



Reflections of a River Rat:

Yes, Virginia and Liam, there is a Santa Claus

Just a few weeks before Christmas, Liam Holleran had arrived at one of life's crucial junctures, and there was no turning back.

His 4th grade teacher had called to broach a sensitive subject. Liam was one of two or three 10-year-olds out of a classroom of 24 who believed in the tradition of Santa Claus. Knowing that Liam was a factual kid, a linear learner, a boy who was vulnerable to the teasing and taunting of classmates, the teacher wanted us to decide whether we should prolong the fantasy.



Tough call. Who wouldn't want to extend their child's hopes and dreams of a sainted, benevolent gift giver amid a blur of technology, reality TV, consumerism and shifting moral codes. As parents, we factor in the biases of our lives, and our own endearing childhood memories when we make major decisions for our children. We huddled. Do we pass or run with it?

We made the call. Social situations were difficult enough for him without exposing him to ridicule from insensitive classmates. Liam must be told.

This was not a decision we rushed into. We tiptoed. To steal an old golf line, this one needed to land like a butterfly with sore feet.

The day Mary and I sat Liam down, the tree was decorated, packages were wrapped, the manger set was illuminated on the front lawn; all the trappings of Christmas abounded. His sisters, Katie and Claire, were segregated out of earshot with the TV turned up.

The moment had arrived, but it came with all the baggage that Liam had toted through life. Initially, as a 2- or 3-year-old, he feared Santa Claus. When

we would go to a shopping mall or a newspaper Christmas party, Liam would eat the cookies and enjoy the moment, but there was no way he was climbing onto the lap of a bearded stranger in a red suit. If I

could listen to his thoughts, he would have said: “Who dresses like that?” Or, “I’ve never seen this act before.”

We had a breakthrough around the age of 5. By then, school had loosened him up. He waited his turn at the newspaper Christmas gathering, mustered his courage, approached the overstuffed saint in the red suit, and greeted Santa with “Happy Kwanzaa.” Our jaws dropped, then reshaped into a chuckle. Sure, we appreciated his respect for diverse cultures, but there was something incongruent that made it funny about a little Irish kid blurting that out on his first interaction with Santa.



Still, Christmas remained a challenge when we would arrive in Morristown on New Year’s Eve to celebrate with my mother, Eileen, and three or four of her sisters. They were too generous and would wrap packages for our threesome. More than once, Liam would unwrap a game or puzzle, and immediately announce: “I can’t play with this. It says ages 2-4, and I’m 5!” Or he would open a sweater then politely say, “No thank you.”

“We lived in fear,” my Aunt Rosemary recalled. “We were all afraid he was going to give back our gifts.”

Liam seemingly had a schtick for all holidays, all denominations. When our neighbors, the Tanzmans, invited us to their annual Hanukkah party, our first, I wanted the children to be aware of the traditions. So I ran a little night school about the dreidel game, menorahs, and eight days of celebration, not just one.

Murray had just dished out another round of latkes when he gathered the children and asked who could retell the story of Hanukkah. The awkward silence was broken by an 8-year-old boy with big, round eyeglasses and a superior memory.



“Well,” he began, “it all started with the Maccabees ...” He was on a roll. His story was succinct and explained the oil of the menorah lasting eight days. At the end, Murray’s mother, well into her 80s and with tears welling in her eyes, approached the boy, complimented his retelling, and asked his name, expecting to hear some strong, traditional Jewish name. The boy replied, “Liam Francis Holleran.” We laughed some more; the little Irish boy had struck again.

Within two years, we were at the aforementioned juncture with Liam. We decided this was not going to be a Virginia O’Hanlon moment. We loved the sentiment of that *New York Sun* editorial from 1897, but we opted for the factual approach that fit his learning style. We talked about the Fourth Century legend of St. Nicholas leaving presents in children’s shoes. We explained that in Holland, children had named him Sinterklaas. In Germany, he was known as Kris Kringle. Regardless, the real reason for the season was to commemorate the birth of Christ and his impact on the world.

We kept plugging away about how parents recognized the spirit and joy that Saint Nicholas first provided, but that people only live for about 100 years tops, so the parents kept the legend alive for their children.

“Liam, do you understand what we’re saying?” I asked.

Then, with all his youthful innocence, he dropped his A-bomb.

“Yeah,” deadpanned Liam. “Santa Claus is dead.”

Jim Holleran, a Morristown native, is a retired teacher and registrar for the Rochester City School District, and former sports editor of the Democrat and Chronicle. Reach him at jimholleran29@gmail.com or view past columns at <https://hollerangetsitwrite.files.wordpress.com> under Reflections of a River Rat.