

# Christmas To Us



Photo by Adrienne Arden, Ellis

## Muse

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**Stories** (Amanda Sprochi, HSL Cataloging; Jason Touchatt, Ellis Security)

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## Reflections

The Editor

The last couple years as editor of the *Muse*, I have asked for original contributions, often including a few loose ideas or a survey asking questions to spark your creativity. I hope you will agree that this year's contributions succeed in making you feel "you are there," inside someone else's world, their traditions and sometimes their hopes. You will notice that every holiday piece in this issue relates to Christmas. It isn't that we at the *Muse* don't value non-Christian traditions – we always ask about them and will continue to, but this is the material we received.

One of this year's survey questions provoked an interesting response. I asked you, "'Holiday cheer' aside, has Christmas ever made you feel sad?" A few of you answered "yes" to that question, but asked that I not publish your responses. I asked whether I might make a general statement that incorporates things that different people said, and you allowed me to do that.

When asking that question, I had a partially-formed thought in my mind, based on a couple of my own "sad Christmases," that sadness around this holiday stems from rupture and loss of connection to loved ones. The starkest example of such loss is the death of someone close, but broken connections can also mean divorce or breakup, geographical separation, distancing through anger, or mental illness, when your loved one is estranged not only from you but from themselves, making a big hole in your previously reliable holiday tapestry and contrasting jarringly with the ubiquitous cultural celebration of togetherness and connection.

"Celebrating togetherness." That seems to me like it sums up a good deal of "Christmas spirit," yet you seldom see it directly on a Christmas card. Nor is it "the true meaning of Christmas" in the Christian sense of the celebration of Christ's birth. And yet – Christmas is not Easter. Christmas celebrates Jesus' *incarnation* (in English: the *becoming flesh*) the beginning of a special, finite time when a deity entered relationships with people in a literal, earthly way, becoming part of a family, eating, speaking with people around him. That, and the world-changing *potential* in this baby, which blended so well with pagan European solstice traditions we still see in the form of candles and Christmas trees, is what the excitement of Christmas is about. Is it any wonder that when the flesh of those around us, or our connection to it, is taken away, or twisted, or the potential removed, that the contrast makes the heart ache?

Consider: the consumerism around Christmas is also a sort of incarnation, in which we attempt to "incarnate" our own love and friendship into things that we give and receive. Gift-giving at its best can be loving and creative, but like poetry and other

forms of metaphor in which A stands in for B, it risks ill-suitedness, exaggeration and becoming overwrought.

May we be gentle to one another, appreciating with as much generosity as possible the relationships we do have. They are the "simple gifts" of this and every season. – R.B.

## How I Became a Morning Person

Amanda Sprochi

Not a morning person, she struggled to stay awake on the bus. I really need a cup of coffee, she thought.

Sitting in the seats in front of her, a young African American man began talking to the African American lady next to him. Their conversation began to register at the edge of her consciousness.

"I need to go the DMV to get my driver's license," the young man said. "My parole officer said it's up on Vandiver."

"You know it moved. It used to be further down, but it's up in the shopping center now," she told him.

"I need to get the driver's license so I can get a social security card and get some work. I'm trying real hard to get my life together and stay straight. I never want to go back to jail."

The white woman across the aisle broke in. "You know, it's fifteen dollars to get your license or state id."

"Wow, that much?" he asked.

"You also need to have your birth certificate to get a license now," an older African American man on his other side added.

"Where do I get my birth certificate?"

"Well," the white lady across from him said, "if you were born in Missouri you can get it from the health department. You can write to them too."

"Where's the health department?" the young man asked.

"It's over there on Worley," she answered. "I think it's about \$15 to get a copy."

"Do I need a copy? I have an old Missouri driver's license."

The man next to him said, "No, you really have to have your birth certificate. They used to just take id, but now you have to prove you're a resident. But with your birth certificate and your license, you can get a Social Security card."

The woman across the aisle said, "You know, it's nice doing that sort of thing here in Columbia. I went to get my license renewed and it took a half an hour. In St. Louis, you have to wait, 4, 5 hours sometimes."



