

"Christmas Magic"

by

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Magic is a word most often associated with witchcraft, sorcerers, and spells. But it is also defined as a "mysterious quality of enchantment and delight". And when I was a child, there was one day in the year that surpassed all others in both enchantment and delight--a day that was pure magic. That day was the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

To understand what made this day so special, that even opening presents on Christmas Day took a backseat, I will have to take you back about 50 years to the late 1950's – early 1960's. At that time, the suburban shopping mall was still a gleam in the corporate eye, and everybody still went downtown to do their shopping. In those days the Christmas shopping season didn't begin until the day after Thanksgiving. But on the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving--after the stores would close--the visual merchandising teams and window dressers would work well into the early morning hours decorating their stores for Christmas.

Although the Christmas shopping season began the Friday after Thanksgiving, that was a workday for my Mom who was an account clerk at J C Penney's. But on Saturday morning, my Mom, and my sister and I would bundle up in heavy coats, boots, and wool hats, and take the bus into downtown Minneapolis to see the department stores decorated for Christmas.

The themes of the store windows and displays were a well-guarded secret that even most of the store's staff wasn't privy to. But there were always rumors. One year, rumor had it that Penney's would break with the tradition of using red and green in their decorations, and instead would adorn their store using pink and silver trimmings.

I remember my Mom coming home from work on Friday all excited by what she had seen that day at the store, and she promised we would not be disappointed. Anticipation began to overwhelm me. I remember waking up in the middle of the night and looking out the window at several feet of snow illumined by the full moon. Everyone in the house but me was fast asleep. I remember searching the horizon for some signs of the morning, wondering if the night would ever end.

I thought I would burst in anticipation, but finally the morning arrived. And soon we were on the bus, on our way to our glorious annual adventure.

Our first stop was always at "The Catholic Gift Store" where my sister and I would stock up on the latest in "holy cards", and my Mom would buy religious Christmas cards for Catholic family and friends. Secular cards for the Lutheran side of the family, who I presumed were non-religious, would be purchased later in the day at one of the downtown department stores.

As we walked down the street toward the department stores, I remember seeing a very old man standing all alone and leaning heavily on a cane. In addition to an overcoat, hat, and scarf to protect himself against the winter chill, he was wearing a broad smile upon his face as he gazed into the store window. I tugged on my Mom's coat to hurry her along as I was anxious to see what he was looking at. And when I reached the window, I gazed in astonishment at a magnificent scene of Santa's workshop where multiple Lionel trains--all decked out with Christmas trimmings--raced around a track as "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" played from speakers outside the store. The old man and I smiled at each other. It was easy, even for a 7 year old, to guess what he had asked Santa to bring him for Christmas.

Our next stop was the Penney's store, and my Mom was right. We were not disappointed. When we walked into the store we saw a veritable winter wonderland, where pink and silver wreaths and other decorations adorned the walls, and in the center of the store stood a huge magnificent white flocked tree embellished with enormous pink and silver ornaments, ribbons and trims, all illuminated by a giant flood light. It was the most beautiful Christmas tree I had ever seen! Up and down the aisles we walked as a medley of Christmas songs were being played, the most memorable of which were "Silver Bells" and "Winter Wonderland".

Once my Mom began working at Penney's, my parents had enough money to indulge themselves with an early Christmas present—a brand new, hi-fi stereo--and buying records for that stereo was on our shopping list. As we approached the record section, we saw teenagers congregating around the latest technological innovation—the transistor radio, from which we heard the voice of Brenda Lee belting out the latest rock and roll contribution to Christmas music, "Rocking around the Christmas Tree". After perusing the record selection, we purchased our 1<sup>st</sup> two albums for the new stereo--a two album set of the Harry Simeon Chorale's Christmas Favorites and Christmas hymns by the Sisters of the Holy Name Nun's Choir --both of which I recently came into possession of after my Father passed away a few weeks ago.

For hours we walked along the streets and through the stores, captivated by all of the displays. There were mannequins dressed in elegant gowns for Christmas parties; a children's Toyland decorated with enormous candy canes and smiling snowmen, and Santa Claus listening carefully to wishes of every child; carolers dressed in 19<sup>th</sup> century costumes singing on the street corners; and my special favorite, a series of windows decorated with scenes from "The Nutcracker Ballet" with its wonderful music played on speakers outside the store.

