

Recent Ramblings * Christmas Spirit

When I was a kid, Christmas Spirit was a lot like the humidity we waded through during the summer months; a constant presence that we breathed in with every breath, felt on our skin, and could almost hold in our hands if we could sit still long enough. Inescapable.

From the snow (that we still thought was “beautiful” at this early stage of the wintertime) to Mom’s Christmas village on top of the bookcase (complete with lighted ceramic houses, a lighted village Christmas tree, polyester batting for fake snow, and little people skating on a mirrored lake)—we had Christmas Spirit in spades. The Carpenters’ Christmas album, Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton, The Statler Brothers, Reba, Alabama, Clint Black, and half a dozen others were our soundtrack anytime we were home. Scheming and plotting gift-buying and hiding spots were the sum total of our problems after Thanksgiving.

Imagine my shock when 2020 hits (and hits, and hits, and hits...) and I realized there’s TWO WEEKS until The Big Day, and there’s not a shred of Christmas Spirit in all the land. My kids were the very definition of melancholy, and Trent and I were no better. I’d always taken for granted that Christmas Spirit was just... there. It never took any work to achieve. But this particular year, it was like staring into a crater that should have held one of the Great Lakes. I was mystified.

Where did all of that Christmas Spirit from my youth come from? And where did it go? And where was it NOW?

I started to formulate a theory; I had some work to do. I had copied all of my favorite Christmas albums from my mom’s collection back in college. Well, about three years ago, I’d taken them to work with me and lost them. My entire CD collection was a mess anyway, so I started figuring out where everything was and eventually did find those lost CDs. I moved my 6-CD changer (don’t laugh; I’m old school, ok?) and connected it to my iHome (for my Gen1 iPod Touch circa 2007. Again, don’t laugh; it still works, and I still love it and use it daily.) I put in my top 6 Christmas albums of my youth and let the music teleport me back to my folks’ living room and their perfect Christmas tree (alight with bubble lights) smelling all of the delicious smells of Christmas.

I then asked Trent to take all of us to get a Christmas tree that weekend. We took 2 quads out to the dozer lines from the Sheep Fire and kept going until we found some nice conifers... We were in a pine/ fir mix area and found a stout Red Fir that would support the weight of our mostly-very-weighty Christmas ornaments. And of course, the kids helped. This was the result:



I kept the Christmas music playing every moment I was home. Which was a lot. Because we were amid another home-schooling stretch since Thanksgiving. I had a strand of lights with sheer ribbons around the opening behind the tree to clip my Christmas cards to as a constant reminder of those people we were most grateful for. I managed to crank out a Christmas letter, but instead of writing a story summarizing our year (with the usual humorous spin and bits of what we'd learned), I only wrote of things I was grateful for and pasted the better pictures from the least stressful moments. And I put up my lights around the front porch that can be seen down the driveway by our neighbors as an evil ploy to get them to SLOW DOWN on our road.

Slowly but surely, the kids started coming around to talking about what they were excited for. I tried to make some of my favorite holiday dishes every few days. I took my son shopping for gifts for his sister and cousins. My daughter was sick the week before Christmas, but one of the sweet gals who works at her preschool made a home delivery of the dozen ornaments the kids had personalized for the parents. They went right up on the tree.

We cranked out some Christmas cookies, and we even delivered the few that weren't consumed before they had time to cool. (Ok, it must be mentioned here: George Straight, "Christmas Cookies.") One evening we were out after dark driving around and even pulled over to admire the lights at a few homes.

Christmas came and went like it always does. We'd managed to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and get our act together for Christmas. Dare I say we even hoped this next year would be better than the last.

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My theory was now in its beta-testing phase. This year the Christmas decorations were busted out before the turkey was even in the Tupperware. By Black Friday, I had lights up and as many decorations that could be put up without a tree. Christmas music? Check. Shopping? Started in October since I heard shipping was going to be a nightmare this year. Conversations in this house are centered around GIVING (I despise toy commercials!) and FAMILY and BEING GRATEFUL. And, of course, the birth of baby Jesus.

My Christmas letter this year again focuses on the best parts of another not-so-great year. Included with the card is a page of about 10 pictures of these people I call my family in various stages of complete and utter imperfection.

But back to my original question(s)... Christmas Spirit came from my mom. My theory was this: my mom never allowed a moment from the time the frost first hit until New Year's Day to be without something reminding us of all there is to look forward to. All her little reminders (lights, sounds, smells) were present and accounted for before we even had time to wonder, "how many days until Christmas?" She was always busy thinking of others; homemade gifts, cooking food we would deliver to elderly friends, leaving out Christmas cards for everyone to admire, and displaying the pictures of family that were sent with the cards by her desk.

It's now the same in my house. I'm the MOM here. It's up to me. Lights, food, cards, music... I'm ready.

This past weekend we went out and got our tree. We drove past where we got our tree last year. We drove in and out of 3 additional fire scars until my son voiced the thought in my mind: "Are we there yet?"

"We haven't found the perfect tree yet, bud," said my husband.

"It's not about the tree..." I reminded them all.

What I learned: **Christmas Spirit is** a combination of **remembering** the good of the years past **and hope** for the future. Remembering to be grateful each and every day for loved ones, and by showing that appreciation with gifts and food and time together. Carrying over the traditions and seasonal reminders (lights, food, music...) from year to year builds a foundation for Christmas Spirit to live on, but still leaving room to weave in new traditions and make new memories. Those feelings of contentment, a full heart... however fleeting... are tied to those reminders. We just need to keep them going.

Now that's not to say that every day between Thanksgiving and Christmas is supposed to be a bundle of joy. The kids still frustrate me on a daily basis. But it's the moments when the Christmas music rises over the din of homework, play dough, and making dinner to remember my mom playing this same music, making this very same dinner I'm now making for my family (except MY kids like how I make my sauerkraut!) And how the whole house seemed filled when she was in the kitchen with the Christmas music playing and the bubble lights going on the tree and the handmade tree skirt hugging the presents underneath... And it just seems that in those moments—both then and now—it's enough. Both in the remembering and passing it on.

Thanks, Mom.