

Self-Empowerment

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Santa On My Mind

This past Autumn season was a busy time for me, as my husband and I sold our house in Philadelphia and moved to an apartment in nearby Mount Laurel, NJ. Whew! It was indeed a huge process to downsize from a three bedroom house to a one bedroom apartment. Even after releasing a vast amount of abundance, we still had much to pack, move, and unpack. Done! Yay!

We love our new apartment. The rooms are spacious. Everything is on one floor so no lugging laundry up and down between three floors. The grounds are kept beautifully by others, so we don't have to spend the weekends mowing, weeding, etc. Any problems, we just call maintenance to handle it. We are grateful for the freedom and ease.

Do I miss our house? Not too much. I loved that house for the eleven years we lived there, but in the balance of all aspects between home ownership responsibilities and apartment rental, this move is just a perfect fit for us now. I released and let go. It feels good.

And so now I happily look forward to this year's Winter holidays with renewed health and greater ease, as this time last year I was in the midst of intense medical treatments.

I also remember some holiday seasons from years past that were challenging in ways other than health related. Maybe you, like me, have had emotional issues triggered by unmet needs, desires, and/or expectations around the holidays. There can often be great pressure to "have a happy holiday" when maybe we're not feeling so happy about our life circumstances. For years as a single parent the holidays evoked feelings of sadness and loss, feelings I rarely shared.

A Santa Pause

My non-religious Jewish family did not celebrate Christmas, so Santa Claus was not part of my upbringing. As an adult I would like to take a Santa pause with you.

Santa Claus is to me a "spiritual but not religious" symbol of great meaning. Despite commercialization, there is a great opportunity to get in touch with what Santa means to the sweet innocent child within us.

Christmas songs suggest that somehow Santa knows if we've been bad or good, as if he were omniscient and omnipresent, like a god. It's a scary thought, imagining that each of my thoughts, words, and deeds could be seen

and judged. I want to be rewarded for my goodness, but I have excuses, defenses, and denials for those less than savory actions on my part. Many years of psychological and spiritual work keep me from saying "the Devil made me do it!" Unfortunately, I have to admit my responsibility in all such matters. Maybe I'll get coal in my stocking this year for some harsh words I blurted out, and more....

So what does a Santa figure embody for me? He is my own conscience, projected outward. He is a symbol of a jolly loving God. He is an older and wiser man who will personally visit each and every one of us, offering the gifts he knows we desire.

The bearded man in a red suit is a child's image, one that most of us have intellectually outgrown, but often still harbor in a corner of our mind. Maybe we call it Karma, or a Spiritual Journey to Truth, or just a yearning of the heart for an end to suffering. But he's still there....



Healing: Finding the Inner Santa

We long for a perfect parent, teacher, guru, savior, messiah, lover, or Santa to guide us to right thought, right speech, and right action. The suggestion is that I will feel more whole, more complete, if only that "other" were there for me, supporting me through my challenges, keeping me on the goodness track. We are tempted to believe "If only I had [a particular person, place, or thing], then I'd be ok." The purpose of the ego is to keep that "If only" game going.

If you really *knew*, not just intellectually, but from the bottom of your toes, all the way up to your heart and mind, that there is within each of us a connection with an Inner Santa, Inner Wisdom, or whatever you call the Higher Power of your understanding – there would be a different quality to your experience of the journey of life.

We can shift from seeking an external Santa to finding the internal one. Instead of playing seek-but-do-not-find, we could practice connecting and re-connecting with that which is available to each of us as an inner guiding light. It

may start out as a pilot light, but with practice, could grow to the power of a lighthouse.

I value the many teachers who have contributed to my life. Yet it has been most valuable to learn to trust my Higher Self to be the one I turn to as often as my willingness allows. My self-empowerment is in the remembering of my connection with Spirit, that “more” of myself that is present, open, and loving, no matter what circumstances or challenges come my way.

