

I have celebrated the consumer Christmas all my life. Only when I tried to step back did I understand its power. We would have needed to retreat to a bomb shelter in early September to escape the siege.

I'M DREAMING OF A GREEN CHRISTMAS

BY KEVIN TAFT



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NOTHING IN A MODERN SOCIETY defines everyday life more than does consuming. Our society may be a mosaic of many religions, colours, professions, ethnicities and even sexualities, but virtually all of us are eager consumers: 98 per cent of households have colour televisions, and over half have two or more; 99 per cent have radios, telephones and fridges; almost 85 per cent have microwave ovens, DVDs and CD players; and almost 80 per cent have automobiles.

Most of us think humans by nature have always wanted more. But anthropologists and historians suggest something different. In traditional societies people limited their material wants. But in modern societies the appetite for consuming is assumed to be limitless. Traditional warnings against wanting too much are almost eliminated. In a consumer society few social guidelines say "This is enough." No social convention says "For Christmas, these are enough gifts," or "For a wardrobe, these are enough clothes." We consume as much as we can afford, and we generally wish we could afford more. A healthy dose of material greed, rather than being something to contain, is a sign of a socially useful character. Facilitating and cultivating it is good economics, and underpins government policy and the education system. We seem obliged to consume limitlessly; it is fun, it is socially necessary, it is good for the economy, it gives us something to do, it makes life worth living.

Why do people want so much, and then more and more and more? What creates "the consumer"? In 1994, as part of a year-long research project into the power that sustains consumer society, I convinced my family to put our lives as consumers under a microscope. For a year we lived an experiment, with me, my incredibly tolerant wife Jeanette, and our unwitting young sons Jordan and Spencer as the subjects. I wondered if, by resisting consuming, we might become more aware of how the consumer society worked, just as a canoeist becomes more attuned to the current of the river when he stops drifting and begins paddling.

We alternated our lifestyles every month, living one month as if we were seriously committed environmentalists, and the next month as if we were ordinary members of the middle class. Our life as greens boiled down to less car driving and more cycling, busing and walking; less meat and more organic, locally grown food; fewer commercial cleansers and more non-toxic ones; and a commitment to "living lightly on the Earth." I kept a detailed daily journal of the experiment, which grew into a book-length manuscript. What follows is an excerpt from the entries for December—one of the green months.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9.

The boys are now counting down the days until Christmas and pressing to get a Christmas tree...

As I turn the pages of this morning's newspaper and see advertisement upon advertisement, I become contemptuous of the commercialism of Christmas. This is repulsive, I think,

and then realize I am absentmindedly whistling the cheery tune, "It's a holly jolly Christmas, it's the best time of the year," a Burl Ives song from my childhood. Burl Ives himself, with all the girth of Santa Claus, is cheerily strumming his ukulele and singing in his folksy tenor, inside my skull two inches behind my eyeballs. Oh by golly! There isn't room for both of us in here, and I have a distinct sense that Burl and all his Christmas helpers are soon going to squeeze me out. My mind is telling itself two stories at once. I was conscious of one of these, the one about the materialistic corruption of Christmas. But I suspect the other story, the story of happy Christmas consuming, is the more powerful one. It is rooted in my childhood memories, in my very sense of who I am, and it must be rising from the advertising, passing the barriers of consciousness that I have set up to control it, and crowding into the farthest reaches of my mind. For all my distaste for the consumerism of Christmas it has long since permanently colonized my mind, staking out a happy mental territory of joyous gift openings, sugar plum dreams, loving families and delicious meals...

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10.

Two inches of powdery snow coat the world beneath a calm sky of flawless blue. Another cold day promises daytime highs of minus 15 C, and we need supplies. Normally I would hop in the minivan to go to two or three stores and return home, but I am committed to my bike. This curtails my roaming to shop, so I stick to closer stores and think twice before going out. My bike is a natural governor on consuming that forces me both to buy more carefully and to shop more often.

I help Jordan with his Saturday chore of emptying the household garbage. We start with a large black plastic garbage bag but soon realize this is far too big. As it turns out, we get the whole week's non-recyclable garbage (except the kitchen garbage) into one grocery bag. We only generated one of these from the kitchen as well.

But sorting the recyclables for the blue box is more of a hassle. The garbage and recyclables are only collected every second week in the winter, and by the end of the two weeks we have quite a pile of recyclables. Sorting through them entails several minutes of separating milk cartons, piling paper and stuffing it all into bags and the blue box. Most of the material has been sitting in our unheated garage and is icy cold. It would be easier just to chuck everything in the garbage. Surely this should be the other way around, making it easier to recycle than to dispose...

