

Celebrating Christmas 101

I know it's a little late in the holiday season to be giving advice about how to maximize your enjoyment (or minimize your despair) but having learned something from each of the last 56 Christmases I think I'm finally getting it right.

I'm sure everyone goes about it differently, which means the rest of you are doing it all wrong. Not to worry- that's easily fixed.

First, and at the risk of jeopardizing the economic recovery, I'm begging you to quit buying presents for people who don't need them. Small children, OK, but most of the rest of us who are fortunate enough to be fully employed have already accumulated more junk than we'll ever need – stop enabling!

For years, my family has had a \$20 limit on presents (affecting only those of us who can't overcome the shopping compulsion); the rest of the money that we would have spent on dumb stuff gets donated to charities in each others' names. Fortunately, I have an extended family of generous and gainfully employed adults, so we generate a surprising amount of charitable contributions.

If you insist on bending rule number one, at least do your shopping locally if you can – the benefits to the local economy are not in doubt. I was talking to the owner of a seasonal business on a very busy afternoon last Sunday. She's grateful for the traffic, but wishes it could be spread out a little more evenly throughout the year. She said, "I thank God that Christ was an only child."

Not to minimize the religious importance of Christmas, of course. Not all of my family members could be considered religious in the traditional sense of the word, but that doesn't prevent the rest of us from piggybacking on the spirit of the season. I love the music, all of which seems to be religiously inspired for some reason.

I'm a big fan of Handel's *Messiah*, and this year I have attended one performance, will sing in another and will play in the orchestra on a third. I was feeling pretty good about myself until I mentioned it to a co-worker and he said, "What's the *Messiah*?"

You should attend *at least* two live Christmas performances of some kind. Three weeks ago, LuAnn was dying to go to the Radio City Christmas show featuring the Rockettes that happened to be on a Thursday evening. I always have brass band rehearsals on Thursdays, so I was resisting.

She finally insisted that this was the only Christmas present she wanted, so I caved. "Oh, all right," I said. "I'll make the supreme sacrifice and spend two hours with you watching 18 young, fit, scantily-clad women cavorting about - if I must."

LuAnn never met a Christmas TV special she didn't like, and until recently I was above viewing the seemingly endless hours of tear-jerking schlock. Distressingly, I find myself going all gooey and sentimental in my old age. Now, not only will I sit and watch the dumb things, but I'll get a bit weepy at the endings.

Everyone has a favorite Christmas movie, and I won't pretend that mine is better than yours. You may never have heard of *Donovan's Reef*, an obscure comedy set in Hawaii starring John Wayne and Lee Marvin, but LuAnn and I drag out our DVD copy every year.

There are hundreds of excellent Christmas CDs available, but if your collection doesn't include the *Carpenters Christmas Portrait*, you're missing out. Yes, the same Carpenters who dished out insipid fluff like "Close to You" in the seventies also put out arguably the best Christmas album in history – I consider at least four cuts to be definitive recordings.

Finally, it seems like more people have put up Christmas lights this season than I remember in recent years. Still, there are a lot of dark houses all over town. Would it kill you to put a \$2.99 string of lights around a wreath on your front porch? I smile every time I pass a house with any kind of seasonal decoration. Don't overdo it though – a little goes a long way.

There you go - we can't have too many people celebrating Christmas the "right" way. And God bless us, every one!

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