

**“YES, VIRGINIA, THERE IS A SANTA CLAUS!”**

**BY**

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## ***“Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus!”***

You all know this famous response by Francis Church to a letter from an 8 year old, Virginia O’Hanlon, first published in *The New York Sun* in 1897.

**"DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.  
"Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.  
"Papa says, 'If you see it in THE SUN it's so.'  
"Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?"**

The quick response was printed as an unsigned editorial Sept. 21, 1897. The work of veteran newsman Francis Pharcellus Church has since become history's most reprinted newspaper editorial, appearing in part or whole in dozens of languages in books, movies, and on posters and stamps.

Here is Church’s response:

**VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except [what] they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.**

**Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists 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. Alas! How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.**

**Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.**

**You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world, which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, VIRGINIA, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.**

**No Santa Claus! Thank God! He lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.**

**The letter is as warm and fuzzy as it is unconvincing, but it does serve a useful function in it's a good idea, from time to time, to recover the weirdness of existence, its very oddness, the wonder of being alive at all. Even those among us who tend to be skeptical, let alone, to be generally cynical, would profit from being brought up short with the oddness of being here at all. This is a good time of year to think about how strange it is to be here. By the end of the evening I hope we'll all go home with a renewed sense of wonder and bewilderment, regardless of our beliefs or lack of them. Some of you may even believe in Santa Claus again, or at least recover or deepen your sense of wonder and uneasiness.**

Tonight, I want to take a look at the oddness of life through the prism of G. K Chesterton with a little bit of Charles Dickens thrown in; and end with a seasonal song by Irving Berlin, and a visit to a very unusual synagogue in England just after WWII.

Let's start with G. K. Chesterton. He wrote, "*The function of the imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange.*" When you think about it, the big issue, which exercises the imagination of this generation seems to be *connection*. Facebook is in your face. We're caught up in the Web. We have come to use of "the word "connect" as if it were sacred in and of itself . . . Connection is the goal. But the quality of that connection, the quality of the information, the quality of the relationship that connection permits – none of this is important . . . a lot of social networking software explicitly encourages people to make weak, superficial connections with each other . . ."1

Jaron Lanier in his book *You Are Not A Gadget* points out that people *reduce* themselves because of information technologies. "Information systems need to have information in order to run, but information underrepresents reality." Think, for a moment, about that statement! *Information underrepresents reality*. Information can't give us the full picture. For example, there is no perfect computer analogue for what we call a "person". When life is turned into a database there is degradation. When a human being becomes a set of data on a website he or she is

reduced. Everything shrinks.” We need a revolution – a refusal to degraded, diminished, under-represented. We need our own version of “Yes, Virginia . . .” No wonder many of us are disgruntled, disillusioned about politics and worried about the future. The gathering of data isn’t enough and more and more we find ourselves living in a data junkyard.

Nearly a century ago (during WWI), political commentator Walter Lippmann was prophetic about our need to see a link between personal interaction (of which freedom is the prerequisite) and transcendent authority.

“We are unsettled to the very roots of our being.” He wrote. “There isn’t a human relation, whether of parent or child, husband and wife, worker and employer, that doesn’t move in a strange situation. We are not used to a complicated civilization, we don’t know how to behave when personal contact and eternal authority have disappeared. There are no precedents to guide us, no wisdom that was not meant for a simpler age.”<sup>2</sup>

If that was true then, how much more is it so now – in a shrinking world enduring accelerated change? The key insight here is the combination of “personal contact” with “eternal authority.” These are the two poles around which a fully human and truly free life revolves. We might not want to call the second pole “eternal authority”, but most of us would invoke some inner moral compass, even if we found it difficult to put it into words. I might not know what the “eternal authority” is but I do acknowledge there’s a reality outside my own little psyche, calling me out of solipsistic idiocy into relationship with others and the world. We’re back to the Facebook theme of *connection* again. If

we don't find a creative outlet for this longing for connection, there are plenty of destructive ones in religion and ideology to fill the void. It's no accident that people, longing for something to count on, feel drawn to authoritarianism in both politics and religion. "Only connect . . . live in the fragments not longer," wrote E.M. Forster. "Only we can't!"

