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FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

What has prompted this short paper, knowing it would be delivered amidst the good will and joy that permeates much of the world this time of the year, is a concern that many have raised regarding the din, the babble, the hissing, as well as, the fabrications, demonizing, and false witness, which are all a part of the crude and uncivil discourse that our society has of late succumbed.

Are there any nice people around?

My wife and I don't watch a lot of TV together but are loyal to the evening "News Hour" on public TV with Jim Lehrer. Especially we like it when David Brooks and Mark Shields are on it from the right and the left. Brooks has become one of our favorite conservative columnist of whom, as a matter of self disclosure, there are few for us these days.

In Brook's NY Times column a couple of months ago, "In Search of Dignity", he sought to address this upsurge of incivility by lifting up George Washington as a too forgotten model of decent behavior in the civic square.

To Brooks, Washington was great not because he was a military or political hero. But, he writes, "because of the way he conducted himself during times of temptation. It was his moral character that set him off from other men." Brooks highlighted how Washington lived by the personal dignity code that recognized, "human beings are flawed creatures...falling into disasters caused by their own passions." Such a code, Brooks, contends is now lost in our present narcissistic culture – especially the code's concern to promote national interests above personal interests.

He ends his column by suggesting that President Obama, himself the target of much of the ill will and disrespect, fortunately retains a certain personal dignity that we should appreciate no matter how we may differ with his policies. His column proved timely and was well received.

President Obama himself has said, "People shouldn't underestimate the value of civility."

I would add that no other country protects hate speech more than we in the United States. But that freedom does not mean we should increase its use.

Even if we are mindful that incivility in our nation's life is nothing new and has often been worse than is presently the case, the past cannot excuse the present. The current nastiness and polarization is enough, enough for the National Endowment for the Humanities to initiate a fifty state civility tour to confront the coarseness in our nation's public manners. The N.E.H. reminds us of the simple truth, "Civilization requires civility."

All this made me think about what makes for nice people, as mundane as that sounds. And I further thought, in preparing for this my third holiday paper, that a jumping off place about niceness was to return again to Santa Claus. After all, niceness is what Santa explicitly requires of us.

I had posed the question a couple of years ago, "Should Santa Be Canonized or Not?" I know the original Saint Nicholas of the 3rd Century was canonized but the current reincarnation of him remains problematic for many.

Never the less, and to my surprise, Santa has grown in popularity around the world since I last focused on him. Ecumenically he has crossed the religious divide and is found in practically every culture. A few years ago in Mid-East Jordan, a children's charity group created what has now become the Muslim Santa, referred to as Baba Noel. He looks and behaves the same in his red suit but his beard is black and his famous laugh is now, Hoi, Hoi, Hoi.

There are countless Santa organizations in our land. One such corporate enterprise supplied 250 Santa's this Christmas to 165 shopping centers. The company boasts that all their Santas have the proper attire, body weight, have passed criminal back ground checks, and 95% of them have a natural white beard. They were all brought to Colorado for a three day training all in order to be able to answer the most vexing questions the children might ask, such as how can Santa fly around the world in just one night. Although my nine year old grandson doesn't need convincing for he told me hikers have recently found some of Santa's gifts on top of Mt. Everest.

Since I am of the school that believes let people everywhere get all they can out of Christmas, I will leave the criticism of Santa as being too cozy with commercial interests to others. What I am curious about is the effect Santa has on the psyche of the children themselves. Is believing in Santa Claus a good thing? Will believing in him enhance their character? And most importantly, when they grow up will they still try to be nice?

Most children do eagerly anticipate Santa's coming, albeit with a twinge of anxiety. After all, they have heard and undoubtedly could recite Santa's advent song, "Santa Claus is Coming to Town"

That song, which I have discovered is the third most sold Christmas record after *Rudolph* and *White Christmas*, does make it clear, and in no uncertain terms, what Santa requires of children if they are to get what they had asked for. I'm sure you are familiar with it:

You better watch out, you better not cry.
 You better not pout, I'm telling your why
 Santa Claus is coming to town.

He's making a list and checking it twice,
 Gonna find out who is naughty and nice.
 Santa Claus is coming to town.

He sees you when you're sleeping.
 He knows when you're awake.
 He knows when you've been good or bad,
 So be good for goodness' sake.

Santa, after all, is not just some jolly elfish character who comes to freely shower gifts, but is both the judge and jury regarding who are the good and bad children. Like the classical view of God, Santa is **omniscient**; all wise and knowing, **omnipresent**; every where so you can't hide from him, and **omnipotent**; all powerful, able to deliver what he promises.

What Santa demands is that all children get busy and look into their hearts to make sure they are choosing nice over naughty.

The song's author, Haven Gillespie, was born and raised across the river in Covington. He worked here in the city for the Times Star as a typesetter before moving on to New York. I believe Gillespie's song does captured the long held cultural understanding that Santa is a moral force to be reckoned with.

