

Valerie Elverton Dixon

December 23, 2013

A Memo from Santa

To: Christmas Defenders

From: Santa Claus dictated to Valerie Elverton Dixon

Re: War on Christmas

For the past several years, the holidays have been scarred by talk about a “war on Christmas.” In the name of tradition, many of you lament the trend of people wishing each other happy holidays, changing the titles of various parades and pageants from Christmas to Holiday this or that. So, you have defined this trend as a “war on Christmas”, and you have entered into battle.

As you know this is my busy season. In some countries I made my deliveries on December 6, it has been busy for me since Halloween. When I took a moment after attending Madiba’s state funeral to catch up on current events in the United States, and I learned of the discussion about whether or not I could be represented as anything other than a white man, I decided to send this memo.

To be brief and to the point: You need to stop.

You are not helping the Spirit of Christmas by insisting that people say what *you* want them to say and represent me the way *you* want me represented. I question whether or not you even understand what Christmas means when you refuse to allow the tradition to expand and to grow. Traditions must change in order to maintain. If they do not, they become stagnant, and sclerotic, and they die. The changes you see upset you. Take a look at your angry faces. Listen to your combative tone. Your defense of Christmas is choking the joy out of it.

Let us take a moment to review the history and the meaning of Christmas. The scriptures do not tell us that Jesus was born on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In early Christianity, the community did not celebrate the birth of the savior. It celebrated Jesus’ death and resurrection. It celebrated the death days of martyrs. Death was a birth from time into eternity. Pagans celebrated birth from eternity into time. The ancient Roman world celebrated December 25<sup>th</sup> as the birth of the unconquered sun. It was a celebration of the winter solstice when the days begin to get longer.

In the fourth century of the Common Era, Chrysostom wrote: “[T]hey call it ‘Birthday of the Unconquered’. Who is so unconquered as Our Lord. . . ? If they say that it is the birthday of the Sun, He is the Sun of Justice.” (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm>)

December was also the month of the Saturnalia, days of celebration in the ancient Roman world in honor of Saturn. To celebrate the end of autumn planting, the holiday was an occasion to visit friends

and to give gifts, especially wax candles. It was also a time when normal rules of social order were reversed and set aside. Gambling was allowed in public. Slaves did not work; they were treated as equals, and sometimes the masters would serve the slaves. Many of these traditions carried over into Christmas and New Year's celebrations.

([http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia\\_romana/calendar/saturnalia.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/calendar/saturnalia.html))

From the very start, Christmas has been in a syncretistic relationship with other non-Christian spiritualities, and some of the symbols from those traditions have become a part of Christmas. The Yule log is a long that burned in northern Europe during the longest night. The Christmas tree and decoration with evergreen branches come from the tradition of bringing ever green plants into the house as a decoration during the winter solstice. Romans decorated their temples with fir trees during the December Saturnalia celebrations.

Mistletoe comes from Norse mythology where the goddess Frigga redeems the mistletoe that was crafted into a weapon that killed her son. She blesses it to become a symbol of peace and love. Scandinavian warriors would put down their weapons in the face of the enemy when standing near mistletoe. Over time, we have lost the idea of mistletoe as a symbol of peace, and we have made it into a symbol of romantic love. I am hopeful that we can reclaim it as a symbol to end wars, all wars, even and especially this nonsense about a "war on Christmas." (<http://www.herbco.com/t-mistletoe.aspx>)

Christmas ought to be a season of peace, not only because Jesus was called the Prince of Peace, but also because of the story of "Silent Night." It was Christmas Eve 1914 during World War I when German soldiers began singing "Silent Night." The English soldiers also started singing the song. Soon they came out of their trenches and there was an unofficial truce. For a moment, the Spirit of Christmas brought a pause in the war. ([http://www.amazon.com/Silent-Night-Story-World-Christmas/dp/0452283671/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1387828863&sr=8-1&keywords=Silent+Night+World+War+I](http://www.amazon.com/Silent-Night-Story-World-Christmas/dp/0452283671/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1387828863&sr=8-1&keywords=Silent+Night+World+War+I))

The Christmas songs of peace can also mean love.