Another way of talking about "personal contact" and "eternal authority," comes from Chesterton who found himself in just such a predicament as ours yet was joyfully optimistic. He refused to collapse into negativity. As a young man, he suffered a two-year period of internal darkness, as he struggled with depression. He wrote,

When I had been for some time in these, the darkest depths of contemporary pessimism, I had a strong inward impulse to revolt; to dislodge the incubus or throw off this nightmare. But as I was still thinking the thing out by myself, with little help from philosophy and no real help from religion, I invented a rudimentary and makeshift mystical theory of my own. It was substantially this: that even mere existence, reduced to its most primary limits, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. Anything was magnificent compared with nothing. Even if daylight were a dream, it was a day-dream; it was not a nightmare . . . or, if it was a nightmare, it was an enjoyable nightmare.<sup>3</sup>

Chesterton found encouragement in Robert Louis Stevenson's refusal to go mad. Stevenson stood up suddenly amid all these things and shook himself with a sort of impatient sanity; a shrug of skepticism about skepticism. His real distinction is that he had the sense to see that there is nothing to be done with Nothing. He saw that in that staggering universe it was absolutely necessary to stand somehow on something . . . he did seek for a ledge on which he could really stand. He did definitely

and even dramatically refuse to go mad; or, what is much worse, to remain futile.<sup>4</sup> I don't know about you, but all this sounds startlingly contemporary. We live now with a definite undertow of nihilism, of decadence. Jacques Barzun wrote, "When people accept futility and the absurd as normal, the culture is decadent." In the light of this, "Yes, Virginia . . ." is a call to rebellion, albeit of an odd kind – a conservative rebellion in line with Chesterton's whose conservatism was "not the blinkered and mulish preference for the past over the present, but a philosophical concern for whether there will be a future."<sup>5</sup> That's my concern too – not whether there will be a future but whether there will be a future fit for humans. That's why Virginia's question about Santa Claus points to something important about values. I am reminded of Wendell Berry's poem *The Mad Farmer Liberation Front* – a rallying cry against decadence, futility.

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.  
And you will have a window in your head.  
Not even your future will be a mystery  
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
and shut away in a little drawer.  
When you want to buy something  
they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.

So friends, every day do something  
that wont compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone that does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace  
the flag. Hope to live in that free  
republic for which it stands.

Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

.....  
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.

.....  
As soon as the generals and the POLITICOS  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.

*Be joyful though you have considered all the facts!* Joy for  
Chesterton came not from anything in particular but from everything in  
particular. The best thing to rejoice in is *everything* – existence itself –  
and to contemplate existence, to realize in a “sunlight of surprise” that  
there is something when there need not be anything, is to experience  
joy. This joy is “a certain silly exuberance” – “silly” in every sense,  
including the older senses of “simple”, “innocent”.”

“You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert  
and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace  
before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming,  
fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the  
pen in the ink.”

Chesterton’s appreciation of “ordinary things” was an expression of his  
sense of the splendor of existence. And being aware and awake to what  
he called this *sunrise of wonder* involved the virtues involved in humor,



the virtues of self-forgetful abandonment to a good joke, and of a humility that can acknowledge the “inconsistency” of things without seeking to overcome it.

This is why Chesterton valued fairy tales (“yes, Virginia”) because he saw them as renewing the way in which we perceive the world; they showed that existence was strange, that it was good, that goodness was sustained by limits. He valued humor because it involves openness to the ways in which reality exceeds any ideas one might form of it: “the man who sees the inconsistency in things is a humorist”, and it involves humility, because one must abandon oneself to a joke to be funny: “do not fancy you can be a detached wit and avoid being a buffoon”. The humor of Chesterton was of a kind that finds the thing laughed at precious and admirable in its laughableness, and he saw laughter as inseparable from love. Far from seeing mirth as a kind of irresponsibility or forgetfulness of reality, he saw it as a response to the truth of things, a perception of the whole. He tells us, “Fairy tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.” Santa Claus may not exist but the story tells us that Virginia and each one of us matters, and that a life fully lived is one full of expectation. In the mid 1890s, Chesterton jotted down in a private notebook the reflection, “there is one thing which gives radiance to everything, streets, houses, lamp posts, communities, politics, lives – It is the idea of something round the corner.”

We find the same humor, generosity and sense of expectancy in Charles Dickens. In *A Christmas Carol* he wrote:

**"I have always thought of Christmastime, when it has come round . . . as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of all people high and low as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys."**

Now, think of Mr. Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. Dickens invented a character that epitomized the dehumanizing power of "facts" – those bit of information, which underrepresent reality. Listen. Mr. Gradgrind speaks.

**"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"**

And later Mr. Gradgrind, broken-down and miserably submissive, asks Bitzer, 'Have you a heart?' The young man, having learned from the master, replies, 'the circulation, sir, couldn't be carried on without one. No man, sir, acquainted with the facts established by Harvey, relating to the circulation of the blood, can doubt that I have a heart.' 'Is it accessible,' cried Mr. Gradgrind, 'to any compassionate influence?' 'It is accessible to reason, sir, and to nothing else.'

