

"Why I Believe in Santa Claus"
A Sermon delivered at
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[the "danger" of Santa]

Every so often, newspapers will report that a psychologist has released a warning to parents that belief in Santa Claus is hazardous to their children's psyches. The earliest such warning in my file goes back to 1949 when the famous psychiatrist, Brock Chisholm, a Unitarian who served as head of the World Health Organization of the United Nations, asserted that "any child who believes in Santa has had his ability to think permanently injured. Such a child will become the kind of person who will develop a sore back when there is a tough job to do, and refuse to think realistically when war threatens." Dr. Chisholm revised his view somewhat in a 1957 book in which he suggested that we not do away with Santa, but that every time we speak of him, or read a fairy tale, we should preface it with a disclaimer statement that "the story you are about to hear is not true," lest there be any confusion in the child's mind.

Given what "realistic thinking" about war is usually understood to mean, I tend to view Dr. Chisholm's earlier warning as a recommendation; and I have to say that the people who I know who do not believe in Santa Claus are more likely to have sore backs than the people I know who do believe.

But Dr. Chisholm speaks to the traditional Unitarian in us - the Unitarian who believes that everything that is not entirely rational is suspect. We get caught on the horns of a dilemma every year at this time, as we wrestle with the complexity of celebrating the anniversary of a baby born to a virgin two thousand years ago in a stable in Bethlehem. We feel pretty certain that it never happened. Many of us have fled from churches which based their world views on the science of the first century and insisted upon the recitation of creeds which affirmed as true things we could not believe. Even those of us who grew up in Unitarian Universalist Churches are aware enough of the dominant culture to be "touchy" about affirming mythologies in which we do not believe.

[impelled to celebrate]

And yet, it is hard for us not to celebrate. Some would say that it is because of the cultural pressure of the society's celebration, and others would say it is because of an internal need - a need attested to by the almost universal existence of festivals at the time of the winter solstice. The very movement of the planet seems to evoke a response from within us. If there is a compelling need to celebrate, it seems reasonable to join in the form of expression utilized by the people around us. But we doubt the story, and so we are torn.

The psychoanalyst, Bruno Bettelheim, in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, took on the rationalists several years ago, insisting that there are very good reasons for fairy tales, since many of them communicate a kind of psychological truth with a powerful voice

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that helps children to gain an understanding of the world. He insisted that it is only the literalistic minds of some parents for whom the fairy tales present a problem, and asserted that it is children who have been denied childhood enchantment who have, at a later age, turned to chemical substances in search for the fantasy they lacked.

In fact, in recent years, Unitarian Universalism has shifted somewhat in its orientation to reason -- not, I hope, by becoming irrational - not by affirming as true things that fight against reason, but by becoming open to the possibility that there is something more than reason - that there is a place for poetry as well as prose.

It is in this context that I want to affirm my belief in Santa Claus as being more defensible and more utilitarian than belief in the birth of a supernatural being in a manger two thousand years ago.

For me, as some of you may recall, the celebration of Christmas centers the ritual of watching the 1947 movie, *Miracle on 34th Street*. For me, that film classic is our generation's equivalent of Dickens's *Christmas Carol*. It gets me in the mood. It focuses on the issues that I believe we face. I can never quite understand how some people see *It's a Wonderful Life* as the quintessential Christmas story because it doesn't come close for me.

(The miracle of videotape has made the film experience available at our own convenience, rather than forcing us to watch for the time that the local or cable channels choose to slip it in at their convenience.)

[the story]

For the sake of those few who have never seen it, for those who have not seen it in a while, and to celebrate it for those who have seen it recently, let me recall the genius of Valentine Davies, one of the great screenwriters of Hollywood's Golden Age.

The story begins, as Christmas does for many Easterners, with the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade. The miracle of television, and the network competition, has served to trivialize the Macy's parade, making it only one of many, but there was a time that I can remember when Macy's parade was the parade - at least, as I said, for us Easterners.