"I've lived in big cities, St. Louis, Kansas City... Columbia is real nice. It's got its problems like anywhere, but people here are friendly, they look out for each other. The big cities, nobody cares. And where else can you ride the bus for 50 cents?" said the man next to him.

A white guy across the aisle chipped in, "It costs \$4.00 to get across St. Louis now by bus, and you only get one transfer. So if you need to change buses more than once you have to pay again."

"Hmm hmm hmm. See what I mean? Columbia's nicer than that," the older man said.

"Do you need any help getting on your feet?" the African American lady next to the young man asked. "Our church has some programs, and you're welcome to come by."

"I know the Catholic church has some community programs as well, and you don't need to be Catholic to go," added the white lady across the aisle.

"You should also check out the Baptist church at 4<sup>th</sup> and Providence downtown. I go there, because I really like the service," the older African American man offered. "Here, let me give you my name and number, you can call me anytime if you need help." He proceeded to write out his information in the young man's notebook. "Really, anytime, let me know if I can help."

"Honey," said the white lady across the aisle, "do you have the \$15 for the driver's license?"

"No," the young man admitted.

"Here," she said, reaching into her purse, "take this. This will get you started." She handed him a \$20 bill.

"Whoo, see what I mean? People here, they help out," said the man next to him.

"Thank you so much," said the young man, practically speechless.

"I've been in need of help sometimes in my life too. And people have helped out. So I figure, I can help out someone else. Pass it on," said the lady.

"Yeah, pay it forward," agreed the man next to him.

Her stop came up and she got up to leave. As she passed him, she put her hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Good luck to you," she said.

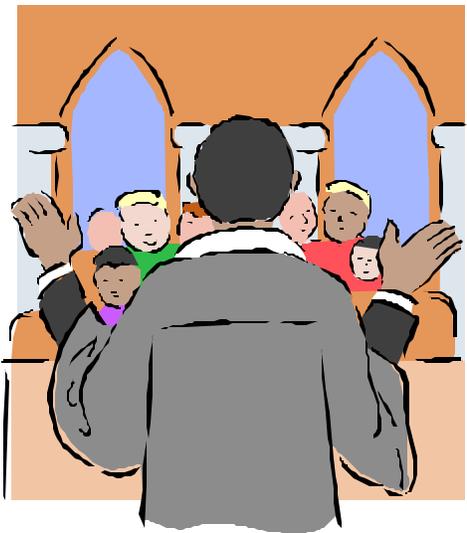
"Ah, she's been listening to our conversation!" joked the man next to him, and smiled widely at her.

"Merry Christmas, everyone," she said, as she got off the bus.

"Merry Christmas!" chimed the group, as the doors of the bus swung closed.



What is the true meaning of Christmas? Although most people have the right idea in how to answer this question, why is it that so many have forgotten it and so few have really thought about it and let it sink in? The celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ is celebrated all over the world, yet in many cases Christmas has become more about greed, wants and desires, and spending as much money as possible and less about honoring the birth of the Christ by taking care of our fellow man by exhibiting the His spirit of giving. The story of one couple I know stands out to me as an example of the true spirit of giving.



Tom and Jeannie had just gotten married in Denver, Colorado in the early 90's. Young and recently married, they were not well off financially. While attending a church service, it was brought to the attention of the congregation that several other congregations in what is now called Eurasia were in desperate need for financial help from their sister churches here in the USA. Several of the Eurasian churches, because of the fall of the communistic regime, were in dire need of consistent support from their more financially stable brethren. So, the leaders of the church decided to present the need to the congregation to see how they could help. It was decided that they, along with many other churches that were affiliated with theirs throughout the US, would take up a "special contribution" to send to the Eurasian churches to help them in their time of need.

