

The Joys and Melancholy of Christmas

Shôn Ellerton, January 5, 2020

Celebrating Christmas and the New Year is supposed to be a joyous occasion, but for me, it was a little melancholic and a time to reflect.



Tomorrow, I go back to work after two weeks of Christmas and New Year's break. For some, the two weeks break is too short, for others, going back to work is a blessing, and for others, there was no break at all, whether being at home or at work. But one thing for sure, a break from the food and the booze!

Christmas and New Year's is the time to indulge, although I've been bit more moderate this year than usual. Here, in Australia, the holiday break seems to be one party after another, with bucketloads of food and limitless supplies of beer, wine and spirits. We hosted one ourselves just before the New Year; although, the advantage of being the host is that one's too damn busy to indulge in the food and the drink! Most importantly, it was a golden opportunity to catch up with friends and acquaintances where, normally, there is never any time to do so during the year.

However, Christmas and New Year is not all good for some. I, once, sat in that camp around 15 years ago while living alone during the wintry English days whilst having family and friends spread all over the world. Wherever you went, you were reminded that you should be happy. Endless Christmas Slade songs in every supermarket, toys and presents for children you do not have, Christmas carollers throwing you back to your childhood, a melancholic reminder that you had great memories of being with family during those times. They weren't always good, of course. The occasional dispute can arise over the Christmas festive board probably due to too much wine, turkey and ham followed by copious amounts of Christmas pudding with brandy sauce!

For those that seek comfort during the Christmas period, some take the option of working throughout the festive period and to save those days for later in the year. Unfortunately, that option is becoming increasingly scarce due to companies insisting on forced leave during the holidays. Essential and retail personnel, of course, are exempt from this. Some of those seeking comfort travel to far-flung locations whose culture does not celebrate Christmas, provided one can endure the heaving crowds and traffic jams trying to get to the airport because of so many others having similar thoughts. In 2004, I went to Egypt and, on returning to the UK, Christmas was gone! Hooray!

These days for me, Christmas is a joyous occasion but not overly so. We kept it fairly low-key this year. We have the fake artificial tree and lights which has survived amazingly well over the last 10 years. I've yet to take it down. Doesn't smell like a tree but at least it doesn't shed sharp needles. We had a modest size turkey along with a friend of mine who was alone for Christmas Day. The gathering was small, but it was equally festive and not at all stressful.

Our son enjoyed Christmas just like any other young boy. We didn't really go into detail what Christmas was all about, but we did convey the message that giving feels better than receiving, unless it's the tax office. For a young boy, these sorts of feelings will develop in time, I suppose. We hope, as parents, that he will remember the halcyon days of what Christmas is like as a young child when he grows up. Meanwhile, he was begging me to take him to the skate park to try his new skateboard out!

For me, personally, Christmas is a bit of melancholic affair because you can never get those days back when you remember it to be the way you remember it as a young child. It always conjures up images of my Welsh grandmother hanging hundreds of Christmas cards along catenaries of string end to end in the hallway of the house. I remember the ever-present baskets of golden russet apples and conference pears lying in wait to be eaten, the long misty walks across the fields of Essex to visit other households, each with a little fire within a cosy room surrounded by ceiling timbers and brass buckles and trinkets hanging on the walls. But most of all, I remember my grandmother's Christmas cake. It was prepared six months in advance. Laden with fruit and nuts, each week, the cake tin was opened, and it was drizzled with copious amounts of brandy. It became so incredibly dense and rich, it's highly unlikely a black hole would have devoured it in its entirety. When ready to eat, it was smothered in a rich layer of marzipan followed by a thin hard coat of royal icing. It was often a joke that if the local bobby caught one of the guests driving haphazardly along

the narrow country roads in the area, one of the questions that might have been asked is, 'Have you been at Lilian's cake again, sir?'

It is always very sad that not all can enjoy Christmas and the New Year. The recent fires in Australia has been all-consuming and tragic. Homeless people who are in dire need of help roam around the streets looking for comfort. Many others around the world barely have enough to feed their families. For me, Christmas and the New Year is a time to celebrate and be joyous; but most importantly, it is a time to reflect with the hope that we can all do better the next year.