One time we got into a lengthy line at the restaurant at the most exclusive department store in the city. I wondered why, since I knew we had other plans for lunch. But up ahead I heard "oohs" and "aahs" and everyone's face was filled with surprise and delight. As we got closer I could see what had captivated everyone's attention. A Christmas display featuring a magnificent Christmas party with two-foot high dolls dressed lavishly in brocades, velvets, and lace with their escorts dressed in top hat and tails as the music "Deck the Halls" and "My Favorite Things" was played. I had never seen anything so beautiful. Once we had feasted our eyes on this splendid display, my Mom ushered us away saying we didn't have time to wait in line for lunch any longer, and we headed for our real luncheon destination-- the diner at Woolworth's where we enjoyed a hamburger, fries, and a Coke and talked about all the wonderful things we had seen that day.

Many, many years have passed since those wonderful experiences of my childhood. Christmases have come and gone and many things have changed. And looking at the world at Christmas through grownup eyes is not a view that necessarily offers much enchantment and delight. The Christmas shopping season no longer begins the day after Thanksgiving, but for some retailers it begins as early as Halloween with an all time low reached in 2006 when the Visalia J C Penney store put up their "trim a home" shop the weekend before Labor Day. While Christmas is called a season for giving, for some it becomes a time for unrealistic expectations, huge emotional let-downs, and a time of lascivious acquisitiveness. Consumerism abounds as retailers attempt to seduce shoppers with advertisements telling how purchase of their merchandise will help achieve happiness or acceptance, or the pleasure they deserve. Depression, grief and loneliness are often exacerbated by shattered family circumstances and increased debt loads. It can be a time of overeating, overdrinking as well as overspending. It is a time when our Christmas calendars become overloaded, causing us to think in terms of "just getting the holidays over with".

It is also a time when it is easy to become demoralized at the perpetual conflict in our world even as the message of peace is preached from every pulpit. It is a time when we become painfully aware of people in our community who have no food for Christmas dinner, or no one to share it with. We are forced to confront the reality of hundreds of children and teenagers who have to rely on charitable donations through civic and religious organizations so that there may be a toy or gift card with their name on it on Christmas Day. For many of us who have become alienated from the religious traditions of Christmas there can be a huge feeling of emptiness and loss. Conflicts sometimes arise among those who do not see Christmas as a holiday in which they are included. And of course not every Christmas memory is a happy one.

But still, I love the Christmas season and always will. I look forward to it. It still is a time of magic for me. But I never really understood why I continued to feel this way--given all the negative associations with Christmas. That is, — until this past summer.

Sometimes profound insights can come to us from unexpected sources.

In a rare fit of housekeeping this past summer, I found myself dusting off the shelf where my CDs are stored. And coming across my collection of Christmas music I paused and looked fondly at them as they evoked many special memories for me. Later, as I made my way to the 60's rock music section, I came across an often-played CD, "Do You Believe in Magic" by the Loving Spoonful, one of my favorite rock bands of the decade. And as I sang to myself those often-heard lyrics of that song, I realized what it was that still makes Christmas such a magical time of year for me. The magic of Christmas is in the music.

What would Christmas be without music; indeed what would life be without music? Music is an integral part of the fabric of our being. It is a universal language, some would say the language of God. Once we hear it, it speaks to us clearly, and it touches each and every heart.

Music is far more than just entertainment. It helps each one of us find our unique social niche, bringing us together with other people who share common interests and values. It documents the history of social and cultural changes in society, and is always in a state of perpetual evolution, combining new ideas with older ones to create a sound that's unique to each generation. It speaks to us of our past; it is an indication of how things are today; and it gives us a view of the direction our society is heading.

*Karl Paulnack, pianist and director of the music division at the Boston Conservatory summed it up beautifully in this statement.*

“Music is one of the ways we make sense of things, a way to express feelings when we have no words, a way to understand things with our hearts when we cannot grasp them with our minds. Music is the language we choose when we are speechless.”

The hymns we sing at church help to build our spiritual community, and patriotic songs to give us a sense of national identity. In every step of our lives music places another brick on the foundation of who we are. Familiar songs help us recall special moments in our lives -- our first love, our first anti-war demonstration, or special memories of Christmases past.

Music is pure spirit. We cannot touch it, but it touches us profoundly and deeply. Many Christians await “The Rapture”, but I stand before you today as one who has actually experienced it. I have been raptured and music was the source of that bliss. Having been raised in the Catholic faith in the days before the Vatican II reforms, one of the earliest kinds of music I was exposed to was Gregorian Chant. I heard it, and I sang it as part of the Catholic Mass. It is a beautiful, sacred, and even mystical form of music--the embodiment of ancient Christianity.

But in the 1960’s, the Catholic Church parted company with its Latin musical traditions, and in my late 20’s I parted company with the Catholic Church, in much bitterness and disillusionment. It had been decades since I last heard Gregorian Chant, but in 1995 while touring in northern France I stepped into the Cathedral of Mont St. Michel in France and became immersed in it as the music filled the cathedral. In that instant, the music of the moment and the music of memory joined together in a kind of loving embrace that I felt to the very core of my being, and in that communion we became inseparably one.