The song was first heard on the air when Eddie Cantor, a devout Jew, sang it on his program in 1934 and it was an instant success. Many believe its message of character accountability is more true to the meaning of Christmas than so many other songs which are mere fluff.

The essential message of the song is clearly to be nice, not naughty. Of course, gifts are both the incentive and the reward for being nice, even though there is also the more transcending plea in the song, to "be good for goodness's sake." Or, we might add, for God's sake, or for the sake of the whole world.

To be sure, the nice and not naughty that Santa wants to see is pretty much what parents want to see with their children. Be polite, don't say bad words, don't be pushy, don't steal, don't interrupt people, and don't lie. How many times have parents reminded their children, "Now play nice." And that is what we all need to do, no matter our age – play nice!

After all, the opposite of being nice is being disagreeable, unpleasant, discourteous, inconsiderate, vulgar, arrogant, selfish, stingy, unjust, unkind, unfair, and harmful. The world has far too much of such behavior.

At first glance the word nice does seem a little shallow to be on the list of great virtues. Nice people don't necessarily finish first. And addressing stubborn social injustices doesn't happen by just being nice.

Niceness is not one of the words the great prophetic tradition requires of us. To do justice, to love mercy and walk with humility before God. Even The Scout Law: to be Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent, doesn't mention, "just be nice."

But who of us wants to be known for not being nice?

In seminary I would have the radio on while studying, and on Sunday night a rather lively religious group came on. I would listen for a bit because of its lively music, but hardly agreeing with their preaching. But I still remember fifty years later the way they signed off the air, "Good night to all of you in radio land. And until next week, just remember, it's nice to be nice." I used to cringe when I heard it. Not love your neighbor as yourself, or love your enemies, or practice the Golden rule, or don't judge lest you be judged. No, just a simple reminder, it's nice to be nice. Well, I don't belittle such ideology any longer.

Nice is essential! In its absence the Scrooges and the Grinches prevail. David Brooks recently suggested in another column that those in the beleaguered Republican Party who are searching for a new leader may want to rally around Senator John Thune from South Dakota. Why? Because he is "*genial, modest, and catch this, nice. He is also untouched by cynicism. Instead he is optimistic, uplifting and catch this, nice.*" It appears the Senator is doubly nice.

As for "Santa Clause is Coming to Town", most parents don't mind the theology behind it because it fits comfortably with their own understanding of God. Further, they believe a little fear of God is good for all children. J. Edgar Hoover would agree.* Wouldn't we all act a little better if we knew Santa's eye, just like God's eye, was always on us and there was no where we could go to conceal our actions or inner thoughts?

Certainly it is better if we all would act ethically out of our own good heart and not because big brother, big Santa, or big God is watching. The IRS counts on such trust. So do those we have made promises to. Einstein offers, "If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed."

Still, we know we don't do well without some policing. Even Alan Greenspan now famously confesses that the humans on Wall Street are as flawed as any of us on Main Street – thus the need for more regulation.

So it is important, and effective, that Santa watches over our children, checking who is being naughty or nice. Santa is hardly perceived as being wrathful since he remains the gracious gift giver as well. But because he is watching and making a list, children will try to be nicer. That's a plus, even if only for a week or so.

But what happens when Santa goes? Soon enough, children do learn the secret, the deception, behind Santa Claus. Were they betrayed? Yes, but it is a sort of a cultural lie and not just that of their parents, and all is soon forgiven.

All in all we need not worry about promoting fantasy in our children. They don't need life's hard realism dumped too early on them. They only want our love anyway. The only danger, as one mother told me last week, is to tell the truth about Santa too early which she did with her son. It took several days for him to begin to smile at her again.

Most children who once believed, will grow up and continue the good will and the soft heartiness of the Santa story. And if their children or grand children begin to doubt Santa's reality, they surely will reach for the Cincinnati Enquirer on Christmas morn and read to them one of the most endearing columns of all time, "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus."

But what happens when God goes? Is every thing then permitted? Well, for most, God remains.

World religion scholar, Karen Armstrong, in her new book, *The Case for God* does offer a critical commentary though. She writes, "We learned about God at about the same time as we were told about Santa Claus. But while our understanding of the Santa Claus phenomenon evolved and matured, our theology remained some what infantile."

To Armstrong, a mature theology would be open-ended, more inclusive, and would acknowledge the mysterious nature of God whose presence none of us can finally define or exclusively possess. Before God humility is an absolute necessity.

She further makes the case that at the heart of all the great religion is the demand to practice compassion, the ability to feel for our neighbors, and treat them with equity.

I would only add, since religion will always be with us, that there will never be peace among the nations until there is peace between all the world's major religions. What ever faith we have, we better get busy at that.

As for God's reality, I suspect that throughout history, no matter what has transpired, God has never ceased to exist in a loving heart. The original Santa was an incarnation of that love. It would be nice if we could be too.

* I don't think Hoover was a Santa figure at all but I once heard a comment he made that the FBI could not keep up with crime in the U. S if the churches ever closed their Sunday School classes for children.

