

The Santa Game
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For some of us, I know, Christmas is that season that begins before Halloween and shuts down about midday on December 25. But I'm a bit old-fashioned and, though the New Year has come and gone, I'm considering this the Ninth Day of Christmas, though my true love did not give me Nine Ladies Dancing. Actually, we each gave the other colds this year, and we are both struggling back to health.

What you may not realize is that Christmas is evolving; it is not just the season of the Prince of Peace, not just about stars and wise Zoroastrian priests on camels, about a spike in retail sales that allows merchants to finish the year in the profit column, about thousands of concerts and carolings and suspension of normal business. Christmas is all those things, but it now also means the Santa Surveillance State.

How do children survive childhood? How do they learn the difference between right and wrong? How do they learn to control their shadow side, the jealousy, the anger, the disappointment? How do they, how do any of us, learn to channel our destructive impulses into harmless or constructive ones?

One theory says you have to have a system of rewards and punishments. Without rewards and punishments, this theory goes, the child is never going to come to right behavior on his or her own. This theory is behind what I am calling the Santa Game.

The promise of Santa is that he knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake, and he knows if you're naughty or nice, so you'd better be nice or you won't get anything in your stocking.

This idea of Santa is a little bit like the idea of God described in Psalm 139:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

Or it's like Big Brother in George Orwell's classic novel of totalitarianism, *1984*.

Santa knows what you have been doing and on Christmas Day, when all the other kids are opening their sweets and playing with their toys, there is the threat, the possibility, that there may be nothing in your stocking, like there was in bad King John's, the A.A. Milne poem I recited at the Christmas Eve service. Or it could even be worse than nothing. I never personally knew anyone who got anything but presents in their stocking, though my mother says that her brother

Albert one time got ashes and switches, and I have heard of people getting lumps of coal. At least you can burn the coal and stay warm.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, the Santa Claus we know today was invented by the Knickerbocker group in New York in the early Nineteenth Century to solidify an imagined Dutch heritage. He was based loosely on St. Nicholas, a Fourth Century bishop from what is now Turkey, but the more immediate folk precursors of Santa figures in Europe were Belsnickel and Krampus, who are two folk figures concerned with punishing and terrifying children. Santa Claus, of course was invented to be largely benign, but some of these older European ideas have crept it, so we have popular songs asserting that even Santa makes his list and checks it twice, finding out who's naughty and nice.

In the last ten years, there has been a new twist on this Santa's observations. After all, Santa is only one dude and even a child can question how one dude can keep track of all the children in the world. To answer that question, ten years ago, someone invented the Elf on a Shelf. It started out as a self-published children's book sold with an accompanying doll, but it caught on and was made into a CBS animated TV special and is now all over America. The idea of Elf on a Shelf is that you take the little doll into your house around Thanksgiving and between then and Christmas, the elf makes nightly reports to Santa at the North Pole about the behavior of the children in the house. There are certain rules: no human is supposed to touch the elf, or the magic will evaporate, but without touching, somehow the elf is found in a new place in the house every morning when the children wake up. This has created in these households a new normal; a house under 24-hour moral surveillance. And of course, there have developed websites where you can post pictures of your elf and share elf stories.

Now I'm sure this is handy for parents. If junior is acting up, you just have to report him to the elf and remind him that his behavior will be noted at Christmas. But the implications to me are downright creepy. A Washington Post article examining the subject concludes "The Elf on the Shelf" is just another nannycam in a nanny state obsessed with penal codes. As long as you believe in him, the pixie-scout elf is no different than the store security camera and the gizmo that automatically generates speeding tickets. The tattletale elf, who reports back to the corporate Christmas machine, fits right in with our times."

I was discussing this with Jacqueline's family and one of her relatives mentioned a young mother she knew who does not even celebrate Christmas in her household, but nevertheless has an Elf on the Shelf to keep the young ones in line!