For Unitarian Universalists, Christmas can be a bit of a paradox, as most members do not accept the divinity of Jesus Christ. Still it was members of our own Unitarian faith tradition who have had the most significant influence on how the holiday is celebrated, and have been responsible for developing themes that have become an integral part of the Christmas message. We are familiar with the influence Unitarian Charles Dickens has had on our holiday celebration through his wonderful story “A Christmas Carol”. But another, a Unitarian minister, had an equally profound and lasting influence on the Christmas season and its message, through his music.

In 1846, the United States had declared war on Mexico and like many Unitarian Ministers, Edmund Hamilton Sears denounced it as a war of aggression, and he

frequently spoke out against it. In response to the hostility he wrote a new Christmas Carol "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear". At the time, this carol was a major departure from the customary genre of Christmas music, and it forged a new theme for the holiday--one that we all take for granted today.

We hear the expression "peace on earth and goodwill to all" so often during this season of the year we may assume that it was always a part of the Christmas theme. But in fact, it was Reverend Sears song that popularized these words from the Gospel of St. Luke into a Christmas slogan of general usage. At the time, Sears' lyrics were such a controversial departure in the direction of social commentary that it angered religious conservatives. It was so controversial that a popular newspaper of the time wrote the following about the new carol--"[this] is just the kind of thing that we can expect from THOSE Unitarians." But its words and music moved millions of hearts, and it became a beloved and widely-accepted hymn. Today the theme of peace and good will to all is among the most important of all Christmas themes.

But the magic of Christmas music is not limited to religious subjects. In the early 1940's a Russian immigrant and son of Jewish cantor popularized a genre of secular music thereby making the Christmas season a celebration for all. Israel Isidore Beilin -- or Irving Berlin, as he came to be called, is credited with defining secular Christmas music as we now know it. In 1942 he composed the song "White Christmas" for the movie "Holiday Inn", but it became so popular that Bing Crosby also sang it during WWII to soldiers who were moved by its references to what their Christmases were like before the war and would be again some day. Still today, "White Christmas" is the biggest selling Christmas song of all time. WWII veterans will also remember back in 1943 when Bing Crosby released the song "I'll be Home for Christmas." It touched the hearts of Americans, both soldiers and civilians, who were then in the depths of World War II. It's message remains as poignant today as it was back then as new troops will soon join their comrades in Afghanistan, and become separated from their families at Christmas.

While much of today's music falls into various categories that appeal only to a particular group or generation, Christmas music is multigenerational. Young and old know the lyrics to popular Christmas songs and carols such as those we often hear as background music during holiday meals or parties, and retailers frequently play during the holiday season to share the festive spirit with their shoppers. And the genre's impact has only deepened as the years have passed. Every December, for a few weeks, crooners like Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Dean Martin return to life, and we see the past connect to the present as we listen to the same music our parents heard, and that our children also have come to associate with their own celebration of Christmas. And

every year, new songs such as Enya's "White is in the Winter Night" joins the ranks of songs that we associate with the season's beloved favorites.

Christmas music is both cross-cultural and politically inclusive. While various ethnic groups have their own unique musical traditions, today's immigrants will also find themselves singing along to Christmas tunes written by yesterday's immigrants, and Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives will join together to sing the same Christmas classics-- making Christmas a holiday for everyone to share. And some Christmas music can even transcend religious boundaries, like George Frederick Handel's "Messiah". Every year Christians, Jews, and atheists alike stand side by side singing the lyrics of this magnificent chorale work.

While Christmas has its critics, its Scrooges, and its predatory commercial interests, no time of the year like Christmas affords us with an opportunity to rid our hearts of sadness and gloom, and to share our love and blessings with others. It can be time of generosity, a time for us to free ourselves from whatever grudges or ill will we may hold on to. It can be a time for pausing in our frenetic pace, and see the needs of less fortunate people in our community, and take time to enjoy being with our friends and families. Just like everything else in life, Christmas is what we make of it.

And at the heart of this wonderful season we find the magic of Christmas--its music. It embraces our highest ideals and conveys this message to others. It speaks of our yearning for closeness with those we love, and bids us to take time to have fun, and to celebrate the season, as well as to contemplate the spiritual dimension of our existence.

So I bid you to shop, eat, drink, and celebrate in joyful moderation; but revel with reckless abandon and delight in the music of this special time of year. And may the magic of Christmas music cast its spell over you and bless you this holiday season.

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