At bedtime, Jordan, who is becoming skeptical about the existence of Santa, says to Jeanette in his most earnest voice, "I really hope you aren't Santa, Mom." He seems concerned that if there is no Santa, he won't get as many gifts. We are charmed by his comment, though I wonder if we are doing him a favour by sustaining his illusion.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13.

During our green months we hang our laundry to drip dry, which takes much longer than merely tossing it in the dryer, and transforms our laundry room into a fabric jungle of pants, shirts, underwear and socks hanging from every hook, nail

and pipe. Some of the clothes would look better if they were machine-dried; they are a kind of software, designed to work with the enameled steel hardware of laundry appliances.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15.

After supper the four of us take the minivan to go Christmas shopping, and end up in the proverbial shopping frenzy, splitting up and reconverging, checking gift prices and availability, and successfully fulfilling a fair chunk of our Christmas gift obligations. Green it is not. By the time we finish we have driven 32 kilometres, visited one big box store three different times and Southgate Mall twice, hit two major department stores at another mall and searched another big box store and various smaller shops. At every place the service is good and the parking free. Jeanette and I joke about being Santa's little helpers.

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SANTA CLAUS. How did a 4th-century bishop from Turkey whose existence is known only from a smattering of evidence become the patron saint of consuming and the superhero of our children's happiness? From the dark ages until the 1800s, St. Nicholas (a.k.a. Kris Kringle/Father Christmas/Bellsnuckle/Santa Claus) drifted in and out of religious and folk festivals throughout Europe and eventually North America. Sometimes he was a magic elf, sometimes a harsh disciplinarian; sometimes he looked like a shepherd, a king, or a pope. Seldom, if ever, was he a major cultural or religious figure.

In Germany and Scandinavia, St. Nicholas was the legendary figure who brought candies and small treats to children at Christmas. His story was carried to North America by early immigrants. In 1822, American clergyman Clement C. Moore wrote "A Visit From St. Nicholas" ("Twas the night before Christmas"). Christmas after Christmas this poem was reprinted, and its story and images—a jolly elf riding through the sky in a sleigh pulled by reindeer, twinkling up and down chimneys with a sack of toys—penetrated the American imagination.

But Santa Claus didn't have a "look." People portrayed him in brown, white, red or black; in fur or cloth; clean-shaven or bearded. This began to sort out in 1863, when *Harper's Weekly* in the US launched a 23-year-long series of pen-and-ink Christmas drawings that presented Santa as the character we now know and love: a chubby, bearded fellow with a contagious smile, turned-out in a fur-trimmed suit. His final fashion designer was Coca-Cola. Coke, needing a way to boost sales in cool winter weather, realized that squeezing down all the chimneys of the world would make even Santa thirsty. Each Christmas from 1931 to 1966 they built marketing campaigns around a different full-colour portrait of Santa enjoying a Coke—"The Pause that Refreshes." Around the world today Santa dresses in only red and white, the official colours of the Coca-Cola company.

If one person more than any other is behind Jordan's hope

that Santa is real, it may be Frank Church. He was an editor at the *New York Sun* in 1897, and wrote the famous response to the little girl whose letter questioned the existence of Santa Claus. "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," wrote Mr. Church, "as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy..." Though Santa might never be seen, Church continued, people must believe in such a figure if there is to be hope for the world and happiness for children.

Love, generosity, devotion, beauty, joy, hope for the world and happiness for children: those are heavy burdens to load on Santa, but he seems to shoulder them without breaking a sweat. The catch is, Jeanette and I and all those other parents are obliged to act as if Santa were real; we sweat while Santa puts his feet up and enjoys a Coke.

As Christmas advertising became common in the last decades of the 1800s, Santa played an increasingly prominent role. But it was often a confused role—as it still is. Merchants wanted to attach the sacred authority of a religious holiday to their marketing campaigns, and who better to achieve this than Santa Claus? He was obscure enough to be recruited as a salesman without offending people, but he was still a saint with a traditional role in Christmas customs. He could bring heaven to earth. With miraculous powers, Santa watched over and judged "who's naughty and nice," answered prayers, and pulled a joyful bounty of earthly blessings from his bottomless sack. Christmas cards of the 1880s and 1890s sometimes showed children kneeling by their beds, saying their prayers to Santa, or Santa accompanied by angels. Santa Claus delivered the rewards that good Christians, especially Christian children, deserved. Santa Claus became as important a symbol of Christmas as the baby Jesus—in many ways more important.

