



A Christmas Meditation . . . of sorts

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

My daughter’s curled up on the sofa under three blankets, with Arthur the cat on her feet. She’s home sick today. So am I. But for me, “home” is synonymous with “office,” and I’m sitting at my computer, head in my hands.

“My head hurts and my stomach hurts and I think I have a fever,” I tell her. “And I’m on deadline. I have to write my column today. And it’s my Christmas column, so it has to be special.”

I’m not feeling very special. In fact, I’m feeling especially un-special.

But, just as the show must go on, the column must be written, so I start casting around for ideas. In my weakened state, I can’t possibly pull this thing out of thin air. I need help. I say a quick prayer, thanking God for the gift of the holy spirit . . . and for The Google.

I surf and I read. Time passes. My daughter is now at my desk, braiding my hair. She has rallied. I have not. I google on, listlessly.

Feeling lousy and put upon, I find myself drawn to articles and comments by others feeling lousy and put upon. They're not hard to find. After all, it's now a time-honored tradition to gripe about the holidays in print.

There's the "Put the Christ Back in Christmas" crowd, the "Keep Your Christ to Yourself" crowd, the "I'm Already Sick of Christmas Music" crowd, the "What's Your Problem with Christmas Music?" crowd, the "Christmas is too Commercial" crowd, the "Don't Shop Online, Shop Local" crowd, the "Get Your Tacky Light Show Out of My Neighborhood" crowd, the "Hey, Grinch – I Can Do Whatever I Want in My Own Yard!" crowd, and a host of other well-intended whiners. Ah, my people.

As I read through this year's crop of complaints, I feel something like a giggle starting somewhere in the recesses of my limp, achy body. It feels almost like . . . could it be? . . . nah, no way . . . yes, wait . . . it is! It's mirth. These Christmas critics are filling me with mirth because I recognize that, on some level, I agree with every one of them. I *get* their gripes. The complaints may be warmed over and trite by now, sure, but they're legit. All of them. Especially the ones that contradict the other ones. And that makes me mirthful for the first time in this sorry excuse for a day.

Okay, maybe I'm just punchy – I have a fever, remember? – but I'm suddenly struck by the beauty of this annual parade of Christmas crybabies. With everything we've got to kvetch about this year – the fiscal cliff, the Middle East, the generals and their socialites – Americans still care enough about Christmas to argue over how it should be kept. No matter who we are, where we come from, or what we believe, we all hold Christmas sacred. We don't cotton to those who would mess with our yuletide ideal. In my fevered, punchy mirthfulness, I find that touching.

And then I land upon the photo of the New York City police officer who bought shoes – and not just shoes, but all-weather boots! – for a barefoot homeless man. If you haven't come across this picture – congratulations; you are truly living the unplugged life, and I commend you. Nevertheless, you missed a great story.

Officer Lawrence Diprimo told the NY Times, “It was freezing out and you could see the blisters on the man’s feet. I had two pairs of socks and I was still cold.” Officer Diprimo and the man began talking, and the officer learned his shoe size. As the barefoot man slowly walked away – on his heels – Officer Diprimo went into a Sketchers shoe store. It was 9:30 pm, and only getting colder.

More from the Times: *“We were just kind of shocked,” said Jose Cano, 28, a manager working at the store that night. “Most of us are New Yorkers and we just kind of pass by that kind of thing. Especially in this neighborhood.” Mr. Cano volunteered to give the officer his employee discount to bring down the regular \$100 price of the all-weather boots to a little more than \$75.”*

Officer Diprimo returned to the barefoot man with the new pair of boots, and knelt to help him put them on. This quiet act of generosity would have gone virtually unnoticed, but a tourist from Arizona took a snapshot, and the picture went viral. It’s been warming hearts across the Internet ever since.

I’m unwell, so I know you’ll excuse me for digressing from my Christmas theme. Or did I?

Still wandering through cyberspace, I light upon one of those Flash Mob videos. You know the ones: A bunch of average-looking pedestrians – or diners, or shoppers – in a large, public place, suddenly transform into a spectacular chorus or orchestra or dance troupe, while *actual* average pedestrians (or diners or shoppers) look on, first bemused, then amazed. You’ve seen those, right?

The flash mob *du jour* has infiltrated a crowded shopping mall at Christmas time. The video is undated, but I like imagining that it’s Black Friday . . . that we have descended into the underworld, into the very realm of Satan himself. (I’m sick, remember?) There are thousands of people milling about, shoving their way into stores, toting bags, bags, and more bags. It’s loud. It’s garish. There’s a shopping mall Santa, and even *he* seems loud and garish. Suddenly, from out of the rumbling din, comes a lone voice, clear and startling: “Joyful, joyful we adore thee . . . Lord of glory, Lord of love.” Right there in the middle of the loud, garish shopping mall, a beautiful, dark-haired young woman is singing the Ode to Joy.

As it happens with flash mobs, others join in. We learn that many of our mall rats are actually

trained choral singers in disguise. After their rousing rendition of Beethoven's 9th, they launch into "O, Come All Ye Faithful," followed by "Go Tell It On The Mountain." With every line of every song, a few more singers join in. At some point, I realize the music is no longer limited to the flash mob. The genuine mall rats are singing, too.

The final carol is my favorite – "O, Holy Night." By now, it seems the entire mall is singing. Even those who aren't have stopped their rushing about and are looking on in something akin to wonder. Near the end of the song, a couple dressed as Mary and Joseph emerge from the crowd, the woman with a baby in her arms. "Fall on your knees," sings the flash mob. And you know what? People do. Right there in the middle of the loud, garish shopping mall, people are dropping to their knees around this couple and their baby. Maybe this is rehearsed? Maybe these are all flash mobsters? But I don't think so. I see children and grownups falling on their knees. Even a teenage boy is kneeling. People have tears in their eyes and smiles on their faces and a love song on their lips.

And then it's over. The kneeling people stand, the couple walk away with their baby, the singers disperse, and the entire mall bursts into applause.

And I am sitting here at my computer, with an aching head (and braided hair), and weary bones . . . and a serious case of the chills.

Must be the fever.

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