

Danville News Column
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“The Season for Giving (Up)”
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‘Tis the season for giving. ‘Tis also the season for giving up. Years ago my parents had to give up the Christmas they wanted, expected. I’ve discovered since how it happens all the time.

Perhaps it’s some consolation that they enjoyed Christmas they wanted for many years. We Andrews’ created some wonderful traditions. We ate our big meal on Christmas Eve – always roast beast. Off to midnight services. We’d drive home in the chill for stocking hanging, listening to two stories, setting out cookies for Santa. Finally, with sugarplum eyes, off to bed we wiggling ones went.

My parents honed the art of Nativity cruelty to a scalpel’s edge. Waterboarding? Ain’t nothing compared to our Christmas mornings. Christmas morning we children were allowed to huddle at the top of the steps that led downstairs to the living room and kitchen. At this point we were still permitted the luxury of remaining in our jamies (mine had space rockets). When given permission we could race down and marvel at what delights arrived magically during the night – IN OUR STOCKINGS ONLY, which had been thumb-tacked ritualistically the night before on the fireplace mantel. You must use the same puncture hole you have used all previous years lest Santa mistake your stocking for your sister’s, then she’d get the dart gun and you’d end up with hair ribbons.

After this stocking sorbet, we had to sit down at the kitchen table, pray, and eat breakfast. Then, back upstairs we were force-marched. We had to change into our civvies, make our beds, and brush our teeth. Bataan inspired dad. Could we now please raid the presents? No. If cousins were arriving we had to wait. If no cousins, we still had to wait until mom and dad were ready, her hair brushed and his hair Brylcreamed. Only then could we line up by age at the closed door to the porch – youngest first – and enter the world of presents, some gloriously unwrapped, most wrapped.

Our Christmas tree never was set up in the living room. Over the years our back porch evolved to wrap around two sides of our house. Dutch doors led to the enclosed porch which you accessed by four steps up. My mother’s father built our house when mom, dad, and three month old Larry moved to Jersey to go to work in grandpa’s Paint and Varnish Factory. For some reason, grandpa Young disdained basements, so when you would enter our house from the front door you walked down a flight of stairs into the first floor. Our living room windows looked out grass level, which meant, then, that the porch, built on ground level, was above the living room and kitchen. Grandpa borrowed his architectural designs from M.C. Escher.

Come Christmas morning the Dutch doors were ceremonially opened. But no stampede was tolerated. Youngest first. We first had to wait for Evie to toddle up the steps. Many

a Christmas morning, we wanted to trample her. Eventually, she sensed her authority, and, exercising her power, she would deliberately climb up those porch steps slower and slower, as if ascending Mount Everest. Our Fox Terrier Susie, quivering and tail wagging from the atmosphere of excitement, ignored the rules and raced into the room before us all.

Traditions. Evolving traditions.

Add a few more Christmases, a few graduations, a few marriages, and our first child was born. Since we pastor types work on Christmas Eve, we were forced to travel the five hours from Lancaster to Jersey on Christmas morning. Packing up was a rushing nightmare. We left late. Elaine and I snapped at each other. Well, I snapped, she murmured. The baby wailed most miles. We were relieved to discover you could warm a glass bottle on the defroster. We arrived to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace stressed and frantic. Next year, I announced we wouldn't be coming home for Christmas. We had our own home. If mom and dad wanted to see us, they knew where we lived. It was time for us to create our own traditions. Mom pouted. Dad understood.

What goes around, comes around. This year, for our first Christmas ever, one of our children has chosen to remain in her home 3,000 miles away and celebrate Christmas there. It now is our turn to adjust.

Christmas is a season for getting, yes. More so, 'tis the season for letting go. Come to think of it, that is exactly how the first Christmas began.