What interests me most about the Santa Game is how it resembles the old arguments about the afterlife. Now the afterlife is always a topic for speculation. There is a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which Calvin asks in the first panel, "Don't you wonder where we go when we die?" Hobbes thinks this over for the second panel and then in the third he suggests "Pittsburgh?" In the fourth panel Calvin replies, "You mean for the people who are good or the ones who are bad?"

Universalists had a unique view of the afterlife, asserting that the God who made the world loved humans too much to permit them to suffer in Hell eternally, no matter what they had done in this life. Universalism quickly came under attack from the rest of the Christian world, who said, without punishment in the next life, why would anyone ever do right in this one? If you could have your way with the world in wanton disregard of law, morality and the interests of others, and still die and go to heaven, why would anyone ever do the right thing? Further, went the argument, if Universalists didn't believe in eternal punishment, they can't be trusted. So Universalist children were barred from Universities, and Universalist adults were barred from serving on juries or giving testimony, because their oaths would be meaningless. Those early Universalists fought back. They started their own Universities – Tufts, St. Lawrence, Meadville. And they argued basically that virtue was its own reward. In the 1805 Winchester Profession, the Universalists said this:

“We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.”

In other words, virtue is its own reward, vice is its own punishment, you don't need this big contrived system of rewards and punishments to enforce morality. In the early 1830s, this controversy about whether there were rewards or punishments in the afterlife blossomed into a full-fledged debate between the minister we regard as the father of Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, and the chief theologian of Universalism, Hosea Ballou. Take a look at the symbol on the hanging behind me here. You will notice the flaming chalice, but do you also notice what surrounds the chalice? It is two circles, and they are each offset a little bit. They represent Unitarianism and Universalism, two separate theological systems which joined organizationally in 1961 without ever resolving the differences between them, which had been profound in the Nineteenth Century. Most ministers will concentrate on the large areas of overlap between the two movements, the freedom of thought, critical attitude towards the Bible, respect for democratic processes, etc. I am also interested however, in the slivers, the crescents where the two historically disagreed, and this issue of rewards and punishments is one of the main ones.

William Ellery Channing, the Unitarian, and Hosea Ballou, the Universalist, ministered for decades to flagship churches in downtown Boston, lived within half mile of each other on Beacon Hill, and yet, for all that the historical record discloses, never met each other in person! However, this did not prevent them from engaging in a dispute over divine retribution. Sometime in the early 1830s, Channing preached and published a sermon entitled “The Evil of Sin.” In it, he took specific aim at the Universalists without, however, naming them. In discussing the afterlife, Channing asserted that we shall carry into the next life the mind we had in this life and sin committed in this life will produce suffering in the next. So the afterlife is analogous to this life, and it is nonsensical to suppose that someone who had been terribly wicked in this life would all of a sudden become a saint upon death. In effect, Channing said, St. Peter wouldn't recognize Idi Amin or Adolf Hitler at the pearly gates if they came with haloes. Purged of their great sin, they wouldn't even be the same people.

This was an attack by one of the most prominent ministers in Boston on a central tenet of Universalism, and Ballou, as that religion's chief spokesperson, could not let it go unchallenged in public print. Channing published a sermon; Ballou published a book in rejoinder.

Channing had maintained, that the next life would be similar to this one, what he called the principle of analogy. Ballou said Channing is ignoring one of the features of this life, which is that good people, the saints, are broad-minded and empathetic and are always trying to bring the sinners around to righteousness. If the principle of analogy holds, the saints should have that same care and concern for the sinner in the next life, but if that were the case, they could not stand to see the wicked suffering the torments of Hell. Channing said it is not logical for the sinner to have a radical break from his past character upon death, but Ballou said it's just as radical to suppose that the saint goes from a benevolent concern for the sinner before death to utter indifference to the sinner's suffering after death.

Ballou concludes,

“In taking a general view of this weighty subject, it seems impossible to avoid surprise at the zeal which is manifested in support of the doctrine which carries sin and misery into the future state, but resigns at death all those holy feelings, those heavenly compassions and those merciful desires, which in this world engage the saints in the blessed cause of bringing sinners to repentance. Finding a stream, so broad, so deep and so rapid, it is natural to inquire for the fountain from which it flows. Does it flow from that God who is love? Can infinite love take pleasure in continuing sin beyond this mortal state, and in discontinuing those compassions, and that heavenly mercy, which so kindly flow towards the unhappy guilty in this world? In reasoning thus, do we reason from analogy? No; we contradict analogy.”