“Experts” come and go, communicating from their personal or professional perspective, and sometimes with an agenda that might not work well for me. I remember to go within to ask whether their suggestion resonates with my highest knowing in the moment. It takes practice to listen within and follow through on intuition. Persistence yields great dividends in quality self-care. Reclaim your Inner Santa! Slide down the chimney of your mind to the hearth of your heart, and give yourself the gifts that you’ve been longing for – love, joy, and peace of mind.

In this issue

Author and therapist Lee Ann Etscovitz shares her search for Santa in her new book *An Inner Roadmap of Gender Transformation*. Lee Ann’s memoir shares life experiences that are universal issues of the human psyche as well as her gender identity journey.

I have been on the “Ask Leo” email list of Leo A. Notenboom for his technical advice about computers for a few years. Recently he began publishing “Heroic Stories”, sweet down-to-earth stories of people who have acted in compassionate ways that make a difference, and inspire us to be heroes, too.

My prayer for you and your loved ones is an abundance of blessings for peace and joy in your life at this holiday season and always.

Your fellow traveler,

Rev. Jill

Santa Claus: Where Are You?

by Lee Ann Etscovitz

*So much we dream,
realities of the mind
and heart,
struggles of the soul,
so real that life itself
becomes the chance
to test our dreams.*

From the poem, “We Are As Permanent”

Even though I am Jewish, my parents had a Christmas tree every year during my childhood, probably because, as the only Jewish family in town, they did not

want to stand too far apart from the rest of the townspeople, though our surface assimilation did not erase our basic Jewishness. The following [condensed excerpt of the] story is an allegorical search for Santa Claus and at the same time a true accounting of my life-long search for the meaning of Christmas. It was the toxicity of my upbringing along with my gender confusion that for many years combined to give me no inner peace, perhaps the peace I hoped to find with a meaningful recovery of my childhood belief in Santa Claus.

The Death of Santa Claus

Santa Claus died one winter day when I was nine years old, some time in late November or early December. The snow was already on the ground and the cold northern Maine air was full of anticipation with the approach of the Christmas season. It all happened when I was in the fourth grade. I was hanging my coat on a hook in the coatroom at the back of the classroom, and I was about to walk to my assigned desk, when one of the boys quickly whispered to me: “There’s no Santa Claus.”

This pronouncement was made clandestinely and thus more convincingly than if it had been shouted across the school yard during recess. “You’re crazy!” I whispered back, but I was instantly and quietly shaken. I was reluctant to believe the whisperer of such news, because he was also a known trouble-maker. Who wants to believe a trouble-maker, especially in terms of a matter so very basic to one’s own life as the life of Santa Claus? Still, I was shaken and troubled. Concentration on school work that day was very difficult.

Santa Claus represented hope and excitement, especially in the midst of a long and cold northern Maine winter. He was also an escape from a home situation in which I felt less than special. He was an annual reminder that perhaps I was worthwhile after all and that I was entitled to some of life’s bounty, not just physical bounty, but rather emotional and spiritual bounty as well. And so my concentration on school work that day gave way to a preoccupation with the death of Santa Claus, a preoccupation I now realize I have had all my life, or at least until recently, when at last I have found Santa Claus. But I am getting ahead of myself.

When I arrived home after school on that fateful day, I went into the kitchen where my mother was preparing food. In fact, many times when I came home after school the house would smell of freshly baked cinnamon buns, providing an aroma which, I must admit, rivaled the magic quality of Santa Claus. But it was Santa Claus, or the possible death of him, that was on my mind and heavy in my heart that day, a weight far greater than could be lifted even by the heavenly scent

of cinnamon buns. And so I went to the kitchen sink where my mother was standing. I remember standing quietly along side her, watching her prepare some food and then, with some hesitation, looking up and asking her the big question: "Mom, is there really a Santa Claus?"

