

Christmas Eve was a magical time when we were children. We opened our gifts on Christmas morning, and we never received numerous or costly presents, but the evening of December 24th was the highlight of the season. I think it was the anticipation. I believed in the physical reality of Santa Claus, and I really don't know when it became clear to me that his bodily presence was a myth. Nobody ever told me, as far as I can remember. I think that at a certain age most children probably realize that Santa is an idea instead of a person.

We didn't have a fireplace, so if Santa had come down our chimney, he would have ended up either in the wood burning furnace in the basement or in the kitchen stove. We hung our stockings on the edge of the rolltop desk in the front room. I remember leaving something for Santa to eat, and it was always gone in the morning, proof that he really had come. "Stocking stuffers" that are popular today were not something we found in our socks. Instead, there was an orange—a treat we did not often have—hard and filled Christmas candy, peanuts in the shell, a few nuts of other kinds, and at least one chocolate drop, the chocolate covered fondant candy we liked and saw only at Christmas. One Christmas, Santa brought me a little chair, and I failed to recognize that it was an exact copy—in a smaller size—of the regular chairs we used, the 7-pin Scandinavian straight backed chairs made by a neighbor.

When we were children, our Christmas tree went up about the 20th of the month. In Runo's home, as is traditional in Sweden, the tree was decorated on Christmas Eve. He remembers that when he was little, they had actual candles on their tree, and his father stood by the tree the whole time it was lit. Whether he had a pail of water by his side I do not know. Runo said that the same procedure was used in the Swedish Mission Church. They had real candles on that tree too, but someone stood next to the tree to avert any possible disaster.

Every year, somewhere, I read about people who want to "put Christ back in Christmas." They don't seem to realize that the adaptation of the holiday really was in the other direction. The Christians, in an attempt—largely successful—to convert the peoples of Northern Europe, pasted their theology on a winter celebration that had been traditional for centuries. So, whether a person is a Christian, a pagan, a nontheist, a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or any of the other designations we use in order to separate ourselves from our fellow humans, any and all of us can choose to celebrate this winter festival, full of light, friendship, and good will. God jul!