As Santa became an important cultural character, he acquired a detailed life story. By convention he was given a wife, the grandmotherly Mrs. Claus, who helps prepare the gifts, fusses over him before he departs, and has a hearty meal—or a cold Coke—waiting on his return. They have no children, but they do have hardworking little elves and a stable of reindeer. They live at the North Pole in an old European-style house. And just as Odysseus, King Arthur, Bilbo Baggins, Snoopy and Homer Simpson become knowable life-like characters through the events and adventures of their lives, so does Santa, making toys, struggling up and down chimneys, navigating the fog with the help of Rudolph, bringing joy and happiness to children the world over.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 18.

After the boys go to bed, Jeanette sits at the dining room table to catch up on her work while I venture into the laundry room, parting the hanging clothes with my arms, pulling down the items that are dry. Most are stiff and misshapen, as if they were hanged to death and rigor mortis has set in. I am neither a caring nor an attentive laundry-folder (to Jeanette's dismay), but I know enough to realize that clothes dried by machine are easier to handle than these ones. Folding the laundry takes several dull minutes, and the dryer, sitting there with its mouth open, is a great temptation...

MONDAY, DECEMBER 19.

After the boys go to school, I wrap their Christmas gifts from Grandpa. Jeanette and I want to begin adding things under the tree this week to build the Christmas excitement for the boys. We remember the fun of trying to guess what was in each gift when we were young, and we want them to have the same fun too.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20.

The boys gobble up the locally made organic whole wheat noodles we serve for supper, pick at the organic spinach salad, and do their best to completely avoid the baked butternut squash with stuffing. After supper we drive to a children's bookstore so Jordan and Spencer can buy Christmas gifts for one another. Jeanette takes one boy into the bookstore at a time while I take the other browsing through nearby shops. Both of them are interested shoppers, and we have taught them to check prices and compare quality.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22.

Our elderly neighbour is travelling to visit her son for Christmas, and I give her a ride to the downtown bus depot. I ask her about the history of our neighbourhood and she speaks of the time when there was a grocery store, butcher, drugstore, barbershop and hardware store within easy walking distance. All that is left of these now is a struggling convenience store that survives on video rentals and lottery tickets. She is an avid gardener who keeps her house in trim condition, so she particularly misses the neighbourhood hardware store. The hardware industry has consolidated into the giant home improvement centres like Revy and Home Depot, located miles away at the edge of the city. Now, even if she just needs a nail or picture hook, she waits for her son to visit from out of town so he can drive her to one of these stores.



THIS IS THE WORST KIND OF SHOPPING: we are obligated to buy something, but we have no specific ideas about what. We wander the aisles looking for things that are small, cheap, fun, original and not completely wasteful.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24.

Jeanette and I go to a giant new discount pharmacy to buy small items for Jordan's and Spencer's Christmas stockings. This is the worst kind of shopping: we are obligated to buy something, but we have no specific ideas about what. We wander the aisles looking for things that are small, cheap, fun, original and not completely wasteful.

"Here are some Post-It notes that might be fun," suggests Jeanette, holding out a rainbow-coloured block of paper.

"I don't know if the boys would ever use them," I say. "What about some comics?"

"Maybe." "Maybe" is as enthusiastic as either of us get. This is shopping as duty, and I resent it. Jeanette's family traditions didn't include Christmas stockings when she was a child, but mine did,

and a few years ago I was the one who thought they would be a fun tradition to carry on. Now I have my doubts. Eventually we buy a few small items, mostly from the stationery department.

The day-before-Christmas rush overwhelms my commitment to cycle, and in the early afternoon I climb into the minivan to run a string of last-minute errands. One of these is a stop at Debaji's for fruit and vegetables. Their organic products are tired and depressed, and I assume it is an old shipment. The organic spinach, which was excellent 10 days ago, looks way past its prime. Likewise the lettuce. I buy organic cauliflower, broccoli and oranges (which appear to be the only organic fruit), and when I bump into a neighbour I encourage him to ignore the badly blemished look of the organic oranges and buy some...

Christmas Eve ends on a disquieting note. The boys are electrified at the prospect of Christmas tomorrow, but at the same time are on their best behaviour, as if it is all a crystal dream that will shatter if they make a mistake. In the evening, as Spencer follows the ritual of putting out the milk and cookies for Santa, complete with a new napkin holder and coaster he made at school specifically for this moment, he quietly says, "Santa, I hope you enjoy your snack and have a Merry Christmas." This is not play-acting. For him, Santa Claus is alive, a walking, talking, magic man who knows all there is to know about children like Spencer, and who can bring joy or disappointment. Through all the stories and pictures and songs and rituals, we have made Santa real. At bedtime, Jeanette spends a few minutes with Spencer, and then I lie down beside him for a chat. He stares at the ceiling. I look into his face.