When we sing "The Twelve Days of Christmas", we are singing of romantic love, fertility, and a wedding feast. Some people have added Christian meanings to the various items in the song, showing once again how things can carry multiple meanings.

([http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/christmaslore/a/12\\_days\\_of\\_christmas\\_meaning.htm](http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/christmaslore/a/12_days_of_christmas_meaning.htm))

Speaking about multiplicity, I myself am more than one image. I wear fake fur in the northern hemisphere and swimming trunks in the south, since Christmas is a summer festival there. I am called by many names: St. Nicolas, Kris Kringle, Father Christmas, and Santa Claus. I am the representation, the personification of the magic of a wish come true. I bless the child-like faith that life and love can bring us the things we want. What race, nationality, or ethnicity is this generosity?

When a young black girl cannot believe her father when he tells her that Santa becomes the race or ethnicity of the family he visits, this is evidence of the corrosive nature of white supremacy. The entire concept of race is a social construction to justify slavery and colonial oppression. Injustice was

thought to be tolerable even necessary because anyone other than a white person was considered a lesser human being. And, everyone is guilty of buying into this fiction—some more than others. ([http://www.slate.com/articles/life/holidays/2013/12/santa\\_claus\\_an\\_old\\_white\\_man\\_not\\_anymore\\_meet\\_santa\\_the\\_penguin\\_a\\_new\\_christmas.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/holidays/2013/12/santa_claus_an_old_white_man_not_anymore_meet_santa_the_penguin_a_new_christmas.html))

The way out of this morass is to deconstruct the concept of white supremacy and to stop making whiteness the default modality for all that is good and gracious in the world. History tells a more complicated story. We must be clear about history. At the same time, it is important to see beyond the various symbols of Christmas, including myself, to perceive the Spirit of Christmas. We err when our thinking stops with the representation, the personification and hides the unseen thing that the symbol intends to reveal. We err further when we cannot see beyond the inanimate objects that we want.

Christmas is the Mass for Christ. It is the Eucharist celebration that recreates the Lord' Supper—the bread and wine, the sustenance and joy—that brings the Christ, the human incarnation of Divine Love, into our presence. The Eucharist at its etymological root is favor, grace, and gratitude. So we celebrate the Christ Mass, with songs of joy and hope and faith. It is celebrated through the Word and with words of encouragement to allow love to discipline and to rule our lives.

And as Chrysostom said hundreds of years ago, it is a celebration of Christ—The Sun of Justice. At this time of year, we think of the importance of charity. We think of sharing what we have with those who are less fortunate than we. This is as it ought to be. At the same time, it is important for us to consider why so many people need charity. This is because of the injustice of our political economy. Thus, this is also a time to think about the structures that make poor people poor. What is going on with our system of wealth distribution in the United State and around the world that leaves so many people on the economic margins of life? These are the discussions we ought to have, not such a waste of breath as whether we wish each other Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas.

The Spirit of Christmas, the spirit of the holiday season whether one keeps it as a religious observance of the advent and the birth of Jesus, or as an observance of the winter solstice, or a celebration of Hanukah, or the Kwanzaa harvest of the first fruits, or a riotous celebration of the New Year, or as a commemoration of the gifts of the magi , or as a time to tell those we love that we love them, or as a time to visit with family and friends, or as a time for a cease fire in war, or some/all of the above, is the spirit of peace on earth and goodwill toward men and women.

The reality behind the symbol that I am and behind the gifts we give and receive is love. It is radical love, the Christ consciousness found in many religious traditions. It is Divine Love loving the world through us. The holiday season, the Yuletide, Christmastime blesses the world with the blessing expressed by Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' story "A Christmas Carol."

"God bless us everyone."

