

COMMENTARY

BY MARTY DAVIS

Jell-O salad and Montgomery Ward

Blowing the dust off memories of Christmas Past

It's often said Christmas is for children, and this holiday brought that point a little closer to home as I set out to find the child I used to be. This season marked a rite of passage as I learned that going forward sometimes requires going backward first.

My mother died last summer, and it was not until very close to Christmas Day that I came to fully realize the significance of the fact that I am now the oldest living person, and presumably the titular head, of my immediate family. The symbolic implications of this knowledge exceed any actual practical applications in that my family consists only of a brother in Texas, a sister in California and two nieces and a nephew who, regrettably, I scarcely even know. I head a family so scattered, it has been years and years since any holidays were spent together.

A few days before Christmas I was struck with the notion that it was now up to me to preserve long-forgotten family holiday traditions—to look back, to retrieve memories and to re-create them as best as possible so they may be kept alive and cherished. But at the same time came the realization that these memories likely will end with me—who will I pass them on to?

This holiday, and perhaps this one holiday only, I needed to venture into my own personal Christmas Past.

This was not to be an easy task. Like many of us, I live for the present, plan and worry about the future and seldom venture into thoughts of days gone by.

Unfortunately, I exercise my memories as infrequently as I exercise the rest of me. I fear this pattern of living for today and tomorrow puts to risk losing many of my yesterdays.

My journey into the past turned out to be a short trip. The attic of my mind, while dusty indeed, also seems to be largely dimly lit and empty. No bad memories. No sad recollections. Just not a lot there, period.

I did come up with a few visions of old holiday dinners, large family affairs with aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. Those went on until I was about 10 or so—and then, well, then I don't what happened.

They just stopped. And now I never will know, because there is no one left to ask.

For my Christmas dinner I invited a few hardy friends over to share the day, and I planned my menu based on my recent journey of exploration. But as it turned out, most of the things I remembered I couldn't bring myself to re-create.

Sentiment aside, there is no way a raisin carrot salad ever will be brought to life by my hands. The same goes for Waldorf salad—apples, walnuts, celery and mayonnaise! No wonder I don't want to

dredge up these memories. This was culinary child abuse.

I finally found one treasured mental recipe and enthusiastically served my friends green Jell-O with carrots and pineapple. It was solemnly examined, proclaimed to be a "Midwestern thing" and then resoundingly ignored. I happily ate it all.

My jaunt through childhood briefly was jarred by the late-December announcement that all Montgomery Ward stores would be closing soon. Like many people who grew up in smaller towns, Wards was the mainstay of our shopping expeditions.

All the stores were much the same back then. They had half-balconies at the back, with wide center stairs and a much higher front balcony for the offices. The front balcony was accessed through a single steep side staircase.

I clearly see this front staircase through 4-year-old eyes. It was the architectural wonder of my world. It climbed to the stars and was the most frightening thing so far encountered in my rural childhood existence.

I remember being there with my grandmother and timidly approaching the bottom of the stairs. One step, two steps, maybe three steps, then total terror would grip my little heart and I'd back down in quivering fear.

I doubt I could climb those steps today without shivering a bit. They climb clear to the stars, you know?

I cannot clearly recall the smell of Christmas, the thrill of opening presents or the warmth of family, but I see those brown scuffed stairs with white railings as clearly as if I were there yesterday. And as I mourn the loss of these stores and jobs, I am grateful for the gift of the memory of Wards—and for that of green Jell-O with carrots and pineapple.

Very early in my life, and clearly evident in my memories, was the sense and knowledge that I was "different"—that there was something about me I never should discuss or let anyone know about. It was to be a long time before I found the words and explanations to associate with my feelings, my thoughts, my dread of life and my horrible self-imposed, self-defending, self-defeating isolation. It was a long time before I learned about being gay.

And so now, in perhaps a Pollyannaish attempt to create Christmas memories for others, I would ask for this new year, and others to follow, that we all strive to work together, as family, as community, to set goals and make plans to do what we can to make sure the future holds brighter promise for our youth.

Everyone deserves to have happy Christmas memories, a safe today and a promising tomorrow. Happy New Year to us all. **JD**

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REFLECTIONS

5 years ago in just out... VOL. 13 No. 5, JAN. 3, 1996



• Lambda Rising bookstore made a great leap forward when it opened a branch bookstore on America Online, the nation's largest online computer service.

• A Los Angeles man was sentenced to 120 days in jail after he was convicted under California's new domestic violence law, which includes same-sex relationships.

• Community Outreach Inc., also known as Sunflower House, received grants from Equity Foundation and the Seattle-based Pride Foundation to provide lesbian health clinics at its Corvallis location.

• After three terms in the Oregon Legislature, Rep. Lisa Naito said she would not seek re-election. The Portland Democrat, who represented House District 15, said she wanted to spend more time with her two school-age children.

• The Lesbian Community Project's board of directors presented the All Lesbian Talent Show.

• About 10 percent of Cuba's 1,180 HIV-positive inhabitants were released from quarantine and returned to normal life after convincing authorities they would behave responsibly, the Prensa Latina news agency reported Nov. 14.

• The Urban League of Portland said it would step up its efforts to help prevent the spread of HIV in the metro area, particularly in communities of color. President Lawrence J. Dark and several staff members joined a public walk across the Burnside Bridge to dramatize the impact of the epidemic Dec. 1, World AIDS Day.

• Don Horn, triangle productions! executive producer and founder, described his new space, Theater! Theatre!: "I want this to be a place where gays and lesbians can celebrate pride every day—not just once a year. I want this to be valuable to the whole community."

• The Portland Women's Theatre Company presented *Misguided Lives: A Lesbian Soap Opera*—it's not just about Casa Delores anymore!

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