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slightly adapted

How do we nurture the imagination to create an environment of possibility for ourselves and for others? Why have a benign view of the world? For example, what comes to mind when you hear, "Twinkle, twinkle little star"? Did you ever sing it? What did you think about when you sang it? Do you remember how it made you feel? Martha Nussbaum tells the story of one of her students who, responded to the question in this way. He saw a sky beautifully blazing with stars and bands of bright color and the sight made him look in a new way at his dog, a cocker spaniel.

I used to look into the dog's eyes and wonder what the dog was really thinking and feeling. Was my dog ever sad? It pleased me to think about my dog and the way he experienced the world. I looked him in the eyes and knew that he loved me and was capable of feeling pleasure and pain. It then made me think tenderly about my mom and dad and other children I knew.<sup>6</sup>

Why would "Twinkle, twinkle little star" make someone think that the starry sky was benevolent and not malevolent? Why think of your dog as loving and good rather than devilish and cruel? Who cares whether some dog is happy or sad? There are plenty of people who take pleasure in an animal's pain. Martha Nussbaum assures us that something important is going on. She writes,

"The strange fact is that the nursery rhyme itself, like other rhymes, nourished a tender humanity within us and stirs up in us the prospect of friendship. It doesn't make us think paranoid thoughts of a hateful being in the sky, who's out to get us. It tells the child to think of a star like a diamond rather than as a missile of destruction and also not like a machine good only for production and consumption. The nursery rhyme nourishes a generous construction of the seen."

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus! We're not talking about the literal truth but what it takes to nourish *a generous construction of the seen!* For example, two men can have what appear to be identical experiences; say, of grinding poverty -- a brutal father and a long-suffering mother. One man sinks into, the other rises above, the experience. Why? There are many factors, which contribute to the different ways we choose to interpret experience: that elusive thing, character. Then there are also timing and chance. But one vital factor is the story we choose to tell ourselves about what our experiences mean. It makes all the difference if we choose *a generous construction of the seen.*

Shakespearean scholar Tony Nuttall tells us "the Shakespeare who can uncover so much frailty and continue to perceive goodness, the Shakespeare behind the plays, is a figure of immense, intelligent charity." That's it! That's what I hope for us – even as we uncover in ourselves and in others so much frailty that we continue to perceive goodness. We become people of immense, intelligent charity. Not a bad goal. Novelist Mary Gordon asks the question: And then how do we live? The answer?

In celebration.  
Without envy.  
Generously.<sup>7</sup>

So, yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, which brings me to Irving Berlin's *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*. Is it true? No, of course not!

Is it true? Yes, of course it is! Imagine. It's December 1941. Bing Crosby is singing it on his Radio show on Christmas Eve – 17 days after Pearl Harbor. For many American troops – fighting in WWII – it was their first time away from home. The song was an immediate hit. It has no overt religion in it, no Baby Jesus, no manger – but it became a wartime anthem of love and longing. It opens us up to the possibility of a deeper story -- *a generous construction of the seen*.

Irving Berlin lived in a story made up of amazing choices. He faced serious limitations. He could play only in the key of C. Yet he was the most successful songwriter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Isaac Stern was asked -- how did he account for the discrepancy between Berlin's modest musical talent and enormous achievement? It was his philosophy of life – it was the *story* he chose to tell himself about himself and the world. He embraced *a generous construction of the seen*. Life was composed of a few basic elements: life and death, loneliness and love, hope and defeat. In our making our way through these givens, "affirmation is better than complaint, hope more viable than despair, kindness nobler than its opposite. That was about it. But because Berlin believed those platitudes implicitly, he helped people cut through the ambiguities and complexities of a confusing century."<sup>8</sup>

Everyone knows the song – *White Christmas* -- very well, but our ears are closed when we hear it because we're so used to it. In fact, if you

step back and think about the dramatic situation in the song, the narrator is recalling something that is beyond his reach. He says, 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know.'

*Don't knock it!* This song is about our longing for some good news. It could prepare us to hear some tonight. *White Christmas* is a nose pressed up against the glass -- a song from an immigrant Jewish outsider about a holiday that was never his. Irving Berlin was five when his parents brought him to America from Russia. The first Christmas he remembered was spent on Manhattan's Lower East Side at the home of Irish neighbors. And he remembered their tree. ". . . for the immigrant Irving Berlin, or at that point, Izzy Baline, as his real name was Israel Baline, the holiday represented the magic and wonder of the New World." Which brings me to the rabbi.