My mother was not a demonstrative person. She rarely gave hugs and kisses, but I always felt, or wanted to feel, she was there for me, at least when I was a child. Of my father I have absolutely no memory when it comes to holidays, birthdays, and such things as Santa Claus. It was to my mother I always went for the emotional support I needed, or at least for what I was able to get. My mother's response to me on this occasion was helpful, whether she realized it or not, for she gave me psychological room to handle my feelings and to say what I had to say. So without looking away from her task she simply said: "Why do you ask?"

I told her what one of the boys had said to me at school and that he sounded very sure of himself. My mother's potential helpfulness at this point suddenly dwindled into some vague remark about the boy at school not necessarily being right. But she did not sound convincing. She was probably unsure of how to handle my question. So I wandered off to some other part of the house, perhaps to my own room, to begin to deal with this whole matter. More than Santa Claus was in question. What about his elves? What about the food we usually leave for him? Who fills the stockings? I know I heard his sleigh one night and the bells on it. Was all of this a lie? Had I been tricked into believing something that was simply not true? What about the chance to feel special, really special, at least once a year? I was very bewildered and upset.

I finally began to realize that what had been whispered to me at school had been a secret everywhere. Other children confirmed the truth about Santa Claus. His name remained, but he was somehow gone. Many of the children in the first, second, and third grades still believed in him, but there seemed to be a silent agreement among the older children not to say anything to the younger ones.

Yes, I buried Santa Claus when he died, but I also buried something else. I buried hope and possibility. I buried an opportunity to feel special, at least once a year. I buried an illusion that had been my reality, and I had no new illusion with which to replace it. It was as if I had buried a part of myself. Since then I have lived a lifetime without Santa Claus, a lifetime without a certain joy in my heart. As I look back I see myself as not really having buried the disillusionment that grew out of Santa's death. Rather, I have been looking all my life for Santa Claus, for hope and possibility, for that

special feeling in myself, and for a reality that is more than an illusion.

My Search for Santa Claus

Following the death of Santa Claus, I embarked on a journey in search of him. It is not that I embarked consciously. My conscious effort went into all the things necessary for getting on in life. I went to school, joined musical groups, participated in sports, developed some friendships, found jobs, married, raised children, divorced, remarried, and pursued a variety of interests. But beneath all this normal, ongoing activity was a yearning for something that had been missing in my life, that magical something which I experienced every Christmas before Santa Claus had died. His death forced me to do a lot of searching and to ask a lot of questions.

Asking questions, whether directly or indirectly, does not make daily living any easier, but it does add depth along the way. I cherish that depth, that extra sense of meaning which can permeate ordinary tasks and events. With the death of Santa Claus, I needed something meaningful and hopeful in my life, something I could relate to on a deeper level. But I found my own questioning, especially my deeper, inner questions, to be personally disturbing, leaving me with a sense of living in a constant state of ambiguity, for I was not able to find any permanent answers. Perhaps ambiguity is the price one pays for seeing more than meets the ordinary eye. Maybe ambiguity, not certainty, is the norm. To live with uncertainty and yet to be able to get up every day and find enjoyment and meaning in life may very well be what makes life productive and rewarding.

The fact remains that the death of Santa Claus left me with a deep feeling of abandonment, almost cosmic in scope. That feeling followed me wherever I went. I was not able to bury my grief beneath mounds of paperwork or to drown it in a sea of activity. Every effort in life became a search, whether openly or secretly, for Santa Claus. Unfortunately, life's ordinary avenues of meaning did not provide me with the answers I was seeking. For example, one of the first places in which I looked for Santa Claus was school. It was in school, after all, that he had met his untimely death. So maybe in school, where I spent so much time anyway, I thought I might begin to understand what had happened. The academic environment then became a major source of hope in my life for many years, involving high school, college, and even graduate school.

