

## **A Christmas Wish** **Guy M. Townsend**

The approach of winter is a holy time for followers of the three major religions whose roots go back to Abraham and Moses. Moslems have a holy month, Jews have a holy week, and Christians have a holy day.

For Moslems, it is the holy month of Ramadan. For Jews, it is Hanukkah. And for Christians, of course, it is Christmas Day itself, which has been celebrated on December 25th since the early days of the founding of the Christian faith.

I say “of course” when it comes to Christmas, because most of us in the United States are Christians of one stripe or another and to a greater or lesser degree, and virtually all Americans, whether Christian or not, celebrate at this time of the year by the exchange of gifts, a practice which transcends denominational and doctrinal differences and goes to the very heart of our humanity.

In a way, this gift-giving aspect of Christmas more or less *forces* us to think about others, to go out of our way to do something for other people. Since each one of us is the center of our own personal universe, it is both natural and understandable that our primary focus should be on ourselves. To be “self-centered” may not be a desirable trait, but it is in fact the default condition of humankind. Most of us strive, with varying degrees of success, to move beyond that state, and many of us perform truly selfless acts from time to time. Very few of us actually achieve a state of total selflessness, and it can even be argued that those who do achieve that state have actually left behind an essential part of their humanity.

Indeed, in the early days of the Christian faith the very idea that Jesus himself was not really human—that he was fully divine—was branded a heresy (docetism, by name), for the very good reason that if Jesus was not human he could not have suffered and died for the sins of mankind.

In fact, the Gospels are replete with instances of the “human-ness” of Jesus, from his understandable impatience with the denseness of his disciples which is so evident in the first-written Gospel, that of Mark (not Matthew, which came later and was derived in part from Mark), to his penultimate words on the cross in the last-written Gospel, that of John—*“I am thirsty.”*

This idea, that perfection is antithetical to the condition of being human, is wonderfully evoked in a haunting tale by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, “The Birth-Mark” tells the story of one Aylmer, “an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy,” whose wife Georgiana escaped being perfectly beautiful only by the presence of a birth-mark upon her cheek in the shape of a tiny human hand.

*“Had she been less beautiful ... he might have felt his affection heightened by the prettiness of this mimic hand.... But, seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one*

*defect grow more and more intolerable, with every moment of their united lives. It was the fatal flaw of humanity, which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain."*

Aylmer determines to rid his wife of this imperfection, and, being the great man of science that he is ("natural philosophy" being the nineteenth century term for "science"), he concocts a potion and browbeats Georgiana into taking it. In so doing, Aylmer achieves his purpose. Sort of.

*"As the last crimson tint of the birth-mark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight."*

The main theme here, obviously, is Aylmer's hubris, but equally obvious is the message—more a passing observation, really—that imperfection is the natural condition of humankind.

But acknowledging the impossibility of achieving perfection does not relieve us of the responsibility of trying to be as good as we can be within our limitations, and one measure of how much we develop our potential goodness is how selfish or unselfish we are in our dealings and relations with others.

What on earth does this have to do with Christmas? Just that we can use all the help we can get in our efforts to be better people, and the gift-giving aspect of Christmas encourages us to think of others, to be less *selfish* and more *selfless*, which is a goal worth striving for whatever ones religion.

At this one time of the year we *have* to give *some* thought to the likes and wishes and feelings of others. If we didn't, we might give the swing set to our grandmother and the knitting needles to our pre-school niece.

The Christmas season, therefore, has the potential to make us better people quite aside from its religious aspect.

There are some who bemoan the commercialization of Christmas, who see the emphasis on *buying things* which sometimes seems to overshadow everything else between Thanksgiving and December 25 as being something bad and demeaning and shabby. To be sure, there is that part of it.

But there is a good part as well. After all, most of the buying that goes on around Christmas is *buying for others*. It is true that it tends to even out, that most of us end up getting gifts from the same people that we give gifts to. But even if it were a complete wash—even if for every dollar's worth of gifts you give to others you receive a dollar's worth of gifts in return—even then the process has a net positive and beneficial effect. Because in the process each one of us has had to think about others, about their wants and

needs and wishes, and in so doing we have moved a little distance along the way toward being better, less selfish people, whatever our religious orientation may be.

The real challenge, though, is to extend our selflessness beyond our immediate circle of family and friends, to give to those who don't or can't give back to us, to care for those whose only connection to us is that we belong to the same species, the human race. And the giving need not only be material. It can be spiritual as well. When we relax somewhat our rigid prejudices and acknowledge the inherent right of every human to his own beliefs, even when they are not identical to our own, then we are giving the gift of tolerance, which is one of the greatest gifts we humans have to give each other.

And it, like love itself, has absolutely no value at all until it is given away.

So, my Christmas wish for you all, Christians, Moslems, Jews, Druids, and atheists alike, is this: may you give more than you receive, for in so doing you will receive more than you give.

Merry Christmas.