

## A Different Christmas Tradition

Before we were married, my husband informed me that in the event that we ever had children he preferred not to invite Santa Claus to our house. Having had fond memories of looking forward to Santa's visit I was not sure I agreed with this idea. However, after we discussed it, and I understood his reasons behind this odd notion, I promised to think about it, all the time expecting that we would do like everyone else across the nation come Christmas Eve by welcoming Santa into our home to bring gifts to our children. I mean, who were we to buck tradition?

We were married four years before we had our first child. Since he was born in early November, not inviting Santa for his first Christmas was no big deal; besides, we were going to travel home to visit family (a 26 hour trip one way) and show off the new baby for Christmas. We would not even be in our own home that Christmas.

The next year we had an eight year old join our family who had lived in the orphanages of Russia until the previous year. Since she and our son had received lots of gifts from family members we did not bother inviting Santa that year.

The following year we added an adorable baby girl who, like her brother, was born just weeks before Christmas. Again, we did not invite Santa as the youngest two were too young to understand and our adopted daughter did not seem to care. Yes, she had known something similar in the Russian orphanages but had learned not to expect much from him.

Our children were fortunate enough to have a grandmother who enjoyed shopping and overloaded them with gifts at Christmas time. Once, when our youngest daughter was three she became lost behind the stack of packages from her grandmother. It was then that I decided we had a problem. Not only was our den a wreck, but the children did not seem to appreciate what they were given and sometimes did not even know whom the giver was. They had enjoyed ripping open the packages, but it seemed that pleasure did not last past that one day. I decided then and there that we would do something different the next year.

We live in a fairly large antebellum house and tend to lean toward some of the ideas and decorating styles of the Victorian era. I started thinking about the Twelve Days of Christmas that were celebrated by past generations and decided that it would be nice if we followed suit by stretching our Christmas celebrations over a twelve day time period. Would the children enjoy the change? The only way to determine that was to give it a try. What would our family members think of the idea? Needless to say, they were less than impressed and not convinced that we were doing the right thing by subjecting our children to an idea that would make them different from their peers. In other words...had we lost our minds?!

I pitched the idea to my husband and he said he had no problem in giving the idea a try. He thought it was rather novel actually. The first year we learned some lessons that caused us to make changes in subsequent years. That year we began our Christmas celebrations by reading the Christmas story from Luke 2:1-20. Then we allowed the children to open presents from grandparents, other relatives, and friends on Christmas Eve. In the evening on Christmas Day they began opening their presents from us. That first year we wrapped 12 presents for each of our children and then just let them pick the one they wanted each night. Of course, the largest gift was chosen first. I immediately saw a flaw in the new tradition and knew it would have to be changed the next year.

The following year we again had them open gifts from others on Christmas Eve and our youngest read from Luke. That year reading before opening gifts became part of our new tradition. Each night we read a Christmas story from old books that I had bought at auctions or in antique stores. Some of these stories have become favorites and are requested each year. I have since collected other books and try to read different Christmas stories and even included poetry just to keep things fresh and interesting. Sometimes we would have cookies or some other snack to nibble on while the story was being read. However, since the rest of the world had finished with Christmas already, we didn't always have as much time in the evenings as we'd have liked in order to enjoy our time together and open the next gift. On those evenings we skipped the snacks.

Another change to the second year of our new tradition involved the selection of gifts. Rather than letting the children pick just any gift, we numbered each of the gifts and had the children draw a number from a little tin with a lid that I had bought just for that purpose. Each child had their own tin and each tin was different. They would close their eyes and draw one number from the tin. Their next step was to find the present with the matching number. This added a kind of treasure hunt feeling to our celebration. It also gave clearer meaning to the verse in Luke 11:9 "...seek, and ye shall find..." In fact, one year we did do a treasure hunt. For the oldest daughter who could read a rhyme was written on a 3x5 card as her clue. For the younger two, pictures were drawn that they had to decipher in order to find their present of the day hidden somewhere in our big old house. They enjoyed this game a lot. It was this year that we had a bad ice storm which caused the power to go out for several days. That meant that our evening Christmas celebrations were done by candlelight. From that point on the children always wanted to open their gifts by candlelight so another tradition was born.

When you start something new that has never been done before, there is always some trouble shooting required. For example, one year I had more than 12 gifts for each child. How to handle this became a big question. My solution was to place a slip of paper for each gift over the 12 with the word "EXTRA" into their tin. If they drew the "EXTRA" slip first then they were allowed to pick a gift marked "EXTRA" and draw again until they pulled out a number. The "EXTRA" slips soon became their favorite to retrieve from the tin as they could choose which extra package they opened. Guess which one that usually was...yes, the biggest one first.

On good years, those were ones when I had lots of time to shop and find lots of inexpensive small gifts throughout the year, we stuffed stockings that the children could empty each morning. One year I was able to find books at the Dollar Tree about Wishbone the detective dog on PBS. One book went into my son's stocking each day. There were ten or eleven of the books and he had each of them read before the day was over. He greatly enjoyed the books and asked for more the next year. Unfortunately, I was never able to find more at just \$1 each.

Other stocking stuffers have been socks, lip balm, writing paper, fingernail polish, coupons or gift certificates to local fast-food restaurants, puzzle books, miniature cars, etc. Stocking stuffers do not have to be large, just something with which the children can start their day. The stocking stuffer that they all looked forward to most was a large bag of M&Ms that they did not have to share with anyone. I usually give these the first morning of our celebrations just to see who can make them last the longest.

We have enjoyed this new way of celebrating Christmas for several years now; however, it was not well received at first, especially by my son who always wanted the largest present first. But, over the years my children have learned to wait for good things to be given to them; a lesson that too many of the younger generation has yet to learn. Our children also learned that the biggest box does not necessarily hold the best present; a validation of the old saying, "Good things come

in small packages.” By stretching out our celebration time from just one evening and one day to an evening plus 12 days we have a chance to really reflect on what this time means to us and to enjoy the gifts one at a time rather than the normal rip it open, throw it aside, rip it open, throw it aside mentality that I began observing in my children at a very young age. When January 5<sup>th</sup> rolls around we have truly enjoyed our holiday and are ready to move on into the New Year.

The time of gathering together each night has become precious to us and I know I will miss it once the children are grown and gone. I can honestly say that we have not missed the visit of Santa, but we could have done without the flack from our family members who thought we were nuts. To their way of thinking we were depriving our children of one of the best parts of Christmas, the part that most people focus on in the month of December. To our way of thinking we have given our children a better understanding of why we celebrate Christmas, concentrated family time where being together is enjoyed not endured, and lessons that could not have been learned had we followed the traditional path of celebrating Christmas as we had grown up doing. Our children would tell you that they have not felt deprived and enjoy the anticipation each evening rather than the build up and quick let down that most everyone else goes through on Christmas Day. Was it worth it to buck tradition? You bet your red velvet suit it was!

Copyright ©2009, C. M. Anderson. All rights reserved.