

I Skipped the Santa Claus Tradition With My Three Sons, and They Still Have Christmas Spirit

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My husband and I have figured out how to flip the tradition so our sons give, instead of receive.



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COURTESY OF AMY PATUREL

“Mommy, who is Santa?”

My then 4-year-old son didn't realize he was asking a loaded question. He just wanted to know more about the big-bellied guy in the red suit. How does he grow such a fluffy, snow-white beard? Why is he seemingly everywhere this time of year?

Instead of saying something like, "Santa is a myth," for fear he'd repeat those words to neighborhood kids, I said, "I like to think of Santa Claus as a symbol of faith and love."

It may be an unpopular choice, but my husband, Brandon, and I have decided to forgo introducing our children to Santa Claus, at least not in the traditional way. They see him in malls, on street corners and occasionally walking through the aisles at Target or Walmart. They hear stories about Santa at school, they read about him in books and they see him on TV shows.

One of our 9-year-old twins is convinced Santa is real, despite the lack of gifts under our tree with his name attached. The other suspects it's an elaborate tale. But none of our three boys has asked me whether Santa Claus exists directly, so I haven't weighed in. Even with those caveats, we're catching a lot of flak from friends and family.

“You’re robbing your kids of the magic of Christmas!”

“Give them some fun.”

“There’s such a short window when you can see that wonder in their eyes on Christmas morning. Do you really want to miss that?”

I understand the dismayed reactions. When I was a kid, Christmas Eve was the most anticipated night of the year. My sister and I stayed up until 2 a.m. playing Bonkers and Chutes and Ladders, hoping to catch a glimpse of *him*. One time, I was certain I heard his footsteps in our living room. The hope, the excitement, the mystery — it was magic.

When I was about 7, the enchantment vanished. I saw unwrapped presents in the trunk of my mom’s powder-blue convertible that later appeared under our Christmas tree with the words “From Santa Claus” scrawled on the gift tag.

I wasn't traumatized. I never cried about it. I didn't feel duped. I don't even remember discussing my newfound knowledge with my parents. But I do remember being upset that my older sisters were in on the secret. I also wondered if outing Santa would mean no more gifts from Saint Nick. Apparently not. I'm 46 and my mom still hands me a gift from Santa each year.

Still, when it came to my own children, I dreaded having the discussion that Santa was a farce, and that we had lied to them. **I didn't like the connection between behavior and gifts, particularly because with late nights, sugar-laden treats and exhausting holiday festivities, we're setting our kids up to behave badly.** And I'm not about to follow through on Santa's threat of delivering coal on Christmas morning. Plus, I feared that initial lie could set the stage for bigger, more complex lies down the line.

How could I explain why Santa doesn't bring lavish gifts to some families and not others? Or why people who follow different traditions don't believe in Santa? Or why Santa is always pictured as a white guy, not an elderly woman or an African American? And, in this day and

age, how could I explain that Santa is able to traverse the land without contracting and spreading the novel coronavirus? (Though Dr. Anthony Fauci did help parents with that last one, issuing a statement saying that Santa is immune from COVID-19.)



The writer's three sons don't get gifts from Santa, but they can't resist a white, fluffy beard. Courtesy of Amy Paturel

I wanted to be intentional about how we celebrate the season, so when my twins started preschool, Brandon and I flipped the Christmas fable upside down. **Instead of playing up getting things from Santa Claus, we give them an opportunity to step into the role.** On the nights leading up to Christmas, we dash through the streets dropping gifts at an unsuspecting family's house, then disappear before they find them.

The list of "drop and dash" recipients varies each year, but always includes people who have touched our lives. The neighbor who gave our son lifesaving CPR; the elderly man around the block who reminds me of my late father; close friends who have shown our boys, by example, a love of helping others.

We explain that "Santa Claus" is slang for Saint Nicholas — a real guy who loved children and shared his riches with the less fortunate. Then we take them to the dollar store and purchase basic essentials such as shower curtains, wash cloths, flip flops, soap and water bottles, along with some toys, books and crayons, and send them in a shoebox to the other side of the world through a charity called Samaritan's Purse. To me, that's the spirit of Saint Nicholas.

On Christmas, we try to choose meaningful presents and limit them to three (sometimes less). Then we give all three boys one “Spirit of St. Nicholas” gift to share, usually an experience the whole family will enjoy and remember.

In a funny twist, last year’s Spirit of St. Nicholas adventure took place on board The Polar Express, a train ride in Arizona. Even amidst all of the excitement, the boys seemed to understand that the train ride was a vehicle for storytelling, no different than when we hopped on the Peter Pan ride at Disneyland. Once on board, our sons sang Christmas carols at the top of their lungs and rang their Christmas bells right on cue. And when we pulled back into the station, I know they felt the magic of the season. I did, too.

As my boys are growing older, they're already making the connection — that Santa is a fictional character who traverses the globe by way of flying reindeer. On a recent stroll to check out Christmas décor, my youngest, now 6, said, "I don't think Santa Claus is real, mom. There's no way he could travel all over the world in one night."

"You could be right," I replied. "But I know there was once a man named Saint Nicholas. I like to believe his spirit of love and kindness lives inside of all of us." This year, when they step into the role of good old St. Nick, I hope they understand that’s when real magic happens. That spreading love and cheer during these most tumultuous times is the best way to achieve true happiness.