

To Believe Or Not To Believe

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For a young child, the anticipation of Santa's welcomed arrival on Christmas Eve approaches ecstasy. This superhuman being flies across the entire globe in his reindeer powered sleigh in a matter of 24 hours delivering gifts to all children of the world. These gifts, individually tailored to the desire of each child, are the rewards gained by being good during the preceding year. Santa incentivizes good behavior. He also discourages bad behavior with the threat of receiving the proverbial "lump of coal." Santa is so capable and thorough in his assessment of childhood behavior that he keeps a list, I suppose a database these days, that includes every child and every deed done by them. It is unquestionable that Santa sees all actions and notes them according to their goodness or naughtiness. And it is also the case that Santa keeps this quid pro quo accounting even while he is airborne on Christmas Eve. No child dare behave badly before the gifts are in hand.

I too once believed in Santa Claus. I daresay that at some point of my earliest years I was certain that Santa existed. Why wouldn't I possess certain belief in him? My parents and closest family members spoke of him as though he was real and, at that age, I trusted them completely. Nothing they had said to me could I have interpreted in any other way than their being truthful. There was, however, exterior evidence as well. The society acted as though Santa was real with annual caroling, parties, and Santa being in metaphorical evidence at many street corners and department stores and shopping malls. There were movies and television shows extolling Santa's magnanimous efforts and intentions. Not to mention that presents appeared Christmas morning and treats left for Santa were gone, crumbs left in their stead. Not only was I certain in my belief, I felt I was reasonably justified in doing so.

By the time I turned seven, skeptical storms were brewing in my mind. I began to wonder about how all of these wonderful things could be accomplished by one person, magical

though he was, given the way the world works. Rational questions begged to be answered. How could he fit all of the gifts for all of the children in his sleigh? How fast would he need to travel to visit every house on the planet? How could reindeer fly? How could he know of my behavior while living at the North Pole? Why would he live there anyway? I kept these questions to myself.

At that time, I was a student at St. Aloysius Academy for Boys, a Catholic boarding school on the Main Line of Philadelphia. The property of the school was formerly the estate of a wealthy Philadelphia businessman complete with the formidably dark and gargyle topped Wootton Mansion, a 50 room Neo-Tudor home that served as the convent and student dormitory. While the majority of students, myself included, were day students, there was a small and unfortunate minority who boarded. It was then not clear to me why these boys were subjected to the constant attentions of heavily discipline-oriented nuns who resided in the foreboding residence.

One of the boarding students in my class was Joe McCann. He had been boarding since he was six and was now eight, a full year older than the other students in our grade. That alone gave him some measure of respect from our class. The fact that he was forced to endure life inside the convent with its fearful keepers added to his cachet. On top of these attributes was Joe's persistent possession of the title: Class Clown. This position landed him in trouble far more often than the rest of us, just another quality adding to his stature.

One early December day while my class headed to lunch, Joe said to me in a conspiratorial tone that Santa didn't exist. I almost stopped in my tracks, but not wanting to be perceived as having been surprised by Joe's statement, I continued apace. Nevertheless, there it was, a validation of my skepticism from a trusted source.

Of course, my initial reaction to the validation that Santa did not exist, except as some sort of child control method employed only at Christmas, was to wonder whether sharing my newfound certainty with my parents might anger them, that I had punctured their ruse. Or perhaps they might be elated that I had solved this cultural puzzle. These

thoughts were quickly dispelled by the ever more important question, Would my letting my parents know that I knew of Santa's non-existence result in the end of presents at Christmas? The risk was unbearably severe. I did not tell them.

Yet another disquieting possibility lingered, of whether the very act of my questioning Santa's existence was perceived by him such that the naughty column of my record was taking on more than its fair share of ink. What if I was wrong and he did exist? Would he harshly judge me and leave a conspicuously hefty measure of lumped coal underneath our Christmas tree?

This particular year's Christmas Eve celebration included my mother and father, my mother's parents and sister from Alabama, a childless couple who lived next door and Mort Weintraub a new resident of Philadelphia who worked for my father. My parents always included people from outside of our family, feeling that this added to the spirit of the season.

While the other adults were busy drinking and socializing with one another, my mother and grandmother were busy in the kitchen, doing their best to coax along a turkey, which resisted the oven's attempt to heat it to a safe temperature. Outside, a heavy snowfall added to the atmosphere of the evening.

In the fire lit living room, Mort was playing the role of the good employee by smilingly enduring my grandfather's endless questions about snowfall amounts in Philadelphia as such events never occurred in Alabama. My father kept glasses full while fending off repeated requests from me to go outside and build a snowman. Lacking a positive response from my father, I decided to ask Mort if he would like to help me build a snowman. He kindly declined saying that he would, if only he had brought his boots with him. My father intercepted me carrying *his* boots into the living room. I noticed that Mort, between glances at his wristwatch, kept a worried eye on the accumulation of snow. By the time dinner had finally been served, the roads were impassable. Mort stayed the night on our living room couch, as we had no additional beds considering the number

of family from out of town. I would very much like to hear Mort's perspective of his Christmas Eve at the Murphy's.

In due course I was ushered off to bed being reminded that "Santa would soon be here." I went to sleep with a feeling of dread, having set into motion the possibility that I would awaken to a pile of coal, a punishing warning shot from Santa for my having breached the sacred contract of belief. I was doubly troubled by the fact that this might play out in front of a complete stranger, forced to endure a Christmas celebration with his boss' family.

Christmas morning arrived with me awake first, at this point a habitual reaction to Christmas day and the anticipation of Santa's gifts. Instead of eagerly waking the others in the house, I stayed in bed, trying to put off the inevitable. After an agonizingly long period of time, I heard the sounds of a waking household. My mother came into my room and advised the "sleepyhead" to get out of bed to see what Santa had brought. As I descended the stairs, my fears were allayed. Next to a slowly awakening and disheveled couch guest, presents surrounded the tree, including the bicycle I had been gunning for all fall.

With no coal, but rather a bike, it was clear who Santa really was. The only remaining question would be when I would come clean to my parents. I answered that question during the next summer, enough time after this Christmas and before the next to allow potential parental anger to dissipate.

When I finally told my parents, they were neither happy nor upset. My mother explained to me that in her view Santa existed as a spirit of youthful hopefulness. Upon my asking if this meant the end of presents, they reassured me that the gifts would continue. After that year, presents were wrapped instead of being placed unadorned around the tree, with at least one present every year labeled "From: Santa", neatly written in my mother's handwriting.

Although I have been a non-believer for over forty-six years, I am still the first one awake on Christmas morning with the same hopeful anticipation as the child who long ago believed in Santa.