They are getting ready to roll out the Santa Claus float, when a kindly old man (superbly played by Edmund Gwinn) points out to the woman in charge that the Santa on the float is drunk. The woman (Mrs. Walker - played by Maureen O'Hara) asks the old man if he will substitute, since he bears more than a passing resemblance to Santa Claus, even without makeup. While he is not accustomed to substituting for spurious Santa Clauses, one look at the faces of the waiting children convinces him that he must. He makes such a hit with his genuine appearance that he is hired to be Macy's Santa for the season.

The plot thickens when it is discovered that the old man really believes he is Santa Claus. He goes so far as to send Macy's customers to Gimbels, when Gimbels has a better buy on a toy. He survives the storm this creates when Mr. Macy discovers what great publicity this policy generates.

Doris Walker is a very rational person who was taken in by dreams and fantasies once, but who has smartened up enough to keep all that from happening to her daughter,

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Susan (played by the young Natalie Wood.) Susan was brought up not to believe in Santa Claus, or giants or fairies, and stupid kids stuff like that. She was, in fact, a loner since she had so little in common with other kids -- one might even call her a cultural illiterate.

The old man, whose name is Kris Kringle, decides that Mrs. Walker and Susan are good test cases -- maybe there would be hope for the future if he can win them over to believing. He tells Mrs. Walker:

You know, Mrs. Walker, for the past 50 years or so, I've been more and more worried about Christmas. It seems we're all so busy trying to beat the other fellow in making things go faster and look shinier and cost less, that Christmas and I are sort of getting lost in the shuffle. Christmas is still Christmas. Christmas isn't just a day, it's a frame of mind. That's what's been changing. That's why I'm glad I'm here, because maybe I can do something about it.

Kris moves in with Fred, the bachelor lawyer across the hall from the Walkers, and begins to work on Susan and her mother. Just as he thinks he is making progress, the lunatic psychologist on Macy's staff has Kris dragged off to Bellevue as a psychotic. Thinking that he has failed with the Walkers, Kris gives up and intentionally fails all the psychological exams and is committed.

The dramatic highpoint of the film is the committal hearing at which Fred, the bachelor lawyer across the hall, tries to prove that Kris Kringle is sane -- that is dependent upon proving that he is Santa Claus, since that is who he claims to be.

When Mr. Macy is put on the stand, he testifies that he believes in Santa Claus - what alternative does he have? The son of the prosecutor is called to the stand and swears that his father, who never lies, told him there is a Santa Claus. The state concedes the existence of Santa Claus, but questions whether Kris is the genuine article.

In the meantime, Susan has written a letter to Kris at the courthouse, to cheer him up by telling him that he believes in him -- and even Mrs. Walker adds a postscript endorsing that view. A postal clerk questions why Santa Claus is getting a letter addressed to the courthouse, and suggests that this offers the perfect way of getting rid of the Santa mail from the dead letter office.

Just as Fred is about to concede defeat, he is informed that the mail has arrived. After getting the court to agree that the US Post Office is an authoritative and efficient organization (which tells you how old the film is), the bags and bags of letters addressed to Santa Claus are brought into court and placed at the feet of Kris Kringle, proving that, in the eyes of an official US Government Agency, Kris Kringle is the real Santa Claus. Released from the hospital on Christmas Eve, Kris, of course, disappears for the night along with the reindeer from the Bronx Zoo. They reappear, sweaty, the next morning.

Susan and her mother and Fred visit Kris Christmas morning at the retirement home at which he generally resides. Susan is a little disappointed because she had asked Kris to get her dream house. Her mother tells her that "Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to."

Kris draws a map for Fred of a short cut to take to get home, which happens to lead them right by the very house Susan dreamed of. She leaps from the car and finds everything she expected in the house, which happens to be for sale. Mrs. Walker and Fred

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see the possibilities in this for them, - the bachelor lawyer is not to be a bachelor much longer - and over in the corner we see Kris Kringle's cane leaning against the wall. And we know Santa Claus has come through.

