



N ot-Quite-The-N ight-B efore-Christmas

The thrill a child experiences the night before **Christmas** is unlike any other joy in the universe. I remember the anticipation that built up inside me on Christmas Eve until it felt like my head would **explode** on my pillow. My mind raced with expectation and I was certain that the sheer suspense of the thing would keep me from ever falling asleep. But exhaustion eventually won out over imagination and I drifted off with visions of modern-day **sugarplums** dancing in my head.

When the **first light of the day** crept over the horizon, I raced down the stairs, woke up my parents and, as our yearly rituals commenced, almost drowned myself in the excitement of Christmas morning. I was a typical nine-year-old boy.

When my final gift was **ripped** open, I experienced an emotion that can only be described as equal parts **ecstasy** and **despair**. I was overwhelmed by sensory overload, but disappointed that the experience was over for another year and that the gifts I received fell somewhat short of my expectations.

Sure, I got the **GI Joe**, and the **Erector Set**, and the chemistry kit complete with microscope, but I secretly had my heart set on **Marshall Brodine's TV Magic Set** and a **Hot Wheels Loop-D-Loop** race track. "Oh, well," I thought, "At least I have some toys to play with until I can get those other things."

Looking back, it seems like a terrible attitude, even for a little boy. Though I was full of Christmas spirit, was the excitement I brought to the holidays a result of **innocent enthusiasm** or **blatant greed?**

Like most people, I was a victim of a system that encouraged a materialistic view of Christmas. Sure, there were the occasional references to family togetherness, joy to the world, etc., but these paled in contrast to the repeated messages that encouraged my acquisitive and selfish nature. My notion of Christmas had much more to do with **candy and toys and suspense and fantasy** than it did with **giving and appreciation and gratitude and love**.

And it definitely had nothing whatsoever to do with the individual whom we were supposedly honoring.

My family was not particularly religious, but I did have a sense, even as a child, that there was something unusual about celebrating the birth of Christ by a *Suzy Home Maker Oven* or a *G.I. Joe With Kung Fu Grip* delivered under cover of night by a magic fat man in a flying bucket.

For my family, Christmas was not about religion, but it was symbolic of the higher principles of love and contribution to others.

At least it was supposed to be.

You see, that day, after I reached the **peak** of my selfishness, I began to develop an outlook that was as profound as a nine-year-old boy can experience. I knew there was something wrong with the way I was feeling.

But with a **general apathy** that I had been nurturing practically since birth, I ignored this sense of guilt and continued to play into the system that had served me so well. It was a pattern of behavior that continued for a long time. Each year, as Christmas approached, I would confront the guilt, push it aside, and then forget it until the next season rolled around.

This strategy worked until I was a young adult. By then, childish enthusiasm could no longer mask the contradictions I observed all around me. So I figured out a method of dealing with the guilt that seemed perfect: put more emphasis on **giving** than **RECEIVING**.

I had always enjoyed buying presents, so I decided to focus on **that** joy and really work on finding appropriate and thoughtful gifts. This approach distracted me from the selfishness that used to consume me and I soon found myself happily immersed in the **consumer age**.

But an **insidious evil** was sneaking up on me. At first, it was a necessity of **economic\$** ("I only have X number of dollars to spend on Y people") but it graduated to a minor distraction ("I spent \$30 on my **niece**, I guess I have to spend \$30 on my **nephew**).

Eventually it grew into a **sinister compulsion**.

I would find something perfect for a friend for whom I already had a gift, but I was hesitant to give him both because he might be intimidated and feel badly that he didn't spend more on me.

Then there were the people who weren't close friends, but for whom I wanted to get a little something anyway. The inevitable whining phrase, "*But I didn't get you anything!*" echoed in my subconscious until I felt the **joy of giving** being **SUCKED**

**RIGHT
OUT
OF
ME.**

I had exchanged my guilt about **RECEIVING** for guilt about **inappropriate giving** and added the burden of *creating guilt* for my loved ones, who were inadvertently made a part of the madness.

There seemed to be no way out of the dilemma. I felt like reverting back to the old system of selfishness and greed. That is, until I remembered . . .

The Grinch.

It was my favorite Christmas television show. Some watched ***It's a Wonderful Life*** every year. For others it was ***Frosty the Snowman*** or ***A Christmas Carol***. But **my** favorite, the one I looked forward to throughout my childhood (OK, OK, I still watch it today), was ***How the Grinch Stole Christmas***. I loved the drama and the suspense. I loved the animation and the story. But mostly, until the inevitable happy ending, I hated **The Grinch**.

He was **beyond wicked**. A character that made Scrooge seem like an optimist. When I was a kid, I would boo every time he appeared on screen. The Grinch was everything you loved to hate. A character who tried to (I still shudder at the thought) **steal Christmas** from the unsuspecting citizens of **Who-ville**. **THE ANTI-SANTA**.