Finding Santa Claus

The question still remains: who or what is Santa Claus for someone who has received the "whisper" in a fourth grade coatroom? What is the "force," if you will, that provides the magic of Santa Claus? The answer is

simple and extremely difficult at the same time. Santa Claus is in each of us. He is the magic of our own lives, the magic of our own spirit. I can attest to that. Grasping that magic is very difficult, to say the least. It seems to be the responsibility, perhaps the price, of adulthood which requires each of us to take it upon ourselves to rediscover Santa Claus and thus rediscover ourselves.

Time, like the weather, is a fact of life. Death, which is part of our temporal existence, is also a fact of life. While the death of Santa Claus is a fact of life, too, it does not mean the end of him. His resurrection is in the hands and hearts of each of us. The basic requirement for his rebirth is courage and a willingness to risk living with the ongoing pain of facing oneself with all one's strengths and weaknesses. Outside of such courage I see no other way by which to keep Santa Claus alive in a world which, except for one commercialized night a year, seems determined to keep him buried. Santa Claus is the magic of hope and love for oneself and for others. Such magic is needed all year long.

The Santa Claus which I have found again and which I keep on finding in various forms and places is the Santa Claus within my own heart. I have had to reach beyond that fourth grade coatroom. I could not simply dream of the "good old days" when Santa Claus was real without any question about his authenticity. Instead, I have had to reach in, reach out, and reach up. I have had to reach upwards to find the faith and courage to keep on looking, for I have always felt I deserve to have Santa Claus in my life. I have also had to reach out to other people, hoping to touch them somehow with whatever sense of humanity I possess and at the same time discover their humanity. And I have had to reach inward towards myself, seeking the wellsprings of my own existence and of my own powers as a human being. No matter what anyone whispers or even shouts in the coatrooms and hallways of life, Santa Claus and I are meant to be together. Finding Santa Claus was finding myself at last.

Unfortunately, my experiences with psychiatry, education, business, and government, all tend to ignore the underlying human search for Santa Claus. Such insensitivity, however, does not mean the search has to end. It only means that the search for Santa Claus must continue in spite of roadblocks, in spite of social pressure, and in spite of the fact that the value of the search is not readily visible or measurable. In the midst of life's pressures we must strive to retain the magic of Santa and his gift of giving and hope. Without hope and without being able to give as well as receive, life is somehow less human, less meaningful. Trying to

capture the quality of Santa Claus is not easy, because he is only as real as each of us. That is a reality which underlies the very quality of our lives and can take a lifetime to achieve.

Santa Claus is more than a myth, more than a state of mind. He is a measure of our humanity, of our inner spirit, and of our hope for the future where each person counts. To kill Santa Claus, whether openly or clandestinely, is to rob each of us of our dignity and the right to find meaning and relationship in the life we strive to call our own. Santa Claus does not only bear gifts, he is himself a gift. To have Santa Claus in one's life is to be gifted oneself. That is what I ultimately want for Christmas. I want to become my own gift, for then I can truly give to others out of my very being.

This abridged article is reprinted with permission by Lee Ann P. Etscovitz, Ed.D, MFT from her most recently published book An Inner Roadmap of Gender Transformation available on Amazon.com. Lee Ann is also the author of Let the Dandelions Grow: A Poetic Portrait of a Transsexual Journey and the Human Condition.



*I am the new year.
I am an unspoiled page in your book of time.
I am your next chance at the art of living.
I am your opportunity to practice what you have
learned during the last twelve months of your life.
All that you sought the past year and failed to find
is hidden in me;
I am waiting for you to search it out again and,
this time, with more determination.
All the good that you tried to do and didn't achieve
last year is mine to grant –
providing you have clearer intention
and fewer conflicting beliefs.
In me lies the potential of all that you dreamed
but didn't dare to do, all that you hoped
but did not perform,
all that you prayed for and did not yet experience.
These dreams slumber lightly, waiting to be
awakened by the touch of an enduring purpose.
Yes, I am the new year.*

Anonymous

Hey, Saa-antaaa!

by Maggee Davis

“Dave” had Down Syndrome and grew up in a state institution for the mentally impaired. He was there from age one, then released along with many others in the 1970s. Dave then lived in a community residence with three other men. The residence had three staff people, including me, who helped the men take care of everyday needs — laundry, cleaning, shopping, food preparation, going to movies, taking vacations, and so on.

