometimes we hide our real feelings behind our gaily-wrapped packages. Make sure that every present you give this year not only comes with a bright bow and shiny paper, but is also filled with your love.

I leave you this morning with a story about love. It is a story I try to remember when I become cynical about the meaning of the holidays or get tired of the commercials and advertising that I cannot seem to escape. It is a story about a little boy I met this time of year in 1984.

That year the office where I worked hosted a Christmas party for a group of twenty children who had been orphaned and were awaiting placement in foster homes. These kids ranged in age from six months to 12 or 13 years old. Some of them were disfigured or had fresh scars from recent beatings. A few of them were disabled and needed assistance to join the party.

My job at the party was to be one of Santa's helpers and hand out presents the people in our office had purchased for each one of the kids. As I, uh, Santa made my entrance I hugged as many kids as I could find, while giving a hearty Ho! Ho! Ho! and wishing everyone a Merry Christmas. One little boy who was probably 6 or 7 years old and, coincidentally believe it or not, named Don, gave Santa the biggest and strongest hug he had ever felt and then said, "Santa I love you." Everywhere Santa went, little Don followed. He hung on Santa's leg and tugged on Santa's pants. Frankly, the kid started to annoy me.

When Santa sat down to hand out the presents, Don ran to the front of the line to sit on Santa's knee first and to get his presents. "Ah ha", the man behind the beard thought, "now he'll go and play with his presents and leave me alone". When Santa gave Don his presents, Don ran over to a little boy who was paralyzed with some type of disease and could not make it to Santa's lap. Don gave the boy the presents, ran back to Santa's lap, hugged him hard, told him he loved him again and never asked for any more presents.

Behind my beard and makeup were tears that luckily, little Don did not see. I had thought that he was only interested in presents, not Santa or the other kids. Although I gave out the presents that day, little Don, showed and gave Big Don the greatest gift of all....the gift of love.

May we enjoy all of our gifts this year, the ones we give and the ones we receive - and especially the ones money cannot buy. May it be so. Amen.