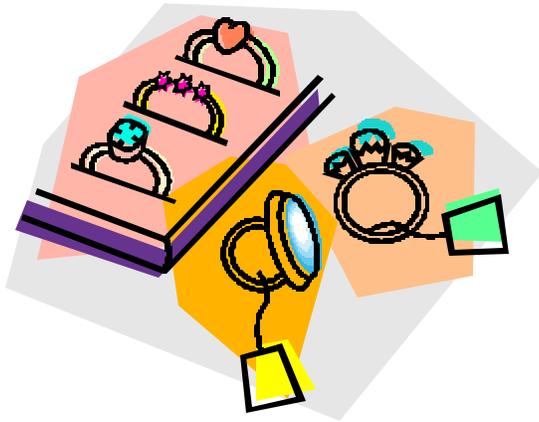
When it came for Tom and Jeannie to decide how they could help in this effort, they were overwhelmed by the desire to help. They had heard the stories of people in the Eurasian churches struggling just to eat one meal a day and having a hard time just being able to keep a roof over their head and they were deeply moved in their hearts. They had barely enough money to get by in their own right, but compared to their Eurasian counterparts, they saw themselves as rich. Faithfully, and feeling God would perform a great miracle, they set a goal and made a commitment to give 20 times their normal weekly tithe for the special contribution that would be collected four months later. Tom and Jeannie crunched the numbers, thought of things they could sell, and tried as many ways as they could think of to raise the money. The day came for them to honor their commitment, but despite their efforts, they were woefully short of their goal. Wanting to help and desiring to keep their word, Tom and Jeannie, who could have easily felt like they had done their best with what they had given, decided to sell Jeannie's wedding ring to make up the difference. In some ways it

broke Jeannie's heart to give up the ring she had waited her whole life for, the one inscribed with the words "With all the love I have...Tom". But, she knew in her heart that what she was doing and what she and Tom were giving would make a difference in so many others' lives that it had to be done.

Years later, Tom and Jeannie were called into service as ministry staff. They were asked to move to Wichita, Kansas to serve the congregation there. Joyfully and happily, they left their beloved Denver home and the many close friends and family they had there to continue the Lord's work in Wichita. The church in Wichita grew by God's hand under their servitude and leadership. And because of their growth in numbers and in faithfulness, Tom and Jeannie were able to make a decent salary, at least in ministry circles. Since that fateful day that Jeannie had given up her ring, it had been on Tom's heart to get her one that was even better than that one some day. He had bought her a small ring from a pawn shop a few months after she had given up hers, but it was it very small and so much less of a ring than her previous one and he felt as though his wife deserved more.

One Christmas, Tom had determined that he had finally saved up enough money to get the ring that would finally be a suitable replacement for the one they sacrificed many years ago. While out doing some Christmas shopping, Tom, always looking for a deal, decided to stop by a local pawn shop that had just recently opened in the hopes of perhaps finding a deal on some tools. Though he had decided that he would buy his wife a new, expensive ring, he decided to look at the rings on display. As he glanced through the rings, he wondered to himself what had ultimately happened to the ring they had given up many years ago.

"Hopefully it adorns the hand of a happily married bride", he thought as a smile crawled across his face. Not seeing anything of much interest, he asked to look though a box of rings that had just been brought in and had yet to make the display.



As he dug through the box, he saw a ring that looked eerily similar to the one they had given up to meet the needs of others many years ago. "NO WAY that could be it that was many years ago and in Denver for crying out loud!" he exclaimed to himself, but he pulled it out anyway. Looking inside the ring, to satisfy his own curiosity, he saw a sight that brought tears to his eyes and amazing joy to his heart. Tom

read the words inscribed: "With all the love I have...Tom." Hastily, Tom pulled out the requisite cash, bought the ring and tried as hard as he could not to break every traffic law in the book to get the ring home to his wife. As Tom presented the ring to his beautiful bride, Jeannie was astonished and tears flowed from eyes as she felt she had just witnessed a miracle. Jeannie felt then and still feels to this day that God gave her ring back because she was willing to

sacrifice for the needs of others. I can't think of a better story to express the meaning of Christmas and how God gives back incredibly to those who give with selfless hearts.

Merry Christmas!



## Christmas Travel

Ann Campion Riley

Holidays equal driving

Long distances in a minivan with crabby kids and bad weather.

