

Winter 2008

To the many who have cared:

Come early November, the suddenly pending winter holidays begin to call to me from afar. Despite the fact that their arrival lingers weeks and even months away, the call is nevertheless compelling and persistent, unapologetic in its refusal to be ignored. Thanksgiving and especially Christmas are the two holidays that speak to me as no other. Yet even as I begin to anticipate what is still to come, I find my thoughts drifting back to times long past, just as eager to recall Christmases and Thanksgivings of years gone by.

Tradition plays an important role in bringing the holidays to life and keeping them alive long after they have faded into memory. It flavors them and makes them memorable, as it draws together young and old. For when we embrace our traditions, we embrace our history even as we are made one with it. Each of us has traditions that have been handed down by loved ones who have gone before us. We hold tightly to our traditions and preserve them and perhaps add touches of our own before passing them on, so that those who follow in our footsteps will cherish our traditions too.

Guatemala is a country rich in tradition. Traditions abound throughout the year and although I have made many of them my own, the ones I value most are those tied to Christmas. Some of these traditions are common to many countries, including the United States. Most every family has a Christmas tree. Gifts, although few and modest by our standards, are kept under the tree, waiting to be exchanged. The placing of a nativity in a prominent location in the home is also widely found, as Guatemala is predominantly Christian. And Santa himself has been known to find his way to Guatemala on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup>, much to the delight of the children.

In Guatemala, the holiday begins in earnest on Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve day is spent searching for last minute gifts and preparing for the pending festivities. Many attend church early in the evening to honor the day's reason for being. As night falls people return home to come together. Depending on the family, a snack may be enjoyed, its purpose to keep hunger at bay until dinner is eaten some time after midnight. Members of the extended family might come by to visit. Conversation is almost nonstop, laughter and music fill the house, and the home is a bustle with giddy energy as just purchased gifts are wrapped and final touches are placed on the main meal.

Later in the evening gifts are opened. In the shelter we then take time to read of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, as told in the Gospel of Luke. At reading's end, everyone is given a candle to hold. When the candles are lit, all of the lights are turned off save those on the tree. Then one by one we each share a reason as to why we are grateful at that time. Once finished the person who has just spoken blows out his candle, so that little by little the candles' glow fades until the lights of the tree are left alone to illuminate the room.

By then the midnight hour is near and families throughout the country gather in the street. There they share what might be the most anticipated tradition in all of Guatemala. The selling and purchasing of fireworks remains legal here. Most everyone takes advantage of it. The darkness of the early morning sky suddenly explodes with the sight and sound of miniature rockets of every kind being launched in front of homes throughout the land. The display, a joyous occasion to behold, continues for nearly thirty minutes. At spectacles end, a thick and sulfurous cloud hangs in the air, making it difficult to distinguish surroundings more than two or three blocks away.

Exhilarated families by now famished, return to their homes to finally partake of dinner. It consists of tamales, French bread and *ponche*, a hot and hearty beverage made by poaching finely diced pieces of fruit in a lightly sweetened, cinnamon-flavored broth. Families are likely to linger at table to enjoy each other's company. The size of the gathering gradually dwindles as the tired celebrants call it a rather long day and turn in for what's left of the night.

Last year I wanted to introduce a new tradition to our kids, one that has long been popular in the United States. The idea came to me when having breakfast with a friend, while briefly back in Boston for Thanksgiving. We spoke of many things that morning, but towards the end of breakfast, the conversation turned to Christmas. Sandie asked how we would be celebrating the holiday in Guatemala. She listened as I explained then shared with me a tradition that was a favorite with her family, the giving of a Christmas stocking filled with small gifts. Sandie's family had added a new twist to the old ritual, by requiring that everyone contribute something toward stuffing the stocking, an idea that caught my fancy. It occurred to me that our youngsters might enjoy such an exchange. Before returning to Guatemala, I purchased some stockings, the ones that are easily found, inexpensive and colorful, covered with artificial red and white fur. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of December I presented my idea – and the stockings – to our kids over dinner. I expected some confusion and even a couple of objections, but there were none. Everyone took to the idea, and then asked for suggestions as to what kinds of gifts might be given.

We set guidelines and decided that all gifts would be turned in on the 24<sup>th</sup> and that the *botas* or boots – their word to describe the stockings – would be given on Christmas Eve. I also deemed it wise that the boots would not be hung in the living room prior to handing them out as it might be difficult for our kids to resist the temptation to peek into the boots and sample what they found. All donations were given to me in private to maximize the element of surprise. Everyone put a good amount of effort into choosing their gift. Among the items turned in were: candy bars, packages of cookies, juice boxes, and even packs of sugarless gum! Only A Child added a few gifts as well. Mid-evening I filled the Christmas boots, and then fastened a piece of masking tape, containing the name of one of our kids, to each boot.

