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A Big Little Kid's Christmas, Written by David J. Marcou on December 12-13, 2007

When I was just a little kid, or at least a big little kid, Christmas was hard on me. Well, maybe not exactly hard; maybe more like surprising; or maybe more like gushy-teary-making, with a dash of humor thrown in. Oh heck, for many of us, it was and is, all of those things rolled into one.

Though I was the oldest of seven kids and given to sentimental feelings even then, the world looked large and moving. Old St. James Church, where we attended, seemed like St. Peter's when we sang in the choir-loft, especially at Christmastime. And from fifth through eighth grades, when I was an altar boy, at Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, my peers and I (no girls, though, which shot the whole thing to heck in key ways) marched down the center aisle, end-to-end, with candles, and it was like the Pope himself was saying the Mass.

However, to my great shame and self-denunciation, to me then the most memorable part of those Midnight Masses was the treat we received afterward: Each altar boy received a full box of Snirkelettes -- those wondrous carmel-and-marshmallow confections -- and not just the small dozen or so to a pack you might get in the movie theater, but the huge, Mother-O-God box like my Grandpa and Grandma Marcou sold individually-wrapped, bite-sized candies from in their grocery store, Marcou's Market, on Rose Street, in the tiny semi-urban preserve we residents still think of as home, La Crosse, Wisconsin, on Mr. Twain's Mississippi.

Yes, I'd head home 15 blocks on my bike on the icy, snow-covered streets at 2 a.m., and when I got there, I'd decamp on the living room couch, place that veritable gold-mine of super-sweets under the couch, which was always covered with a blanket or bedspread, and laid there all night nibbling and all-out chewing down the goods. It was terrible on my teeth and my system overall, but I loved it. I already knew about Christmas Eve, so my parents let me stay up, and I don't recall falling asleep for long on those precious once-a-year nights.

The tree was there, next to me, large and well-lit, and some of the presents were there, until the big ones were finally brought in, all wrapped up, of course. Next-morning was always a thrill, as my siblings and I opened our presents, and Mom and Dad opened theirs. There were always plenty of hand-paintings and hand-print ashtrays for our parents, a big present for each of us kids plus one or two items of clothing, and Brach's candies, in-shell nuts, and oranges for everyone.

Sometimes, there were tears -- I think the train set or a bike might have brought those on, or a Barbie doll for one of my sisters -- but I don't think it was because we didn't receive what we wanted. Sometimes, we did and sometimes we didn't. We weren't rich people who could afford new bikes for everyone (I don't think I ever had a new bike then, always used, though I rode my bikes everywhere) or the most expensive clothes and shoes, but we never thought we were poor, and still don't. The tears happened because it was just a special time of year, because we were together and it meant something good to be together.

Now, some kids in Wisconsin then would have been overjoyed at the presents I used to get, at least if they planned on growing up to be a Gordie Howe or Jonas Salk. I guess my parents were giving me the benefit of the doubt, in case I didn't become too athletic, because one year I got handsome, rugged hockey skates (either my ankles or my sense of balance couldn't support them); another year I got a microscope.

My brothers and sisters received good presents, too, and those were often presents we all could play with – like a train set and army men – though my sisters were happiest with their dolls and play-do, because they could use both of the latter with their toy kitchens.

As happy as we kids were to receive our presents, the best part of Christmastime was winter and snow – and going outdoors and seeing if we could get "killed" in it. Of course, we didn't really want to be killed, but like Wily Coyote, we figured whatever didn't kill us would make us stronger, though not necessarily smarter.

Building snow-forts was truly fun, just like Eskimos, and the stash of snowballs (ice-balls was more like it, and it wasn't all that funny when you got hit in the head with one) you could pile up in them, awaiting the inevitable attacks, made us kids think we could take on the world -- whether that world consisted of Russian Cossacks on horseback, or Denny Behm, Jim McDougle, and Jeff Ceason, who lived in "very dangerous" proximity to us.

I and my brothers, Dennis, Dan, and Tom (and occasionally even my sisters, Diane, Lynn, and Mary Kate), were often making snowballs on days when the snow was packy. Oh, we'd throw together the occasional snowman, too, but neighborhood kids would regularly knock over each other's snowmen, so we figured we'd rather go down fighting ourselves than sit and admire those damned unthinking, unfeeling, unmoving snowmen, who couldn't even muster the courage and skills to protect themselves. Our sisters felt differently about snowmen, of course.

We also created small snow hills for sledding, when we were too lazy or cold to go to big parking lots a few blocks away that had huge drifts, due to blowing, plowing, etc. The Ceasons next door always had a small sledding hill in their yard, winters. Jeff, who was about my age but smaller than me and twice as much a wise-guy, could be infuriating. He loved to call me names, and when I went after him, he ran inside quick as lightning. Once in a while, I'd catch him and sit on top of him, but I just didn't have the guts/stupidity to punch his lights out. When I see Jeff on the streets occasionally these days, we stop and commiserate, because we are now good friends. He was even the maintenance man in my apartment building for a few years, and always took care of repairs for me promptly and without too many wisecracks.

My mother just reminded me of something on the phone that also happens in winter – receiving boxes of Christmas cards from charities, so you will feel more like donating to them. Today, my mother said she received two boxes of ten Neiman Marcus-style Christmas cards from the Lung Association. As she put it, "Someone really screwed up this time." Makes me feel really good when I hear someone else is screwing up in that way, because my parents blame me for spending too much money sometimes, when in fact I spend less money on everything I buy in a year than Ms. Spears does on infant-pacifiers.

