



onlyachild@aol.com

PO Box 990885 Boston, MA 02199

<http://www.onlyachild.org>

Winter 2020

To the many who have cared,

“When youth departs, may wisdom prove enough.” Winston Churchill, from *The Darkest Hour*

I have wondered of late what form the COVID Christmas will take this year. Although the second wave of Coronavirus infections is reportedly well under way in Guatemala, thus far it has not brought any significant rise in the number of new daily cases. For the most part, people remain cautious, although I have noticed a gradual increase in both pedestrian and vehicular movement of late, at least in my corner of Guatemala City. I believe that, barring a sudden and dramatic shift in the second wave, the coming of the Christmas season will only serve to increase movement outside the home.

Expecting a reinvented commercial Christmas this year, I watched for signs of how the Guatemalan retail establishment would respond to the coming of the season. It was with trepidation, at first. Displays signaling the unofficial launching of the season were blessedly delayed and modest, as compared with those of years past. But in recent weeks optimism has replaced earlier doubts and the size and scope of the current commercial Christmas promotion mirror those of their predecessors, ambitious and, in some cases, unapologetic in their excess.

My initial response was one of disappointment and frustration. I had hoped that the less than robust economy would compel retailers to concede that perhaps the time had come to restore balance, if not sanity, to how we elect to celebrate and honor the season, more specifically its heart and soul, Christmas Day. Such hopes appear to have been unfounded. I thought myself naïve and somewhat bitterly resigned myself to the fact I'd have to suffer through yet another year of what I have come to think of as the unbridled exploitation of a high holy day, one which also happens to be a cultural holiday.

Then, unexpectedly, I softened my position and begrudgingly acknowledged that the commercial aspects of the season were not all to be rejected. My modest epiphany took place at my local supermarket. I was rushing through my purchases, focused on the task before me when, after turning a corner at aisle's end, I unexpectedly came upon a display of cloth Santas, stuffed to the point of bursting. Cartoonish in appearance, each Santa possessed the same good natured but somewhat vacuous expression, seemingly possessing not a care in the world. I stopped and, in spite of myself, stood face to face with a Santa who, stared me down from behind two black and beady eyes. I imagined that if I could have read his thoughts, and, if he had been capable of having thought, he likely would have been thinking, *what's the matter with you, grumpy?* Caught of guard and thoroughly disarmed, I smiled.

All at once, I felt flush with happiness. My simpleton Santa reminded me that I have always loved many of the cultural aspects of Christmas, the rituals and traditions that have long preceded the hyper commercialization of the season. I felt liberated. I felt grateful for having been released from my

anger, justified as it may have been. I was stilled. For the first time since the onset of COVID-19, I felt unburdened, if only for a moment in time. It was enough.

I returned home to consider at length to what degree I and others had been weighed down by the demands of the past eight months. I thought about it for days on end. I reflected in my free time, while working, before going to sleep at night, and upon awakening in the morning. Regardless of whether our response to the coming of COVID has been one of reluctant acceptance or determined resistance, most of us have likely struggled if not suffered for the lingering consequences of a crisis which refuses to go away. Some of us will be forever changed, long after COVID releases its grip on humanity.

During a recent email exchange, a member of our Board of Directors, Elaine, shared that an 88 year old friend, Helen, a survivor of the great depression and WW2, had commented that, although such times as these may scar, especially young people, they also offer opportunity for character-building growth. In my response I agreed, for as I have told our youths on more than one occasion, such tests not only provide challenges unique to the moment, they also provide us with the chance to become a more capable person in ways that ordinary times do not. Perhaps some scarring is unavoidable and even a reasonable price to pay for the growth it can promote, assuming the scarring is not debilitating. Adversity, when met, fosters resolve and, in turn, promotes self-confidence, paving the way to maturity and wisdom.

I've come to think that scarring as the emotional equivalent of badges of honor received for having done battle of another kind – not necessarily armed with weapons of war, but rather, with the will and the courage to meet daunting challenges when they come our way; challenges that ask us to rise to the occasion when faced with out-of-the-ordinary adversity. Our emotional scars offer intangible but undeniable proof that, despite having been wounded, we refused to succumb and, with time, regrouped and found the resolve to carry on, wiser for the wear, better prepared to face the challenges of the future.

I have come to wonder if, in terms of my ability to respond to it, the arrival of the Coronavirus could likely not have been better timed – at least thus far. Decades worth of confronting adversity has prepared me for the intense trials that many have faced since the onset of COVID. The countless mistakes I made in responses to the trials I faced throughout life, more pointedly the lessons learned from them, have provided me the resources which, in many ways, best serve me at this time, both personally and as the onsite director of Only A Child. A crisis of the COVID variety would have left me baffled and likely defeated in younger days. My scars, I have concluded, remind me that I have not only faced adversity, but also survived it, scars and all.

Many years ago, I gifted my mother a nativity, which I purchased in Guatemala. My mother had not needed one, as our home had never passed a Christmas without a nativity intentionally positioned in our front hall, waiting to greet all who entered our house, family and visitors alike. Still, I believed my mother would welcome a second nativity, one representing the land of my surrogate home. Painted in the vibrant colors typical of the Mayan culture, its figures filling and surrounding the stable were

unabashedly brown skinned, reflecting the indigenous peoples of the country where it had been crafted.

My mother was thrilled with her gift, especially taken with its Guatemalan flavor, which, she observed, distinguished it from other nativities commonly found in the U.S. It was assigned a place of its own, gathered around a lamp, resting on a small table next to the living room sofa. Each year when the time had come to decorate the house for Christmas, my mother would ask that I unpack and display her Guatemalan nativity. It was our understood that it had become my special task. It was my mother's way of saying that that she continued to value my gift.

Upon my mother's passing in 2017. I decided to return the nativity to its land of origin. It now resides in our shelter. It is our custom to decorate our home on the last Saturday afternoon in November. It is a much-anticipated event and the good will of the season fills our home as the transformation from an ordinary time of year to another time, set apart, unfolds. Each of our youths has settled into a specific area and knows which decorations belong to that area, as well as where they go. I am always a member of the nativity team. It is placed just inside our front door on a large cabinet fronting our dining room. Our youths take special pride in the fact that our nativity reflects their homeland and their culture. I never fail to lovingly remember my mother at the sight of it.

Most of our Christmas decorations are of the cultural rather than religious variety. Their presence in our home never fails to make me happy. They lift my spirits. Nevertheless, it is the religious aspects of the holiday that fill me in a lasting way. For it is the story of the birth of Jesus and the life, death and resurrection awaiting Him which give the season the promise, the hope, the good will and the sparkle which distinguish it the rest of the year, which transform it into something truly extraordinary – the kind of Christmas still able to make our hearts sing.

If it is experience which has provided me with the wisdom needed to manage these times, it is my faith that encourages me and strengthens me and gives me the hope I need to carry on when wisdom alone proves not enough. Thank you for seeing us through another year, our 26th. These are undoubtedly times when we need to come together. Thank you for continuing to stand by Only A Child.

Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. May God bless.

George

George

P.S. Online study at home has overwhelmed our aging laptops and left them in need of replacement. Therefore, this year, we will have a one-item wish list. If you would like to donate or contribute towards the purchase of a laptop (\$400), please make note of it on the back of your donation card.