When I worked with Dave in the 1980s, he was 45 years old. He had Irish heritage, black hair, blue eyes and no teeth. His bowl-shaped haircut complemented his low hairline, a common feature among people with Down Syndrome. He belted his pants below his round belly. Dave appeared different from most people, but he was clean-shaven, looked clean, and managed his self-care well.



Early one December morning, I took Dave to Arsenal Mall in Watertown, Massachusetts to help him buy Christmas presents and personal care items. At the end of a long hallway, we saw someone setting up for the day: the mall Santa. He was portly and older than most mall Santas, with a fake beard but real glasses.

Usually Dave communicated with a simplified version of sign language. He seldom spoke. But right then, he raised his arms and yelled in a loud, clear voice: “Hey, Saa-antaaa!”

As Dave waved and hollered with the biggest grin I’d ever seen on his face, Santa put on his cap and came right over. I gave him a heads-up by exclaiming loudly, “Look, DAVE, it’s Santa!” Santa picked right up on it. He said “Ah, Dave, I was hoping I’d see you here today.” Dave was thrilled. Santa shook his hand, clapped him on the shoulder and knew his name.

Dave spoke little, doing his usual muttering, simplified sign language and imitation of activities. I interpreted what I could and Santa listened graciously. People who work with mentally challenged adults are careful not to treat them like children, so I wouldn’t

have suggested Dave visit Santa at the mall. But Dave saw Santa as an old friend and greeted him. Santa responded in kind.

Santa spoke slowly and clearly in a hearty, deep voice. Without being condescending, Santa said he knew that Dave had been very good that year. I agreed. Santa said he could always count on Dave to be a gentleman. He sounded as if he had known Dave for years. Dave floated for the rest of the season.

I didn’t know how to tell this man what his greeting meant to us, but there was probably no need; I’m sure he saw my tears. That generous mall Santa gave Dave a precious gift of recognition, welcome and love. It cost him nothing, and took no more than a few minutes. Indeed, he provided an unforgettable example for respecting the dignity of every human being from one moment to the next. I remember it every Christmas. I’m sure Dave does, too.

heroicstories.org/hey-saa-antaaa/ originally published as HeroicStories #468 on December 8, 2003. Reprinted with permission from Leo A. Notenboom, Publisher. Visit heroicstories.org to subscribe. Our mission is to publish examples of people being good to each other, to inspire similar heroic actions in others.

Speaking of heroes...

Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929 - April 4, 1968) was an American pastor, activist, humanitarian, and leader in the civil rights movement, using nonviolent civil disobedience to successfully protest racial discrimination in federal and state law.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is an American federal holiday observed on the third Monday of January, celebrated with service projects in many communities.

You can be a part of the 20th Annual Martin Luther King Day of Service. You can participate in one of the projects found online or in your community, or you can simply act compassionately in some form of helpfulness or service wherever you find the opportunity.

An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Daily Word

God guides my way in every situation.

A guide is one who shows the way, who leads and directs. Sherpa mountaineers guide climbers on their mountain trek, quietly leading the way, providing support and direction to ensure that climbers safely reach the top.

God is my guide along life's path. God leads me in right ways, directs my thoughts and actions, and inspires me when I need energy and confidence.

I need never feel lost or alone when meeting a challenge, for I have a loving guide with me at all times to lead me through the twists and turns of life. Knowing this, I relax, let go, and enjoy the journey. I trust God, my Guide, to lead me to my good.

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Love

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Love & Blessings

The mission of Agape Interfaith Ministries is to encourage, support and inspire a deepening conscious relationship with Divinity for the greater experience of wholeness, abundance, love and peace. We serve to elevate consciousness through individual and group educational activities, and community service.