

The Magic of Christmas

Think back a moment to the Christmases of your childhood. What do you remember? What made them special?

I remember a three-tiered aluminum tray full of nuts in the shell and mandarin oranges that appeared a week or so before Christmas and disappeared shortly thereafter. Sitting together in the living room struggling to crack open almonds, pecans, hazelnuts and Brazil nuts is an essential Christmas memory. Time seemed to slow down; it wasn't just about eating nuts (something surely programmed into our genetic code to help us survive the winter), but about the struggle to pry them from the shell and about being together. On Christmas Eve different kinds of fudge and cookies would be added on the top tier. My mother spent days in the kitchen preparing goodies, at first letting me only lick the spoon until I gradually took a greater and greater role in the ritual that I am now passing on to my daughter. A couple of days before Christmas we brought the tree inside and decorated it, lingering over the memories attached to each ornament, stepping back to look after carefully hanging strands of tinsel. On Christmas Eve the youth of our church put on a pageant, retelling the Christmas story through carols and scripture. I still sing those same carols that the angel choir sang with my family every Christmas Eve.

Before going to bed I would always put out a treat for Santa Claus, even as a teenager when I knew that Santa Claus' role had been taken over by my parents and me (once it was a mug of beer). I remember falling asleep with anticipation fluttering in my stomach, then rushing downstairs in the morning in pyjamas to see the presents laid under the tree. There was joy and excitement both in the opening of my own presents and in watching my parents' faces as they opened those from me. I tried to give them things that no one else would think of, often gift certificates for services that I knew they would appreciate, usually for things that money cannot buy.

I don't remember most of the presents I ever received, but I remember these traditions. These are what make up the magic of Christmas for me. So, though it's hard to do, I try not to be swept up in the consumerism that surrounds this season and the pressure of buying something for everyone. I prefer to give and to receive a "smaller" gift, given with love — a tin of homemade cookies, a handmade beeswax candle, a personal letter of appreciation. These are all more precious than whatever the marketers are saying is the hot gift this season.

I am sad that Swiss businesses are succumbing to the ever earlier Christmas frenzy that I thought I had left behind when I moved here 22 years ago. I so savored the honoring of seasons that I found here — asparagus only in April, *Suuser* and walnuts in fall, the first mandarin oranges and peanuts on *Santichlaus* (complete with the ritual of gently separating the two halves and looking for Santa's head). I put on mental blinders when I go into the shops these days, shielding myself from the way-too-early Christmas displays. I won't eat a *Grättimann* until December 6, because that's his day. Children who can't resist the enticement in bakery displays and are already eating *Grättimanne* as an ordinary snack are being robbed of the significance of this treat. What's the big deal? You can get one in any bakery from early November until Christmas.

From an American marketing perspective, not having full choice all the time could be viewed as a kind of deprivation. But if everything is available all of the time, there is no longing, no anticipation, no surprise. Overabundance cheapens the simple pleasures of life — a hug, a warm bath, a beautiful tree. These are not things that we own, but that we are privileged to experience because we are alive and we take time to savor them. An oversupply of material things, however, paradoxically leads to scarcity thinking, in which what we constantly feel dissatisfied with what we have. “Enough” loses its meaning. When we view the world from an attitude of scarcity we lose all sense of gratitude for what we have and all our potential for generosity. Stuffed with things and wanting more, our hearts close. Joy and delight are not possible.

So for Christmas this year I wish you all the joys of loving and giving and sharing, above all of moments that make time stand still.