What is it really worth for them to have a chance to know their cousins?

Driving and driving in bad weather with more forecast.

Why is someone too cold when the car is always too hot?

Mannheim Steamroller has too many horns to be real; Chip Davis must be an egomaniac.

Aren't there any stations just playing normal music?

At least we can talk while they're sleeping.

What did you think of Jim's new girlfriend? Do you think they're living together?

Be careful; someone might be awake.

Outside decorations get bigger and more bizarre every year. Why is that blow-up Santa inside a giant ball?

It's cozy in a car driving in the dark

And it's cold and damp when you open the door.

But you have to get home so Christmas can really start or end

Depending on where you are in the journey.



Photo by Adrienne Arden

## Anne's Dad's Fudge Pie

Anne Barker

Melt 1/2 cup of butter.

Add 2 eggs, 1 cup sugar, and 1 tablespoon vanilla. Mix well.

In a separate bowl mix 1/2 cup of flour, 5 tablespoons cocoa, and 1/4 teaspoon salt. Add this to the butter/eggs/etc.

Pour into a buttered 8 inch pie pan and bake at 350 degrees for about 20 minutes or until set. If you like it gooey, you can take it out early.



See: <http://www.cooks.com/rec/doc/0,1832,156173-231197,00.html> for a molasses puffs recipe, or buy it at the Candy Factory at the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and Cherry in Columbia.

## Christmas Traditions: Anne Barker

One of my more memorable Christmas times was the year I studied in Tübingen, Germany. Most of the festivities that we Americans associate with Christmas were clustered around Saint Nicholas Day, December 6. Gift-giving, Lebkuchen, hot mulled wine, and various other celebrations took place then, and then everything got much quieter for the season of Advent leading up to Christmas day, which I recall as very quiet, with bells ringing in sequence from various churches. I enjoyed the separation of the gift-giving from the more reflective celebration, so although it feels like swimming upstream, I still try to get Christmas shopping done by Dec. 6, then celebrate Advent and delay putting up decorations until the weekend before Christmas. Then they stay up for the 12 days of Christmas, until Epiphany on Jan. 6.

Another memorable year was when I was seven. We were living in an apartment building while my dad was in grad school. Having no funds inspired my parents' creativity and they stayed up late painting a tall narrow bookshelf to make an apartment-doll-house for me. We all had strep throat and were absolutely miserable, but the doll house was wonderful.

Growing up, we always decorated the Christmas tree on December 15, my Dad's birthday, which we celebrated with fudge pie and peppermint ice cream. After doing this for some 20 years, my very patient Dad finally admitted that decorating the Christmas tree is one of his least favorite things to do. My grandfather took things to the opposite extreme. My mother tells of him drilling holes in the trunk of the tree and rearranging the branches to get the best effect.

I associate a lot of flavors and smells with Christmas: bayberry candles, evergreens, eggnog, peppermint, chocolate toffee and Mavrakos' molasses puffs.

Growing up, Christmas was marked by Dad reading *The Night Before Christmas* and our trying to stretch our Christmas stockings--just ordinary socks--to the limit. Seems like those stockings almost always contained chocolate, butterscotch, oranges, silly putty, and Slinkys. Now I enjoy reading or listening to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* or Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales*.



## Christmas Traditions: Kris Anstine

When I was growing up, my mom got tired of not getting to see us kids play with our new toys on Christmas, because she was spending the whole day in the kitchen fixing a big Christmas dinner. She therefore decreed a new family tradition: we would no longer have the big dinner with ham and turkey and all the fixings. Instead, we now have cold cuts, chips, and dips that everyone has fixed ahead of time. Now Mom (and everyone else) can watch the grandkids play with (and break) the new toys they got. (Of course, Mom still ends up spending a lot of time in the kitchen; it's just that now she does it in the days leading up to the holiday!)

One other tradition was that no one got to go into the living room to see what Santa had brought until everyone was out of bed and ready. We lined up in the hall, youngest first, and went into the living room together. When my oldest brother brought his fiancé home their first Christmas, she thought it was a cute tradition – until she found out that, as the oldest “kid” there, she had to go in last! They’ve been married now about 20 years, and I think they still have that tradition at their house!