As planned I brought out the boots once dinner was served. The response could not have been better. Everyone spilled the contents of their boot onto the table to see what was to be found. As expected each felt the need to identify the gift that they had given. It was also not surprising to find that there were those who simply could not wait until after dinner to try a treat or two. It was readily decided that the giving of Christmas boots was a worthwhile idea and should be continued. And thus a new Christmas tradition was born at Only A Child.

Christmas day is usually spent quietly at home recovering from the events of the 24<sup>th</sup>. Once rested, the family comes together again to feast on roast turkey, the customary Christmas Day dinner should circumstances permit. If not a roast chicken or other more affordable option is substituted and enjoyed. Most years at Only A Child we are fortunate to be able to enjoy roast turkey. It is a genuine treat for our youngsters, many of whom have never tried it before.

After dinner, well fed and somewhat tired, we find the strength to enjoy one last tradition. Several miles from home, there is a small park where each November a huge tree is placed. Although the tree is artificial, it is well lit and cheerfully decorated, and to our kids something that must be seen at least once every year. Visitors can walk the park and buy something to eat if they so desire. And for those of you who have wondered what becomes of Santa when his work is finished delivering toys, well he can be found at this same park where for 20 quetzales, or roughly \$2.65, you can have your photo taken with him sitting in the very sleigh that only hours before traveled the world. We never miss the opportunity to do so.

Last Christmas upon arriving at the park, we found Santa waiting for us by his sleigh, looking a little shorter and a good bit more tanned than I remembered him from my days as a child in Boston. We all went to greet him. Bryan, who at 7 years old is the youngest of our shelter's children, grabbed my hand and pulled me along with all of his might, so that we might be the first to arrive at the sleigh. Santa has never forgotten to remember us at Christmas. Last

year, he left our younger children a Hot Wheels track and some cars, as well as a couple of games and some stuffed animals. Bryan, who had never before known Santa to be so generous, was especially delighted. Now standing before the sleigh, he stepped away from me and timidly approached Santa. Upon reaching him, Bryan pulled something from his pants pocket and placed it in Santa's hand. It was the package of cookies that he had found in his Christmas boot. "Gracias," was all that Bryan said in a voice so quiet that I doubt that Santa heard him. But Santa understood Bryan's intention nonetheless and smiled, nodding his head in response as if to say your welcome.

It was impossible not to be moved. Christmas was nearly over and Bryan understood that there were no more gifts to be had. He wasn't searching for anything more. He was simply showing his appreciation in the only way he knew how, by giving Santa something in return. Bryan was saying thank you to Santa for remembering him on Christmas Eve. I turned to our youngsters and searched their faces, wanting to know what they were feeling at that moment. I saw that they were happy and contented too. Knowing so made my Christmas complete for I understood that in previous years they had spent many a Christmas alone, feeling that no one had remembered them. This year was different. This year they had not been forgotten. Later that night, as we walked the park, one of our boys came to me to speak in private. "This was a great Christmas. Thank you. I thought I would never have a happy Christmas ever again. I thought it wasn't possible. But it wasn't true."

Those of you have received our Christmas letters in years past know that there are certain themes that I always come back to. Christmas day and the season that leads up to it is for me a time like no other. The world around us is warmer and more neighborly, a place where people make a greater effort to consider others. It is a time when words like goodness and decency more readily come to mind and manage to seem relevant once again, just as they once were. Hope is in greater supply. Love is the order of the day. And peace on earth seems like a genuine possibility, if only for a short time.

But most of all I long for it well before its arrival and mourn its departure come January, because Christmas is the time of year when I celebrate the birth of Jesus and consider all that it means to me. He came into this world to give His life in service to others. It was a life spent easing suffering of all kinds, healing the sick, helping the poor, comforting those the world had deemed unimportant and therefore had forgotten. His was a life that gave hope not only to those who suffered, but to all people who dreamed of a world free of suffering. His life, by its very Nature, not only showed that a more loving world was possible, but also guided us as to how it might be realized. Never more than at Christmas do we live such possibility. It therefore seems logical that come December, so many lives more closely mirror His and as a result, give the season its sparkle. It only seems

reasonable that His life is the example I try to follow as I work to lift our youngsters out of despair, while guiding them into adulthood.

To those of you who, like me, are Christian, Merry Christmas! To our friends of the Jewish faith, Happy Hanukkah! I wish one and all a happy holiday season filled with joyous times never to be forgotten, shared with those you love. Thanks for seeing us through another year, our 14<sup>th</sup>. Thank you as well for remembering our boys, so that we may give them a Christmas complete with traditions they will long look back on fondly.

Sincerely,

George Leger