Rabbi Lionel Blue -- just after WWII -- was convener of Beth *Din* -- the Reformed Jewish ecclesiastical court in the UK. His job was to try to apply rules, some archaic, to actual situations. "As we listened to our clients' stories, we realized what a gap had grown up between our pre-war religion and post-war reality." The job was somewhat restricting and claustrophobic so Rabbi Blue decided, with a refugee friend Eva, to found an unusual congregation. The mirror image of the ecclesiastical court. There were no forms to fill in and everyone was welcome.

"No questions were asked about anyone's religious status, or about their personal relationships, whether single, divorced, or bereaved -- or with no marriages at all . . . If they wanted a Jewish

Sabbath evening with candles, cinnamon cakes, company and blessings, they were welcome, and they did not they could walk out whenever they wished. We also asked them to add something to the supper table if they could . . . They were all kinds, even some well-set-up Jews, pillars-of-society Jews, Jews living with Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, and Jews who kept very non-kosher company indeed -- and of course their partners came too, and received an even bigger welcome, not to convert them but because they might feel strange. There were half-Jews, quarter-Jews, one-eighth Jews . . . to these we added a Christian evangelical choir, who were so decent that they didn't try to convert anyone there, except by being the decent Christians that they were."

It was an odd assortment of people including one man "who said he was the Holy Spirit and locked himself in the broom cupboard, and some who took one look at us and left in disgust . . . ". Rabbi Blue ends with these words. "I could have cried with relief. At last I had found a temporary religious home, and Judaism was doing what it does best, turning the religious ragtag and bobtail of a big city into a family, even a sort of holy family."

And so are we here tonight! Let's all sing Izzy Baline's hymn that meant so much to those who first heard it sixty years ago in 1941. Let's sing it right now -- because, "Yes, Virginia! There is a Santa Claus!"

*I'm dreaming of a white Christmas  
Just like the ones I used to know.  
Where the treetops glisten,  
And children listen  
To hear sleigh bells in the snow.  
I'm dreaming of a white Christmas  
With every Christmas card I write.  
May your days be merry and bright.  
And may all your Christmases be white.*

Alan Jones, dean emeritus, Grace Cathedral, San Francisco.

<sup>1</sup> See Zadie Smith, "Generation Why?" in NYRB, November 25, 2010, p. 57

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> See Dudley Barker, *G.K. Chesterton*, (New York: Stein and DAY, 1973) 61-62

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce F. Murphy's introduction to Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Barnes and Noble, 2007 (1908) xi.

<sup>6</sup> Paraphrase from Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, pp. 38-39

<sup>7</sup> Mary Gordon, *Reading Jesus*, New York Pantheon, a division of Random House, Inc.2009

<sup>8</sup> Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, p. 3.



## White Christmas?

*"Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, to rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless."* Salmon Rushdie.

*Irving Berlin remembered the sight of an Irish family's Christmas tree when he was a child on the Lower East Side. He later said it seemed to him to tower to heaven. In fact, it was a tiny, miserable little tree, but for the immigrant the holiday represented the magic and wonder of a New World.*

Dreaming of a White Christmas?

Why not? Irving Berlin did, based, by the way, on no experience.

So, here's your chance to escape the mess of belief and disbelief.

Grab whatever story

you've been telling yourself about yourself and fling it into the season's whirlwind!

What comes flying back may surprise you. It may make you cry. It may make you ache with laughter.

Wandering into the story didn't bother Irving.

Why should it you?

Besides, he had the knack of remembering something that never happened.

It wasn't a matter of *belief* but an openness to be changed by *stories*.

Can't we give this baby-in-the-manger stuff a chance to deconstruct whatever nonsense

we've been telling ourselves about the world?

Jesus, Izzy, Emma, Fred, and Sue? What in a name?

The baby's the one that matters.

Don't knock nostalgia. Irving's "White Christmas" did something to those who heard it in 1941.

The story of the mother and her baby might do the same for us.

There are plenty of Pearl Harbors to go round (Who bombed the financial markets? Who made the golden parachutes? Yours and mine lost in the mail?)

One of our poets<sup>\*</sup> said this sentimental song crooned by Crosby, "caught us where we love peace."

Not a bad place to get caught, a good way to start dumping the story that's trapped us with the angst of clutching and fussing over what? You name it.

Bethlehem, like the Lower East Side, offers us a new world.

Just like the ones we used to know! Hardly!

Izzy didn't know squat – this Jewish kid from Russia.

His dismal story didn't stop him from telling it anew -- discovering a New World.

So, start deconstructing!

See yourself in the mystery.

It's *your* story too.

And given the mess we're in,

isn't it time to grow into a new one –

into the one where God slips in among us –

the divine New Deal?

Merry and bright!

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\* Alan Jones, dean emeritus of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco