

December 22, 2020

Santa and Christmas in the Pandemic 2020

It is amazing to think that just last year at this time, I was in Toyland, Greenland, the home of the northern hemisphere Santa, sitting outside, wrapped in a blanket, drinking hot dark chocolate, watching the Northern Lights, and contemplating the relationship between dark matter, dark energy, the Cosmos, and God. When Santa and I talked last Christmas the night before I boarded the airplane to return to East St. Louis, we had no idea that a deadly virus that would infect and kill millions was about to loose itself upon the world.

We could not foresee a global shutdown, so much so that the air would begin to clear and wild animals would walk city streets. We also could not foresee the political foolishness that would make the pandemic worse than it needed to be in the United States.

As you know, I go to Toyland, aka the North Pole, most years to help Santa's team of volunteers who track children so Santa will know where to bring their presents. During the year, children move or their parents make plans for them to visit family and friends at Christmas. We do much of this work online, but we all look forward to seeing each other once a year and reconnecting with the northern hemisphere Santa and his extended family of toyshop workers. Because of the pandemic, this year was different.

The first covid-19 cases were reported December 31, 2019, but we did not know that we would have to begin making serious adjustments until around March. Most people do not know that all the Santas – the northern hemisphere Santa based in Greenland, the southern hemisphere Santa based in the Seychelles, the eastern hemisphere Santa based in South Korea, and the western hemisphere Santa based in Costa Rica—have a team of medical experts that keep track of infectious diseases even when there is not a pandemic. Since the Santas come when most people in a household are asleep, they do not come into contact with many people who are sick, still they have to be careful that they do not spread an infection from one household to the next.

Also, most people do not know that the Santas keep journals that describes every Christmas. These journals go back more than 100 years, so we know what the northern hemisphere Santa faced during the flu pandemic of 1918. It was much as it is today. People had to quarantine, but many people resisted. They were asked to wear masks, but many people did not. Religious services were cancelled or adjusted, and some people were upset about it. Families could not get together for the holidays as normal. The difference between then and now is that families lived closer and there was no online technology that allowed for people to at least see each other virtually.

This time, when March came and the entire world was on lock down, the health team was already certain that this pandemic would probably last well into 2020, and, depending upon whether or not the scientists could create a safe and effective vaccine, it could last well into

2021 and beyond. Our online meetings on the emergency started around Easter. The long-term effects on children were already starting to become evident.

According to the World Economic Forum website, during this pandemic, 6.7 million children could suffer wasting, the condition where an individual loses muscle mass and fat tissue from malnutrition; 1.5 billion children face an education crisis because they cannot go to school in person; 370 million miss free school meals; 80 million children under the age of one year will miss getting immunizations for other diseases.

The Washington Post reports that the poverty rate in the United States started to rise in July after the stimulus checks were spent. The highest poverty rates are among Black Americans and Americans in general with a high school diploma or less. Since June, approximately 2.3 million children under 17 are now living in poverty.

Then, there is the mental health toll that the pandemic is taking on adults and children. Added to the economic uncertainty and the inability to visit with family and friends, there is the relentless news of sickness and death. Most people know of a family member who has contracted the illness. There are many who know someone who has died from the illness. Then, there are those who have died this year from causes unrelated to covid, but because of restrictions on travelling and in person religious gatherings, families have not been able to perform traditional funeral rituals. This year has also seen a global reckoning with the issue of racism in the wake of the killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others.

The Santas are not outside of this reality. In fact, there were meetings about how Santa could and ought to be represented as Black. There were meetings about covid safety and how depicators would interact with children around the world without spreading the disease. While wearing masks, the depicators could not allow the children to sit on their laps. Some kept a social distance with children sitting on benches in front of Santa. Some, spoke with Santa from behind plexiglass. However, despite our best efforts, some children were exposed to a Santa and Mrs. Claus who later tested positive for covid.

Whenever we have our online meetings about this Christmas, the problem of income inequality raises its horry head again. During this pandemic, there was an expression: "We are all in this together." This expression was not and is not true. People of color have suffered infections and death at higher rates in the United States than White people. Upper income people have actually benefitted from the pandemic while lower income people have fallen into or deeper into poverty. Many families who have never experienced food insecurity before are lining up at food banks. Some families will have little money for Christmas gifts and a traditional meal, while others plan to spend more to try to compensate for the inability to travel or to see family and friends.

This is where the Santas are hoping that the true spirit of Christmas will come forth. Christmas is not about how much stuff we can give each other. It is about sharing the incarnation of Divine Love in the world. It is about telling the people we love that they are important to us. For

those who have more this Christmas, the Santas are hopeful that you will share your abundance with those who have less, not only during the Christmas season, but throughout the year. The Santas look forward to the day when governments throughout the world will make structural changes in their political-economies to guarantee that every family has the basic needs of food, housing, clothing, health care, and education.

This year, I did not travel to Toyland. My daughter will not visit me. However, I am grateful that we are all alive and healthy. I look forward to the vaccine which I intend to take the moment it becomes available to people who are not first responders or front-line healthcare workers. Still, the lights on my Christmas tree twinkle in the darkness as the Winter Solstice brings the return of longer days. My cousins and I found a black angel Christmas tree ornament to put on our trees. I am listening to "A Motown Christmas" in my car when I do my errands. My son took me to see the lights that tell the nativity story at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, remembering when my mother took him and his sister to see the lights when he was a little boy. It was a clear black black sky with a bright half-moon shining down upon us more beautiful than the blue lights proclaiming Peace on Earth. I am finding Christmas joy in small things, in every breath. I am hoping that the New Year will bring an end to the pandemic and a new understanding of human community, that each of us can help make life better for all of us, and all of us can help make life better for each of us. This year, more than ever, we need Christmas hope.

May you all have a very Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and a New Year filled with sustenance and joy.