So it is with no small amount of trepidation that I embark on a mission that will have some people wondering if *I* am the modern reincarnation of *The Grinch*. It is the last comparison I would ever desire to have made of me. But my conviction is such that I must take the risk.

By appearing to steal Christmas, I hope to give it back.

Can you remember what you gave or received on Christmases past? Do you even still own the gifts? Have you **BROKEN** the **toys**, packed away the books, **worn out** the clothes, and lost the trinkets?

Even if you *do* remember a gift and even if *did* make you happy, can *that* joy compare with the reassurance of a **kind word**, a **selfless act**, a **hearty laugh**, or a **sincere embrace** from someone you love?

Aren't *these* the memories that stay with us forever? The material gifts that are supposed to be *symbols* of affection **fade away into obscurity** and we are left with emptiness and dissatisfaction.

Some gifts, however, are given and received in exactly the right spirit. My first year in college (over twenty years ago) I had a roommate who was so unlike me that it was amazing we didn't strangle each other. But as these things sometimes go, we became friends instead.

He invited me to his home one long weekend when I had nowhere to go, and introduced me to his family, his friends, and his English Sheepdog, **B i g f o o t** . He made me feel at home.

It was a kindness I will never forget. Though separated by 500 miles, I have never since missed calling him on Christmas day. It's a small, almost insignificant ritual, but I can tell from his voice that it's a gift he looks forward to every year. I know that I do.

So, back to *The Grinch*.

If you are unfamiliar with the fabulous story by Dr. Seuss, The Grinch goes into the town of *Who*-ville, steals all *the gifts, the decorations, the food,* everything he thought made Christmas *Christmas*.

And just as he is about to dump

them
all
over
a
cliff,

he hears the sounds of all the little *Who*'s *singing happily* and celebrating *Christmas*.

He is so shocked that they could enjoy the holiday without all the material trappings, that his heart grows three sizes bigger, and he returns with all the toys to celebrate with his *Who* neighbors.

It's a great story, but I am not certain that the residents of *Earth*-ville would be singing if all the gifts and the food and the decorations were gone on Christmas morning. In fact, I think there would be a lot of *general snarling,* and *accusation,* and *misery*.

This year I have decided to be *The Grinch* and risk being booed and hated. It is my hope, however, that by the end of this letter, you will understand why I am asking all the *Who*'s in my life to play along.

I'm suggesting a very drastic approach to regaining some of the true meaning of Christmas. With apologies to Dr. Seuss, here is a rhyme to explain what I mean:

To the Residents of *Earth-ville* and *Who-ville*

Some *Who's* will surely stomp their feet,
And some will run out to the street,
And cry out to *Who's*-ever there,
"He cannot do this, it's just not fair!"

But those *Who's* whose **hearts** are strong,
Who know when a game has long gone wrong,
Will sing this very simple song,
And just *refuse* to play along:

For **Christmas** of this very year,
I will not shed a single tear,
I will not shed a tear for *Who's*,
I will not shed a tear for *You's*.

I will not ponder what to buy:
Knick-knack, **bauble**, nor **purple tie**!
If someone thinks to ask me why,
I'll tell them with a happy sigh:
That I have had enough of giving,
That I'd rather just get on with living,
For once, I'd rather *not* receive.

Though some may feel they've been deceived,
Most will likely be relieved.
And I'll add (before they turn **too red**),
What I have in mind instead . . .

There are gifts to give on each December,
That *Who's* find easy to remember,
You can give them even if you're poor,
But you cannot leave them by the door,
And you cannot buy them in a store,
You cannot buy one, **three**, or **four**!

You cannot buy these things at all,
(You couldn't **wrap** them anyway; they're much **too tall**!)
You cannot buy them; you'd be dumb if you tried to,
Because you already have them locked inside you!

And the wisest *Who's* are quick to see,
That they *already* have the key.

A little imagination is all you need,
Just dig a hole in your head and plant some seeds,
And watch them grow into words or deeds,
And if you keep out all the **pesky weeds**,
Who knows where all of this will lead?

Perhaps you have the bestest friend,
With a **h e a r t s o b i g**, it has no end!
Who always has kind words to lend,
And love to give, and time to spend,
Why, wouldn't it be nice to send,
A gift he'd never have to mend?

Just take the time to show that *Who*,
How special that he is to you,
A little card or talk will do,
A lot of words, or just a few,
He'll like it more than a gift or two,
I'm sure of that, and so will you!

And what about your little brother,
Your sister, father, or favorite mother?
They are not enticed by greed!
A little time is all you need!