[it's "our story"]

I recount that story, and I watch it year after year, because I believe that it is our story. We don't have to check the personnel records to know, and I mean know, that Doris Walker is a Unitarian - with a vengeance. She says all the things about fantasy that I have heard many Unitarian Universalists say, with equal passion. She and her daughter are really blasé about the whole Christmas bag. I can identify with her skepticism. I identify with her toleration of the nice old man who thinks he is Santa Claus, but seems harmless anyway.

I can also identify with her being won over by her experience. While she is skeptical, she is at the same time open to new experience, a new reality. When she adds her endorsement to Susan's letter, saying that she too believes in Kris Kringle, it is not a renunciation of her reason. It is a proclamation that she is a multi-dimensional person who has been opened up by her love for Kris. For the moment, if he says he is Santa Claus, he is Santa Claus: the belief makes more sense than the disbelief.

Perhaps a part of my attachment to the film is due to the fact that I have a very clear memory of a visit to see the Macy's Santa Claus with my parents, and it was clear that he was the real thing. But then we saw the Gimbels Santa and I was troubled. My parents explained that there were so many children to be seen that the real Santa's brother filled in for him. And I was satisfied. (And I was only fifteen at the time.)

[putting on the suit]

There is no time that I have believed more in Santa Claus than when I have put on a Santa suit to substitute for him.

My major research paper when I was in theological school was on the subject of charismatic leadership. There are people who have the gift of being natural leaders. There are also people who seem rather ordinary until they assume an office which brings out them qualities that had been unsuspected before. (Pope John XXIII is an example.) It has to do, perhaps, with rising to the occasion. All I know is that I, like others I have spoken with, had the experience of putting on the suit and becoming someone other than myself. When I have seen a particular look in the eyes of most of the children and some of the adults, I have known for a certainty that there is a Santa Claus.

[the root of the story]

The myth, which is larger than the reality, richer than the reality, deeper than the reality, is based on a real person - Nicholas the Bishop of Myra, in Turkey, who was born in the year 270, to a couple who had been married for thirty years and had not been blessed with children. He was miraculous from birth, reportedly standing in the water of his first

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bath. His parents died in a plague when he was nine, and according to the legend, he transferred his love for them to love for all the poor, to whom he secretly gave food, clothing, and money, usually at night.

One of the stories told about him is about a friend of his parents whose three daughters were unmarried because their father was too poor to provide them with a dowry. The girls agreed to draw straws to see which would become a prostitute to raise dowry money for the others. Nicholas heard about this and secretly slipped a bag of gold into the room of the eldest, and subsequently into the rooms of the other girls so that all could marry.

It is reported that St. Nicholas was responsible for twenty-one recorded miracles. His fame spread from his native Turkey across Christendom, and the feast of his birth, December 6th, became a prominent holy day. By the year 1400, there were more than five hundred hymns honoring St. Nicholas.

The earliest record of gift giving being associated with him dates to twelfth century France where nuns began the practice of secretly leaving gifts for children in poor families on the eve of St. Nicholas' day. He was known by many names - Sinterklass by the Dutch, Pelze Nicol or Buller Clos, or Ashenclos by the Germans; Samiklos or Santiklos by the Swiss; and Sint Niklaes by the Belgians.

He came to the New World with Christopher Columbus who entered the West Indies on St. Nicholas' Day, December 6, 1492, and named the port St. Nicholas. On one of Henry Hudson's trips for the Dutch West India Company, the lead ship had on its bow a figurehead of the saint of sailors, St. Nicholas. The settlers who accompanied him erected a statue of Nicholas in the square of the town of Manhattan, and their first church was dedicated to Sinter Klas.

[the myth grows]

When Washington Irving wrote his History of New York under the pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker, he wrote of the Dutch burghers celebrations of St. Nicholas birth and the stories of how he would ride over the housetops "drawing forth magnificent presents and dropping them down the chimneys of his favorites" and he told of the hanging of stockings by the chimney."

Irving's friend Clement Moore, an Episcopal minister who taught Oriental and Greek Literature in a seminary, was an amateur poet who often burst into verse on family occasions. In 1822, he promised his daughter Charity that he would write something special for Christmas. He took the characteristics of St. Nicholas that Washington Irving had detailed, and added them to some that were in circulation from other authors, and came up with "The Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas, or Santa Claus," which began, "Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house...."

