

A CHRISTMAS GIFT TO EARTH

OVER THE YEARS, my take on Christmas has shifted a lot. I was taught it was a celebration of the birth of Jesus, but really it was all about the presents! My family was of modest means, but my parents got serious about Christmas and I loved it. I'm a member of Gen X, known as the "latchkey generation" because both parents worked so we came home to an empty house after school. That was just fine by me because it provided an opportunity. For several years, driven by curiosity and anticipation, I sneakily opened Christmas presents, played with them, then rewrapped them before my parents got home. I'd then daydream about the new items and practice a "surprise" look for the day-of ritual.

As a young adult, spiritual curiosity ignited, I left the dogma of my youth, and deeper meanings for the holidays emerged. Stacking up historical accounts and Bible stories, it's almost certain Jesus wasn't born in winter. However, early Christian governments couldn't stamp out ancient pagan celebrations held around the winter solstice, so instead, they laid the Christ story over top of them. Although it was a harsh attempt by one culture to blot out another, there is meaningful symmetry between the stories. On one hand, seekers followed the light of a star to witness a miracle. On the other, nature-oriented folks celebrated making it through the longest night of the year to move once again toward light and warmth. Light, in fact, is a central theme of winter holidays in such diverse traditions as Hannukah, Kwanzaa, Diwali, and of course the winter solstice.

The tradition of gift giving during Christmas started in a very different form than giving presents to friends and family. Instead, it was more like trick-or-treat at Halloween. Poor people—peasants, apprentices, and servants—wandered around knocking on the doors of rich people and demanding gifts of good food, money, and drinks. If they got it, they'd toast the person who gave it to them and wish them goodwill. If they didn't,

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CYLVIA HAYES
is a speaker,
author, and
Unity minister.
Her Substack,
Transcend, is
about raised
consciousness,
economic system
change, and a
world that works
better for all.
She's also the
former First Lady
of Oregon. Visit
cylviahayes.com.



they might leave a nasty trick instead. It was an exchange between social classes.

Eventually the rich got tired of the public begging and created the story of Santa Claus dropping gifts for children. Present-giving later became a matter of parents giving to their own children, and the idea of Christmas shopping was born. People weren't going to get their own kids drunk, and giving them food they ate the rest of the year wasn't special, so they had to shop.

Merchants seized on this and Christmas eventually became the most commercialized of holidays. Now it takes effort to tune out the endless calls to buy, buy, buy and focus on deeper meanings.

The consumption-based approach also takes a toll on the earth. During the holidays, waste in the United States increases by a whopping 25 percent. Food waste, wrapping paper, shopping bags, Christmas cards, bows, ribbons, boxes, decorations, lights, and plastic create an additional *1 million tons* of trash *per week*.

In the long, dark night of winter, before the flip of a switch could illuminate a room or a shopping mall, ancient peoples tuned into the seasons and rhythms of nature—and the wonder and beauty of shared traditions. With intention, modern humans can do the same.

Action Idea: A web search will turn up many tips for reducing waste during the holidays. My favorites include giving experiences instead of stuff (online classes or gift certificates for restaurants or massage), using reusable gift bags or cloth towels as wrapping paper, and decorating a live tree that we plant outside afterward. &