The stream flows from God who is love. That's what's missing from Channing's argument, and that's what Universalism always insists is central to the whole picture. A system of controlling behavior through rewards and punishment, whether we're talking about the afterlife or Santa Claus, is based on fear and greed – fear of the bad consequences and greed for the good. If happiness and holiness are inseparably connected, this suggests that an ethic can be built on happiness rather than fear. Universalists did not consider hunger to be a bad thing. Hunger is part of the human condition, the way we were made. There is no inherent goodness in denying hunger; to the contrary, satisfying hunger is a good thing. An act which is considered evil by society – a robbery, rape, assault – is seen through a Universalist lens as a person trying to satisfy hungers through illegitimate means.

This is why the Universalist remedy for what is popularly called evil is education. If everyone could see, hear and understand broadly, they would satisfy their legitimate hungers through legitimate means. This is another reason why Universalists built universities.

What has this to do with Santa Claus? Santa Claus dispenses a kind of justice at the kiddie level. Good kiddies get presents, bad kiddies get lumps of coal. Virtue is rewarded, vice is punished. And children growing up under this regime are being primed to live in a Calvinist world where God takes over the role of Santa.

Santa does not prepare them for a Universalist world. In a Universalist world, there is punishment, there is even Hell, but it is in this life, not in some other side of the grave. We administer our own punishment when we feel guilty for a wrong we've done. We construct hells in which our law will impose suffering on people to remind them of the wrong they have done, and in some instances keep them from doing it again. In the Nineteenth Century we thought these places would induce people to be penitent, so we called them penitentiaries.

There is an alternative to a government of morality based on reward and punishment. It is what the philosophers call virtue ethics. You bring up children not to fear punishment but to strive to understand and attain the virtues of the good life, such virtues as honor, courage, honesty, integrity, empathy. The societies of ancient Athens, Rome and certain civilizations of China were built on the cultivation of virtues.

It may be that the Santa Game is a useful stage in the maturing of children into responsible adults. But the external threat of rewards and punishments, of the moment of reckoning in front of the family fireplace on what should be a very happy day, is artificial and contrived. We don't need external surveillance to keep kids in line; we need to develop their own self-surveillance. It's called conscience.

Conscience involves awareness of ourselves as actors in a drama with other actors. It involves understanding that what we say and what we do will have consequences. It involves understanding that the other people who might be affected by what we do are not robots or cardboard cutouts, but are just as real as we are. Under the Golden Rule, ethical action involves putting ourselves in the place of the people who will be affected and asking, how would I feel if someone did or said that to me? And it involves answering that question honestly and not trying to evade the answer.

Santa doesn't really have an army of surveillance elves posted in every room of every kid's house. What Santa has to administer his justice is much better than that. Santa has every mother and father in the land. Every mother and father knows which kids have been naughty and nice much better than Elf on a Shelf can. And they bring to the job something better than a keen sense of justice – they bring unconditional love. And that's why most kids get some candy and some oranges and some toys in their stockings instead of ashes and switches.

Look, we don't know whether there is a God, we don't know whether there is an afterlife. We do know that Christmas morning comes around every year, because we've experienced it. But the Universalist vision of a God of unconditional love for every person regardless of race, sex, sexual orientation, belief, age or moral status is superior to one who keeps lists and rewards those who deserve it and punishes the others. I'd prefer that Santa be a Universalist as well.

We don't have to believe in God, thank God. But I'd hope we can believe in love. With love, anything is possible. Love has to act and speak through us. I wrote a hymn many years ago that we occasionally sing, whose chorus expresses this idea:
We are love's hands

Building community,
We are love's voice,
Singing and free
We are love's heart,
Joined as the rivers all
Flowing as one to the sea.

Amen.