

Is Santa over the hill?

December 24, 2007

BY PAIGE WISER

Don't call us Scrooge, Grinch or any other fictional characters. But it's a good time to raise a few questions about another seasonal invention: Santa Claus.

-- Isn't it wrong to lie to our kids?

-- Aren't we setting them up for, at the least, some very confused feelings when they find out the truth?

-- Are those visits to Santa at the mall anything short of traumatic?

-- How many kids are pretending to believe in Santa Claus, if only to mollify parents and keep those presents coming?

-- What's the point? What's wrong with kids getting gifts directly from the people who love them?

We wouldn't go so far as to suggest abolishing the jolly fellow, but it does seem unlikely that Kris Kringle would be created today.

The case against Santa

"I have a 6-year-old who accuses me of never buying him any toys," says Shawn Taylor of Oak Park. "Yeah, right."

She's not going to let the truth out of the bag, but she's tempted. "I'm more worried about what he's going to think when he finds out he's been lied to, frankly. It's not a lie you tell only once. You tell it over and over again. 'Mommy, is Santa Claus watching me?' 'Yeah, sweetie, so you'd better be good.' It does seem quite silly in this day and age."

Joe Healey, the author of *Radical Trust*, couldn't bring himself to perpetuate the Santa Claus myth while bringing up his kids, now ages 21, 18 and 17. Family and friends thought it was odd -- and he worried about his kids ruining the pretense for their schoolmates. "In the end, our Christmases were more meaningful," he says. "Our kids really appreciated that the gifts were coming from their parents."

When children are skeptical about the story, it can mean it's the first step toward becoming a rational free-thinker. "At about the age of 6, I began to think about the logistics of it all and figured out that Santa Claus could not possibly visit everyone simultaneously on Christmas night," said Larry Jones, president of the Albany, N.Y.-based Institute for Human Studies.

Children today mature more quickly and are more savvy, says Debbie Mandel, author of *Turn on Your Inner Light*. "Santa is outmoded for our time period," she says. "Rituals need to be re-evaluated, and new ones appropriate for each family is a great way to invest the holiday with renewed spirit. Tribal beliefs don't need to be blindly accepted. Why not create rituals based on truth?"

In defense of the big guy

"Santa is great for our kids," says Paul F. Davis, author of *Breakthrough for a Broken Heart*. "Saint Nick was a true and historical individual who cared for kids in his community and sneaked some gifts in for their enjoyment during the Christmas season." That's a sentiment worth keeping, he says.

Believing in Santa Claus also is a step in developing skills for higher thinking, says W. George Scarlett, a professor of child development at Tufts University.

"Santa Claus falls under the heading of benign fantasies, fantasies that all cultures are likely to pass on to their children," he says. "One cannot, after all, understand the concept of a germ or develop understanding of historic figures by observing and experiencing firsthand -- one has to imagine. There is, in other words, much good in stimulating children's imaginations -- and the Santa Claus myth is one such example."

Santa simply represents the spirit of giving, says Dandi Daley Mackall, author of *The Legend of St. Nicholas*. "Parents and teachers use myths, fairy tales and other made-up characters every day as tools to teach younger minds important lessons in an engaging way," she says. "Santa is no different."

Mark Amtower, author of *Why Epiphanies Never Occur to Couch Potatoes*, says criticizing Santa is an overreaction. "If you are going to start being totally truthful with a child, you will inevitably go down a path that takes much of the fun out of being a child," he says.

Santa Claus keeps alive the sense of wonder and participation in the mystery that all children are capable of -- and which we lose as adults, says Tom Tuohy, founder of the Chicago charity *Dreams for Kids*. "This mystery and wide-eyed wonder sustains hope and reminds children there is a mythical figure who cares, not just about them, but about all children, especially those who are poor."

Tuohy is rooting for Santa Claus to survive. "I just hope parents explain the powerful lessons of generosity as myth becomes reality," he

says. "Then the tradition will always have great meaning and will keep hope alive for all of us."