When my siblings and I were little, it seemed the only thing you got for free from anyone outside of home was a Christmas popcorn ball at the school party from Santa, and if you were lucky, maybe a present from your teacher, though I now recall we got the same sort of treatment from a Santa in the neighborhood, who stopped by every year at each house on the block. It was always fun trying to guess who was in uniform, even though I wasn't very shrewd about seeing behind those threads and beard.

In grade school, I always had Franciscan nuns as my teachers, and they were kind, but sensible. I got my quota of new rulers and pencils then, which helped in a very non-partying way. And yet, the music and skits were sort of fun, if not to die for, but to poke fun at. (I guess kids never change, in some ways.)

My great downfall as a budding classical pianist occurred at Christmastime in seventh grade. I'd taken piano lessons at school (sometimes with a rather nice-looking, young nun as my teacher, but that's too boring a story to tell, unfortunately) for almost five years, and hated recitals with a passion. I never minded playing the black-and-white instrument when my family was around, or even for the state judging panel,

where I received an A grade. But by God, get me seated by a piano in front of a big room filled with under-heated grownups and overheated kids, and look out – no more Mr. Van Niceguy.

In any case, that Christmas Tom Haag, the eight-grade pianist who'd accompanied the choirs at every Christmas concert since Moses came down from the mountain, had come up with the flu. At the last minute, they called on Mr. Marcou (yep, me) as his replacement. I made a decision on the spot: no way was I going to play in front of that crowd; in fact, I would never take another school piano lesson again. I think my Christmas concert replacement was the good nun who'd taught me how to play. Thank the Lord for small miracles, though I wish I could still play the piano as well now as I did then.

There were times then when I liked music a great deal, even when I was playing it from a piece of sheet music. But in winter, it only passed the time successfully when I'd played myself out, outdoors, or when it was an excuse not to do homework. Today, I love poetry at Christmas, too, especially the step-poem my son composed in second grade, 'Snowman', which ends with the words 'happy Snowman'.

My dad is dutiful, and long was the hardest-working meat-cutter anyone ever saw. He still works part-time, and used to love the whole bit: cutting meats, filling his trays for the case, serving customers, unloading sides of beef from trucks, making deals with salesmen, even cleaning up a bit. To be sure, there's been plenty of stress on our parents (especially losing Tony Skifton, my sister Diane's oldest son, to drowning). Dad used to drink some – he hasn't drunk alcohol or smoked a cigarette since his heart surgery in 1987 – and my siblings and I still love both our parents (Rose and Dave), and God, too.

Although we said grace, especially before special meals, ours was not a Norman Rockwell (or is it Norman Mailer? I'd guess Mailer is more honestly imitable) painted Thanksgiving or Christmas meal. Sometimes, one or both of our grandfathers would join us for those meals; both grandmothers had passed away early on. Our grandfathers would take in the scene, and probably wondered what sort of wild Indians they were seated two steps back from.

Dad would do the turkey-carving, and was expert at it. And while a couple of us boys were starting to eat, throwing verbal jabs as we proceeded, my brother Dan was making our sisters sick by mixing all his food together on his plate, sort of an early fork-to-plate technique en route to ungodly consumption, including the coleslaw with potatoes and gravy. It was bad-looking, but he always ate everything, and apparently a female news anchor at one of our local TV stations, these days, does the same thing.

I guess we boys were all blenders by degrees, at table, though not to the extent Dan was. Meanwhile, my brother Tommy (who's short, muscular, witty, and very energetic) would be telling some sort of animated story that had our little sisters giggling. This is the same Tommy who would become a sergeant in the air force and who now is the office accountant for the U.S. Comptroller of the Currency.

Tom, early on, mastered the art of having our sisters deliver his newspaper route (passed from me down through my brothers to Tom) every night, while he watched TV, drank pop, and ate potato chips. He collected the customer-payments weekly, and I doubt a cent of those payments ever made it into the pocketbooks of our sisters. They did get a bit of pop and potato chips, though, and they loved Tommy's sense of humor, which he may have gotten from others in our family, including Dennis, who's a wry, effective judge today, and Dan, who's now an author, like me, and retired policeman.

As you can see, when you come from a large, working class family (Mom worked in a nursing home for many years, after a short stint at the garment factory), you have to be quick-witted enough not to lose your place in the food-chain. It was the same in our rather tough, but decent-enough neighborhood, where the neighbor kids sometimes "did better" than us at Christmastime. I'm not saying there was any more love in their homes than in ours, but we had the largest family in our neighborhood, and some of the neighbor kids generally got more presents, if that's even important. I never envied the kids who got guns, though, because I'm not a big fan of them. I guess, these days, some parents (ours didn't -- at least not real guns) still buy their kids guns. It's little wonder some kids would rather shoot a person than throw a mild-mannered

snowball at them. (Did you ever throw a snowball at a moving car and have it hit the window, then have the driver jump out and chase you up the street? I did, and it taught me a lot. Well, maybe it didn't teach me anything, except not to do it again.)

But getting back to Christmas, I wouldn't swap my family (including my grown son, Matthew, and his closest friends) and our Christmases with any other family. And I'd guess most people feel the same way about their family's Christmases. In the end, what counts is having family and friends around when you need them most. That generally occurs once a year, on the calendar, for most Americans – on that day when super-sweets are allowed, and when blending your food seems like something your brothers (and sisters) can do to their hearts' content, as long as you don't have to look at the results. That day is Christmas, and Christmas Eve, if you follow the Marcou rule of celebrating both. So to you and yours, have a Great Christmastime, this year, and every year we're all around, because before long most people get old, and you know what that means: It's hard as heck to throw snowballs anymore, much less run for the hills. May all your Christmas woes be small ones, and may all your snowmen and snowwomen be happy.