

A Sack Full of Bull

WM A simple phrase, "Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas", shouted in a deep, jolly voice is enough to inspire even the naughtiest of children to repent. Each December stores, homes, streets, and even cars are decorated with his roly-poly face. His sack is slung over one shoulder, bulging with the promise of materialistic delight. The man, of course, is Santa Claus; a jolly fat man in a red suit with fur trim. He's said to be the jolliest elf in the North Pole, bestowing festively wrapped gifts to children all over the world every Christmas eve. Who wouldn't be in awe of such a man? Well, me for one. In this essay I will share my impressions of this mythic fellow.

WM Saint Nicholas of Myra is said to be the basis of our modern day Santa Claus. Like Santa, St. Nicholas brought gifts, but his intentions were nobler by far. St. Nicholas is said to have paid the dowry for three girls so they wouldn't become prostitutes. Our Western version gives gifts to anyone. His good favor is a bounty held high over children's heads in the hopes of controlling their behavior. Many parents use the promise of gifts as a Christmastime threat, "Santa's watching". This mythical creature is depended upon by children to give them their every desire. Whether it is toys, candy, or cash, children anticipate this bestowing of goods all year. When I was little, we were told to make our list so Santa would know what to bring us. The very act of writing this list was euphoric, because we knew we would get most, if not all, of the things we wanted. And each year my mother would spend beyond her means to grant us this fortune.

★ In America, Santa has been raised to a level just above Jesus. How many of us sing "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" instead of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen"? We decorate our houses for Christmas not with figures of the Virgin Mary cradling newborn Jesus, but ceramic Santas and wooden Santas and plastic Santas and anything else that could possibly be made with Santa's face. In my family, we were not raised with religion. But we celebrated Christmas every year with relish. This bastardized holiday is held much the same way in families all over the country. We are raised to celebrate materialism and greed in the form of a jolly fat man.

Other countries see Santa as an icon as well, though they may call him something else: Pere Noel, Father Christmas, Grandfather Frost, and Sinterklaas, for example. His simple message rings true to everyone who knows him: be good and you'll get stuff. Greed is a natural human emotion, but it is amplified in this jolly character. We buy excessive amounts of gifts for children, in turn reinforcing materialism. Santa's sack full of gifts virtually makes our mouths water. The corners poking out and the little noises it makes as Santa moves... oh, anticipation! The power of a simple burlap sack is astounding.

It's not only the sack of gifts that holds power; it's his suit as well. The red jacket with white fur trim, the matching pants and big leather boots, they grab our attention at first glance. Would Santa be as appealing with a blue suit and grey boots? How about a black suit and some sneakers? The color red itself signifies power. So by dressing this man up in red, we make him stronger. And the boots? We imagine one wearing black leather boots to be tough or strong. If Santa were to wear flip-flops or Keds, would he be a little less powerful? I think so.

Santa's physical characteristics conform to what we believe in our society. He's a jolly fat man, your typical chubby cherub. He's short, so as not to be domineering, and has grandfatherly white hair. Of course, his head is topped with a soft red cap to add a bit of tenderness to his appearance. Santa's shiny silver belt buckle adds a bit of machismo to the look, too.

If you were to judge the Santa experience purely on greed and materialism, you'd be missing out on an even more important factor: deception. The image of Santa itself is a lie. The real Saint Nicholas wore a short grey beard on his hollow face. He was old, yes, but realistically so. He wore robes over his clothing, as was the style at the time, and most like^{ly} some kind of animal hide boots to protect his feet from the elements. It's doubtful he was as polished as our modern-day Santa. He was probably dirty and a bit smelly since bathing wasn't routinely practiced at the time. He most certainly didn't have the coiffed beard and long silky hair we imagine today. But, as any good icon does, he changes with the times. I think we'd respond differently to a smelly old man with a garbage bag over his shoulder and a toothless grin on his wrinkled face. We, as a society, change our ideals with each generation, so our icons must as well.