Share a story from your past,
Tell it quick or make it last,
Perhaps a moment that you shared,
When you were *happy*, lost, or *scared*.
Write it down or speak it out,
It matters not what it's about.

Reveal a thought you've always hidden,
Something secret or forbidden,
A fear, a dream, a hope, a song,
Soon they'll want to play along!

Make a commitment, renew a vow,
It doesn't matter where or how,
It just matters that you do it,
Promise them, and then stick to it!

Or if your thoughts are tough to share,
But you really want to show you care,
Prove to them you're very wise,
And say "I love you" with just your eyes.

Spend a day with a lonely soul,
Teach your neighbor how to bowl,
Turn a stranger into a friend,
Who needs **money**? You've got time to spend!

I've just begun, there's so much more!
Let your imagination soar!
And I'll say it only one more time:
You needn't spend a single dime!

And if you're worried that **Santa's sack**,
Will gewgaws and gadgets and ~~gizmos~~ lack,
Remember you're getting what no one can pack,
The best gift of all . . .

You'll get **Christmas** back.

-- K. Bruce Hurley

Whew! I hope you didn't lose my point in all that rhyming!

I'm not asking everyone in my life to follow this plan exactly, but I am asking them to celebrate **Christmas** by becoming an honorary *Who* and accommodating my special request at least for this one year.

In other words, I will not be buying gifts for my friends and loved ones this year. I urge them not to buy me any, either. And just in case they're feeling pressure to do *something* for me, I ask that they keep in mind that this whole process is about eliminating pressure.

I don't expect anything from them. Not a card, a letter, a picture, a hug, or *anything*.

I want to eradicate expectation from Christmas.

I'm sending a message of non-commercialism to the world. Some *Who's* may not want to give any sort of gift at all (purchased or otherwise). They will simply be a part of the friendship, or the family, or the community, or the universe, at Christmas time. Just ***being in the moment*** is a wonderful contribution.

If someone fails to understand my motive and buys me a gift anyway, I will not refuse it. To do so would deny joy to the giver. But a better idea for everyone who, like me, enjoys giving gifts, is to ask yourself "**Why only on December 25th?**"

I hear people say all the time, "I want to get so-and-so that, but I might as well wait until **Christmas**." In other words, the sentiment is there, but they don't want to have to be forced to think of something else to buy in December.

If you decide to become an honorary *Who* with me, you won't have that pressure. If your sister-in-law wants a subscription to *Hammer and Wrench* magazine, or you think your brother would really like an automatic bread maker, then go ahead and get it for them, even though it's **September-Nothing-Special**. You don't need an excuse. After all, life offers no assurances that they will even be there on Christmas or their birthday.

Sincere and thoughtful giving is a wonderful expression of gratitude and appreciation. Let's not blow it by waiting until retail stores tell us it's mandatory.

And by keeping purchased gifts away from **Christmas**, you'll have a great opportunity to concentrate on the more important elements of **love**, or **gratitude**, or **worship**, or whatever is important to you.

The process of removing expectation from **Christmas** (and for the bold, every day) is not going to be easy. It means to turn your back on tradition and custom and, worst of all, habit. It's always easier to do the things you've always done. But there comes a time when you have to take a stand. Not simply to be different, but *to make a difference*.

I'm not suggesting that we all stop buying gifts for small children (I'm not ***not*** suggesting that, either) but with all the toys kids have, if one person in their life gave them something that wasn't purchased in a store, I don't think they would feel the least bit cheated.

In fact, their *Who* gift might be the only one that lasts until the next **Christmas**. And remember that kids have a far greater ability to understand than we give them credit for. Explain the idea and make *them* honorary *Who*'s. Change the attitude of even one child and now you're really talking about changing the world!

Sure, it takes a little more *creativity*. It takes a little more thought. But after all, aren't your friends and family worth it? Telling someone how you feel might be scary for a lot of people. All right, then you don't have to.

But think about that time in the future when you know you are about to check out of this world forever. When you look back over your life, will you ever be sorry you said what you feel? Or will you actually be **incredibly grateful** that you gave the most important gift of all at the moment when it meant the most. And in case you're wondering, that moment is now.

An old friend from grade school would love to hear from you. A former boss would appreciate knowing that her advice helped you to achieve great things. The little boy down the street might like a day at the beach with your family.

You see how easy it is? Everyone loves and deserves to be appreciated. And if you give with no expectation of return, then, ironically, you will receive, and in ways you never imagined. It's the **great magical principle of love**.

So pick up the phone and call today,
Or drop me a line or two to say,
"I want to be an honorary Who!"
Or if you don't, that's OK too!
You are whoever you want to be,
And whatever that is . . .
It's all right with me.

Signed,



Bruce Hurley a.k.a. *The Grinch*

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