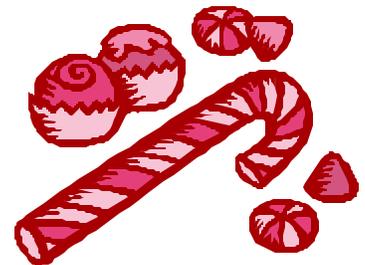
And Speaking of Family and Presents...by H.M.

Last year, I received a gift card (to a hair salon) from my older sister and \$50 from my dad. I'm not proud to say this, especially not at 25 years old, but I almost cried! I know Christmas isn't about the receiving (yada yada), but when everyone got more than I did, I was crushed. I basically watched everyone open gifts and everyone in return, felt really awkward. Later, I text-messed my boyfriend, complaining about it all. Luckily, he never got the message and I was spared having to explain myself.

## Christmas Traditions: Gwen Gray

At our family's farm when I was a kid, the celebration started on Christmas Eve with church and then an oyster stew-chili supper with some extended family. I can't eat oysters anymore (allergy), but I try to continue with the chili for Christmas Eve. No gifts were opened until Dad had come in from doing chores and we'd had a sit-down breakfast, the only day of the year when all of us (seven) had breakfast together. We did get to open stockings upon awakening, but I remember watching Dad through the window, moving from building to building as he tended to the livestock. Had I been a really good daughter, I would have thrown on my clothes and helped! Mike and I also have our kids wait until after breakfast.

Growing up, at the end of the Christmas Eve service, everyone in the congregation would receive a brown paper lunch bag with nuts, some fruit, chocolates, and candy canes. It may sound silly, but that was always one of the best things about Christmas. I can hear the rustle of the bags as they were distributed, the smell of chocolates, peppermint, and apples being released upon opening the bag, and how cold they were because they'd been stored in a part of the church that was unheated. And it was so exciting to see what kind of treats were in the bag even though you pretty much knew what would be in there! I'm happy to say that the church still has this tradition. This year, the kids will be in the church's Christmas program.



My favorite carols are "Angels We Have Heard on High" and "Silent Night" I've always loved the chapter from *Little House on the Prairie* when Mr. Edwards tells Laura and Mary about meeting Santa Claus in Independence and brought home their presents. Favorite recipe? My mom's homemade pecan rolls. Overall, I love the smells, lights, and the generally buoyant mood. I dread the advertising and the consumerism.



Photo by Delores Fisher

## Christmas Traditions: Pearl Newbrough

My husband and I spend Christmas Eve with his family. We usually have dinner at our house and then go to the 7:00 p.m service at church. After church we head to his parents' home to open gifts. We usually end up talking, laughing and exchanging gifts well into the early hours of Christmas Day. My family celebrates on Christmas Day, so my husband and I head to Moberly early Christmas morning. My 6 year-old nephew just can't wait to open gifts, so we usually do so before we even have breakfast. Later we enjoy a big dinner and then just visit the rest of the day.



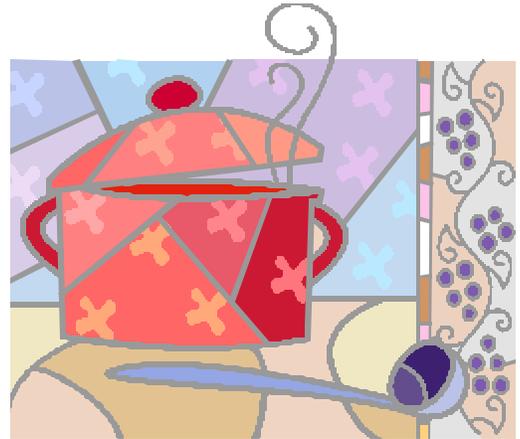
meaning of Christmas.