"Dad," he tells me in hushed tones, "I don't know if I've been a good enough boy for Santa." He is so serious, so worried, that my chest tightens for his concern. He goes on: "I'm not sure I do all the things I should. I wonder if he'll bring me anything."

I struggle with what to say, worried we are doing damage by

maintaining the Santa fantasy so strongly. But to tell him now that it is all just pretend would be devastating to everything he believes and trusts. If he couldn't believe in Santa Claus after everything he has been told, he couldn't believe in anything.

"You are a fine boy, Spencer," I say in my warmest voice, "and I am sure that Santa knows it. Tomorrow is going to be wonderful, and you're going to get many special things. I know you'll be happy." I tell him I love him, give him a kiss good night and shut his bedroom door, leaving him in the darkness.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25.

From the day our experiment began and I realized December was going to be a green month, I have known I am not prepared to completely reject the consumer Christmas. That would be



"Merry Old Santa Claus," by Thomas Nast, Harper's Weekly, 1881.

too hard on Jordan and Spencer, unacceptable to Jeanette, and too difficult to explain to grandparents and aunts and uncles and friends. We have tried to offer some resistance, but as I look at the pile of gifts under the tree and stew over Spencer's comments last night, it is obvious we have been bowled over. I have celebrated the consumer Christmas every year of my life,

"DAD," HE TELLS ME in hushed tones, "I don't know if I've been a good enough boy for Santa." He is so serious, so worried, my chest tightens. He goes on: "I'm not sure I do all the things I should. I wonder if he'll bring me anything."

but only this year, when we have tried to be acutely aware of its pressures, have I begun to understand its power. We would have needed to retreat to a bomb shelter in early September to escape the siege. We gave "green" gifts whenever we could, like hampers of organic coffees and foods, and papermaking kits that use recycled newsprint. We supported the little businesses that provide a local alternative to the mega chainstores. We discouraged gift giving among adult relatives, suggesting we be content with sharing one another's company. But in most ways our efforts seem pathetic, and their impact almost zero.

To our pleasant surprise the boys sleep until 7:30 a.m. Within moments of waking, they have us around the tree in the living room. We begin with the stockings, which are splitting at their seams with gadgets and doodads. Then we move on to the big gifts under the tree. The kids are excited, of course, and we have lots of fun. Spencer's concerns seem to have vanished; I suppose the gifts reassure him of his value. It is a happy time for the boys, and Jeanette and I enjoy it because of them. We ourselves get only modest gifts.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 26.

Through some mysterious process an impromptu brunch for

extended family materializes at our house. Jeanette bakes her fabulous cornbread and we accompany it with coffee, sausages and oranges. As we bring the food to the table we proudly inform everyone that the coffee and oranges are organic, the cornbread is baked with organic flour and cornmeal, and the sausages are locally made by a man at the market. We have fun explaining this, feeling like we are beginning to succeed with some of our efforts, and our guests nod their approval. My sister says that one of her colleagues brought organic oranges to work recently to share with the staff, to everyone's pleasure.

Other company comes at suppertime, and since they eat little meat we happily serve them vegetarian lasagna. They don't leave until 1:00 a.m., and after we clean up and are about to go to bed, I remember that tomorrow is garbage collection. So at 2:00 a.m. I sort the garbage into recyclables and trash. Because of Christmas, we have far more than earlier in the month: three large garbage cans full, plus an overflowing blue box.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 28.

The burden of being green, which seemed to be easing this month, weighs on me this morning. The weather, mild for a couple of weeks, is turning colder and there is fresh snow. Jeanette has had to return to work, so I have the boys on my own until the end of the holidays. This makes shopping by bicycle impossible; to accommodate them we must take the minivan. The easiest meals I can think of for supper are spaghetti and meat sauce, or hamburgers. We are slipping back into old patterns...

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 30.

The Christmas standard *Miracle on 34th Street* is playing at a theatre at West Edmonton Mall, and we take it in. The way it blends faith in Santa Claus with the commercial success of department stores, the fulfillment of children's wishes, and romantic love, makes it the perfect fairy tale for the consumer Christmas, and despite myself I get caught up in the story and enjoy it.

What Christmas really is, is a bundle of stories: *Miracle on 34th Street*. *Scrooge*. *Tiny Tim*. 'Twas the night before Christmas. *Rudolph*. *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. *White Christmas*. *The Little Drummer Boy*. The Biblical Christmas stories: no room at the inn, the manger, the birth of Jesus, the three wise men, the shepherds. Without stories, December 25 would be a day like any other. When it comes to Christmas, we live a large part of our lives, and organize a large part of our economy, through stories. The challenge is, how do we become more conscious of them?

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