Charity showed the poem to friends who made copies, and soon it was in circulation. It was printed the following year (1823) by the Troy Sentinel without credit to the author who was, to its editors, unknown. It was not until 1837 that Moore decided that his name could be used with his poem.

Many people tried illustrating the poem and its hero. The most famous illustrator

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was Thomas Nast, Harper's Weekly's famous political cartoonist, who was the first to symbolize the Democratic party with a donkey and the Republicans with an elephant. He annually made drawings of Santa Claus which evolved over time. The Santa most of us picture is not so much Nast's as it is the product of Coca Cola's artist Haddon Sundblom who began drawing Santas for Coke advertising in 1931. He first used a retired salesman, and then himself as model, and it is his conception of Santa that has become the modern image all around the world.

[materialistic?]

There are people who are concerned that Santa Claus is the symbol of the materialistic dimension of Christmas. One group of researchers found that, in fact, belief in Santa Claus seemed to lead children to a less materialistic view of the holiday. By the time the child is able to let go of a literal belief in Santa, they appear to be ready to embrace what some researchers call:

a more spiritual understanding of him as a symbol. The character of Santa Claus with all of his supernatural attributes seems to prepare children for a more abstract reality. This is no trifling character to youngsters. He embodies power, knowledge, justice, compassion, and generosity.

One nine year old they interviewed explained "The real Santa Claus is you. There isn't a person living at the North Pole with little elves helping him. . . But there's a feeling inside you at Christmastime which makes you feel good and happy and everything."

I was fascinated to learn that one study showed that "Although about 70% of first graders are firm believers, only 10% of their parents believe they are still that naive."

Dr. Carl Anderson, who did his dissertation on "On Discovering the Truth: Children's Reactions to the Reality of the Santa Claus Myth," found that the majority of kids went through a gradual process of coming to terms with the mythical quality of Santa. He urges parents to allow kids to accept the truth when they want to, but to realize that some of their questions may be aimed at seeking permission to continue believing.

[Dear Virginia]

The classical response to the question of Santa's reality is, of course, the response that Francis Pharcellus Church, a religious skeptic who wrote on theological issues for the New York Sun, penned in response to a letter in 1897 from the 8 year old Virginia O'Hanlon. Following a family discussion, she wrote to the paper's Question and Answer column saying:

I am eight years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says "If you see it in the Sun it's so. Please tell me the truth: is there a Santa Claus?"

And Francis Pharcellus Church wrote:

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia,

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whether they be [adults] or children's, are little;e. In this great universe of ours, [a humans] is a mere insect, an ant, in intellect, as compared with the boundless world about us, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginia. There would be no childlike faith, then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment except in sense and sight. The eternal light which fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor [adults] can see.

No Santa Claus! Thank God, he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.

Laura Virginia O'Hanlon Douglas earned a masters degree from Columbia and a Doctorate from Fordham, had a distinguished career as a public school administrator, and died thirty-eight years ago at the age of 81. To the best of our knowledge, she was not scarred by her continued belief in Santa Claus.

[Santa's human face]

Santa Claus is not, in the common understanding, a supernatural figure. While childhood endows him with some pretty remarkable talents, for many of us, it is in fact his human face, his human nature which is most powerful. Unlike a deity in whose hands we are putty, Santa Claus becomes even more powerful, not less, when we recognize that it is we who give him life. And in the process of giving Santa Claus life, our own lives are transformed: we discover, by manifesting the qualities associated with him, that they are qualities that reside in us - waiting always for an awakening touch.

Sixty-nine Christmases have not diminished my belief in the reality of Santa Claus.

I am proudly a skeptic a good 350 days a year, but, remembering that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds, I take comfort in being able to suspend my skepticism every once in a while. And never more than faced with the jolly old elf of Christmas. My life is made more whole, my joy more joyous, my delight more delightful as I am converted each year to a belief in Santa Claus. I invite you to take the risk too.