My favorite Christmas carol is "O Holy Night." I just think it is especially beautiful and it always reminds me of the true

My church always adopts a family for Christmas. We put up an angel tree and the congregation purchases gifts for the family. This is especially meaningful to me as there were a couple of times my family needed help during the holidays when I was a child. I can still remember how good it felt to know that there were people who cared about us.

## Christmas Traditions: Ruth Feldkamp

For my family, which is very Southern Baptist, church is the weekend before the holiday for the Christmas program, the 24th is the day all 30-some of us get together that night for a menu that hasn't changed in 70+ years or so...well, it got one addition when I refused to eat oyster soup or chili. But the homemade chicken noodle has been on the menu for the last 18 years. We used to do a Christmas Day dinner, when the 7 of us kids were young enough not to have families of our own, but that one's gone by the wayside as my cousins all married and had kids.



Probably my favorite Christmas carol is the Trans-Siberian Orchestra's "Carol of the Bells/Christmas in Sarajevo", my favorite holiday TV special is "How the Grinch Stole Christmas", and my favorite Christmas food is my grandmother's sugar cookie recipe. Though the divinity dad used to make might beat that out.

Christmas to me smells of warm English oil soap mixing with the pine scent coming off the tree, the reek of the oysters in their slowly melting salt water, the smell of the silver polish... and it sounds like the crack of the fire in the hearth against the ripping paper, and it feels like the just-as-strong contrast between the cold hearth and the heat of the fire at my back... Then there is the sound of the chainsaw and the feel of the needles on the tree trying to scratch up my arms as grandpa and I haul it to the truck, then the house...

What do I love and dread most about Christmas? The extended family all coming home and needing space to stay. Yes, that is my answer to both.



## MU Libraries Folks and Their Kids in Holiday Performances This Year:

**Pearl Newbrough:** Our church choir (St. Johns Lutheran, 1000 Dorcas St., Mexico) is performing a cantata, "Behold the Glory" on Sunday, December 23. We have been practicing for months. My husband and I both sing in the choir. Our service begins at 10:00 a.m. We do have fellowship time before service at 9:30 with coffee, cookies, etc.

**Gwen Gray:** The kids were both in the Christmas pageant at St. Andrew's.

**Ruth Feldkamp:** Mom and Grandmother will be helping with the church pageant, all of my little cousins probably had school plays but they all live a bit too far away... Other than that, I have no idea. I'm just hoping I don't get dragged into reading a part.

# Great Big Slabs of Ice

(to the tune of "Good King Wenceslas")

Great big slabs of ice fall down from the roof of Ellis  
That's why the north door is closed with a sign to tell us:  
"Danger danger go around, if you want to enter."  
Ellis is a scary place... 'specially in the wi---nter.

Ellis has a million books. That is so impressive.  
But to find them on the shelf, one must be aggressive.  
Where oh where is 1A West in this elevator?  
Ellis is a scary place...for procrastina--a--tors.

Hither freshman, come with me! I see you're frustrated  
Look, your book is on this shelf, "To be integrated."  
We cannot buy every book, for we must be frugal.  
Ellis is a scary place, when you're used to Goo-oogle.

## Holiday Links

Rachel Brekhus

from Kris Anstine, Anne Barker,

<http://www.cresourcei.org/cy12days.html> 12 Days of Christmas

<http://www.northpole.com/> Resources for parents and teachers, activities for kids, and an entire section called "Mrs. Claus' Cookbook" with recipes for all kinds of holiday foods:  
[www.northpole.com/Kitchen/Cookbook/](http://www.northpole.com/Kitchen/Cookbook/)

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmgf60Cl\\_ks](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmgf60Cl_ks) Christmas Lights Gone Wild video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULEhCLKav50> Christmas Cat Montage video

<http://barkingsnake.com/xmashorror/> Kids who do not want to be sitting on Santa's lap

<http://www.nevada.edu/~blake/Christmas.carols.html> Lyrics to traditional Christmas carols

<http://www.nevada.edu/~blake/Christmas.songs.html> Lyrics to modern/secular Christmas songs

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/dec25.html> Library of Congress: Christmas history, culture and arts

<http://www.fathertimes.net/traditions.htm> New Years celebrations around the world