

Norwegians celebrate Christmas

It was seven years old when somebody told me why we celebrate Christmas. It was Mrs. Dahle, my elementary school teacher, who read about the birth of Jesus Christ from the Holy Gospel.



MARIUS MELAND

"Jesus is the son of God," she said. "He was born in a stable on Christmas Eve so that he could repent for all the pagans, adulterers and sodomites who populate the Earth."

We didn't know what adulterers and sodomites were, but we understood that they must be something bad. You see, Mrs. Dahle's universe divided itself neatly into two categories: the good and the bad. Capitalism was good. Communism was bad. Norwegians were good. Immigrants were bad. Christians were good. Muslims, Hindus, Jews and everybody else were bad.

She could teach us this, because in Norway we don't separate church and state. And Mrs. Dahle saw it as her mission to impregnate our minds with good, Christian, traditional values.

She tried very hard, but I'm afraid she wasn't very successful with me. You see, my father was an ardent atheist, and he'd decided that there would be no mention of any deity in our home. That's why I hadn't heard the name Jesus Christ before Mrs. Dahle uttered it.

"Religion is the opium of the people," my father used to say, and I think he'd read that in a book by Karl Marx.

When my father said that we wouldn't celebrate Christmas, my mother immediately protested. She wasn't particularly religious, but she was endeared to every kind of tradition.

"Traditions are good," she said, "because they keep the family together."

Whenever my mother and father disagreed on something, my mother would always get it her way. But

she was wise enough to let my father have the last word, so that it would seem as if he had triumphed.

"Look here, dear," my mother said as she showed my father a history book. "You see, Christmas isn't really a religious holiday. The Vikings celebrated Yule at this time of the year long before they were converted to Christendom."

"Why, you're absolutely right," my father said. "So there's no reason for us not to celebrate the holiday."

In fact, my mother was right. The mid-December celebration in Scandinavia goes back hundreds of years before the Vikings substituted God for Thor and Odin. In ancient time they celebrated winter solstice, when the sun returned and the days became longer. And believe me, if you'd ever lived through a Scandinavian winter, you'd celebrate that too.

Thus, with religion out of the way, we could celebrate Christmas in my family. And oh, did we celebrate!

My mother filled the house with candles and Christmas decorations. There were no angels or stables, of course, but plenty of wreaths, mistletoe, incense, and Santa Claus dolls.

And then there was the food. Following the Norwegian tradition, my mother baked seven types of cakes, including my favorite, the gingerbread men (it was before the era of political correctness, and

besides, my mother didn't have cookie cutters to make gingerbread women).

On Dec. 24, which is the day we celebrate in Norway, my family gathered around the table at noon to eat rice porridge. Before the meal, my mother would put an almond into the porridge kettle and dish it out in equal portions. Whoever got the almond in his porridge would win a marzipan formed as a pig, another Norwegian Christmas tradition. Nobody was supposed to know where the almond would land, but I suspect my mother knew it, because every year a new person would win the marzipan pig. And my mother never got the almond in her dish.

Then we would go down to the garden and hang up a bundle of wheat in the pear tree. There's an old superstition in Norway that if you don't put out a bundle of wheat as food for the birds on Christmas Eve, your family will be struck by bad luck. I believe it's true, because one year we forgot to put out the wheat, and on Christmas morning we found out that mice had overturned the cookie jar and eaten all the gingerbread men.

For Christmas Eve my mother followed the family tradition of serving reindeer steak with lingonberry jam, Russian peas, and boiled potatoes. Other families eat ribs or cod, but my family originally comes from Northern Norway, where most people eat reindeer for Christmas. My brother used to sing "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" while we ate, but my mother didn't like it: she thought it was morbid and asked him to be silent.

After the Christmas dinner, we went out and put a dish of rice porridge on the doorsteps for the "nisse." A "nisse" is a kind of troll who, according to popular tradition, lives under the house and

Turn to CHRISTMAS, Page 15B

Holiday season inspires reflections on death

The meaning of the holidays changed after I saw death for the first time. He couldn't have been more than 20. Laying on the ground, face down, with his motorbike still between his feet, the bus tire was only a few feet away from his head. I was in another bus, another world, passing by the scene that seemed somehow like a joke. No punch line.



EDWARD KLOPFENSTEIN

As the bus I was in drove by, I looked out the window to see the boy alone in the street. It was dark, but I could see a small puddle of blood creep from his head.

The scream of his motorbike's horn was the only sound outside. The silence inside was broken only by the gasps of the other passengers who sat next to me.

That wasn't the first bit of violence I had seen in my life, but it was my first contact with death.

In my short 28 years, I've seen stabbings in Philadelphia, shootings in Idaho, a rape in Japan and that fateful accident in Taiwan.

Whether it's the accidental or the intentional, death creeps its way back into our lives with unending ease. It's the piece of chewed gum that we can't get off our shoe or that cut that just won't heal.

And death is back again.

In late November, a very good friend of mine lost her baby. The child never saw the light of day because it died in the womb.

Hearing about the death brought the bus crash back all over again. Actually, I remember that crash every year about this time. It's just that the baby's death brought the memory back a little sooner this year. You see, the first thing that hit me when I saw the dead boy was how his parents would have to go through that first holiday without him.

I wonder how my friend will get through the same.

After that year, like all other years, I went home for Christmas. I'd meet with family, carefully open the presents so the wrapping paper wouldn't rip and smile

over my Discman or Timex. The tradition just seemed like a hollow rut.

Why go through all this crap, I thought, when it's all for nothing anyway. The end result for sinners and saints alike is all the same: a lifeless corpse.

In my personal quest for an answer to death, I thought about Christmas. That may seem like a strange place to think about such an intense topic, but if you scan any statistics on suicides, you'll see those numbers peak on Christmas Day.

The holiday represents both the highest high and the lowest low for people who can't let go of loneliness. So, it seemed like a good place to think about life and what it's all about.

Christmas (or whatever you want to call it — every society has their own special day and name) isn't the gifts or the tree or all the food mom packs into your stomach. That's the trappings of our artificial society and what the folks in high-rise New York dreamed for us. That is the lie.

Pull away from that pabulum and you'll find a common thread weaving through the world's holidays that humbly returns our eyes again to humanity. From Hanukkah to Japanese moon viewing, that one day, that one moment, gives us a chance to realize that this life can mean more than cheap junk bought on a last-minute whim.

Holidays can focus our realization that the veil hiding death from life is thin indeed. It can make us reflect on what we've really done with our lives.

In my mental travels, I found that life is short. But, as long as we are living, we should rejoice for the miracle of every breathe we breath, if for nothing else.

This is how I got through my contact with death.

I only hope my friend can find something similar this holiday season.

And move on.

— Edward Klopfenstein

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