

VILLAGE VIEW

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As the Christmas holidays draw near, as the chills of December mark the close of Indian Summer, and as, in particular this year, the economy slips further into a slough, we are all reminded repeatedly that Christmas won't be merry for the millions of Americans who are victims of financial disaster.

Christmas, for hundreds of centuries, has been a season of joy and celebration, of exchanging gifts, of reunions among families, of drawing close to loved ones. Christmas is a season of extravagance: extravagant generosity and extravagant emotions.

Exchanging gifts at Christmas has historical precedent derived from stories passed down to us through the ages concerning the birth of Christ. Modern astronomers confirm that a combination of heavenly bodies did indeed converge and line up to form an extraordinarily bright star in the east at that time. Wise men, kings of the Orient, drawn by the brilliant star that appeared in the night sky nearly 2,000 years ago, brought gifts to welcome the infant whose arrival was made conspicuous by the unique event.

In recognition of the long-ago response of the wise men, the kings, we too exchange gifts on this holiday. This is a delightful custom, an opportunity to demonstrate, materially, our affection for those dear to us. Is it not astonishing, however, that the reaction of powerful men, who lived 2,000 years ago, to an incident they could not comprehend and that, therefore, made them feel frightened, and to which they reacted by bearing gifts to an infant, still controls the behavior of millions of people now living on our planet, Earth?

Is exchanging presents truly the essence of Christmas? To an objective observer from outer space who happened along in the month of December, it might seem to be. No element of our lives, this time of year, seems free from pressures to meet expectations of receipt of gifts.

At a time when purchasing presents may, for many of us, be impossible (if rent and food and heat are also to be provided), we may do well to ask: What gifts can I give to those I love without jeopardizing the family's future security?

What are the priorities? What is our true reason for exchanging gifts? To fill needs? To satisfy desires? To demonstrate ability to spend without suffering impoverishment? To stimulate the economy? To assuage guilt? To make up for acknowledged imperfections? Why is exchanging material objects all-important at Christmas?

Tradition, alone, seems a weak excuse for the enormous outpouring of cash that marks this holiday. The essential meaning of Christmas, the celebration of Christ's birth, dims in the brilliance of the annual binge of buying.

Among the millions of people out of work, there is little money for symbolic purchases. Those caught in the widespread lay-offs cannot buy presents this Christmas unless they use credit. Nothing in the present economic picture indicates that January, February, or March of 1983 will bring better days. Many Americans will do well to provide bare necessities in months ahead.

Should Christmas, this year, be abolished? No need for that; instead, isn't this a season and a time to revive the significance of Christmas? Isn't this a season and a time to demonstrate what we feel for one another through giving of ourselves, our time, to show how much we care and how strong our love, rather than giving "things"?

What would you, yourself, prefer? A piece of jewelry, or the assurance you are loved by those you love? A game to play, or a sincere compliment that builds your self-esteem and remains a treasured memory all your life? A potted plant, or a visit with a person you enjoy? What means most to you? Something that comes wrapped in gaily-colored paper and tied with a ribbon . . . or how you perceive other people feel about you?

Do you measure your own worth according to a monetary scale and base your self-confidence on how much cash others

spend on you? Or is your self-respect a reflection of the value others accord you because you possess lovable and admirable qualities? Which circumstance gives you the more rewarding feelings? Receiving presents, or receiving honest appreciation?

This Christmas (or any Christmas, for that matter, but this Christmas it's especially important) consider gifts that reflect your own responses to those questions. Objects that come in packages may be symbols of love and appreciation, or they may be but tokens in lieu of what you crave most. And if this is true of you, you may safely assume it is also true of those you love.

Happiness doesn't come in boxes. It's not for sale in discount houses or department stores. Joy grows only in the hearts of humans who have no doubts that they are precious to those they love.

And Christmas gifts of joy are, in reality, what we all hope to bestow. May the true joys of Christmas thrive in the hearts of men and women and children everywhere.