The biggest deception is that which we bestow upon our children. From the time they can understand words, they can be lied to. We tell them that this man we've never actually met is going to enter our homes while we sleep, then eat our desserts and leave mysterious wrapped packages in our living rooms. They are brainwashed in their formative years by the people they trust the most: their parents. Santa is not only a happy lie, but a tool of conformity as well. The threat of finding a lump of coal in one's stocking is usually taken to heart. If the child is constantly modifying their behavior to fit materialistic values, then the child naturally forms the conclusion that these materials are desirable. We start out with the quaint idea of a jolly fat elf bearing gifts, and end up with money-hungry liars instead.

The financial burden of modern Christmas celebrations is enormous. Toys cost a small fortune themselves, not to mention electronics, gift cards for the extended family, gifts for the boss and coworkers, donations to charity, wrapping supplies, gas for mall trips, and a thousand other little things we buy each year add up to credit card debt and worry-filled nights: Can I make the mortgage payment this month? Will I be able to pay the electric bill if I buy Timmy that Nintendo? Christmas has become commercialized. We, as a society, are all guilty. We've taken a religious tradition, the celebration of Christ's birth, and turned it into a non-denominational cash fest – but why? In the olden days, as my grandmother told me, they were lucky to get a cheap doll for a gift. The doll was to be cherished. It would be kept in pristine condition for as long as possible, because you knew you wouldn't get another. When I was a child, I got several Barbies each Christmas, along with whatever doll was big at the time; I received art supplies, doll clothes, gift certificates, candy galore, and cold hard cash, which I would use to buy more toys. Mind you, we were on welfare, and my mother worked whatever jobs she could find. She'd borrow from friends and family to buy gifts and then be in debt till the next Christmas, when she'd start all over again. Some years, presents were scarce, by which I mean I only got 25 gifts instead of the usual 50 or so. There'd be stockings hung on the wall that were so heavy they would break. This continued for many years, until I put my foot down and told everyone I know to stop buying me gifts. If they bought one, I'd give it to the Salvation Army. If there was a suggestion of a dinner or a family party, I'd make sure to be elsewhere. I just got fed up with the materialism. That's one of the reasons I scorn Santa. He is the face of greed, the very image of capitalism gone crazy.

In other countries, where the population is non-Christian, Christmas is celebrated purely for the existence of Santa. Were he not so appealing, non-Christians wouldn't be lured in to this sacrilegious behavior. But the jolly old elf is hard to resist. People are willing to celebrate a holiday put forth to revel in the birth of a deity they don't believe in, as long as there are presents. Santa's smiling face is there to greet little Islamic children when they wake on Christmas morn. Children in African villages await the arrival of a big white man bearing gifts. The fact that Santa is tied in so closely with Christmas doesn't faze them. Santa has become an icon to these people for the same reasons he appealed to us: greed and materialism. His sack is never empty, his reindeer never tired. He has all the goods you could ever imagine, and he gives them out to everyone, regardless of race, gender, or political affiliation. Santa is a white man, therefore powerful. We have promoted this stereotypical character so fervently over the years, yet never really considered altering it. Why not a female Santa? He's our icon, so why not make him in our image? Why not a black Santa? We have a black president-elect. Why not a Santa who flies in a wheelchair instead of a sleigh, or a skinny Santa in drag? Why not? Because the most powerful stereotypical figure in our society is the white male. A black, handicapped Santa would be seen as weak. A gay-looking Santa in Armani with a Mohawk would not hold the same reverence as our modern-day Santa.

Speaking of appearance, why is it that in a modern world where fitness and body ideals are held high do we allow our children to worship a fat man? Perhaps a trimmer Santa would fit better with our societal self-image. And since an icon is a reflection of the society that creates it, why not sculpt Santa into a better representative? It's because people still hold the belief that a fat man appears jolly. Were Santa skinny, he would appear to have never enjoyed bountiful provisions. He is quite literally an image of self-centeredness. He takes cookies from millions of homes to aid in his self-absorbed state. If Santa is a representation of America, then it is a fitting one. Foreigners see America as "the Land of Opportunity", or a place where dreams come true; and this is a good thing. But Americans are also seen as greedy and self-absorbed, and Santa portrays this well.

So, next time you hear "Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas" being shouted in a deep voice, think of the commercialism that is being promoted, and ask yourself if you want to buy into that.