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An Extreme Make-Over for Santa?

What's Your Reaction?

Motivated by her own childhood wounding when she learned the "truth" about Santa, Arita Trahan wanted her children to have a Santa that would never lead to disappointment and that they would never outgrow. So, almost 30 years ago, Arita gave Santa a big make-over.

Without fanfare, she told her young daughter a new, expanded Santa story that transformed the holiday icon, reconnecting him to his roots as the hero of anonymous giving and acts of kindness, and expanding him into a game in which children also play Santa themselves.

At the time, Arita didn't tell anyone about it--and no one seemed to notice that the Santa that she celebrated with her then three-year-old daughter was any different from theirs. This Santa played out alongside other Santa "stories" without threat. A generational test has proven the success of Arita's Santa make-over, as she credits her children's exceedingly generous natures to their unending experience of playing Santa from toddler into adulthood.

With bail-outs and belt-tightening headlining the economic news this holiday season, it's a fitting time for the rest of us to give Santa a make-over too. After all, the jolly guy has been getting a bit tired and frazzled in recent years. In many homes, he's been relegated to yet another holiday list-keeper who tracks children's behavior with the constant threat of disapproval and withholding of gifts. And he's also been accused of being hijacked as a tool of commercialism whose primary goal is to stoke the fires of greed in our little ones. Years of people-pleasing have definitely taken their toll.

Just in time to save Santa for this year's celebration, Arita has shared her expanded Santa story in her new book, **The Santa Story Revisited: How to Give Your Children a Santa They Will Never Outgrow**, written with Norma Eckroate (Downstream Enterprises). I welcome Arita's message and invite you to join me in helping Santa with his extreme make-over, one child at a time.

Of course, Santa is really not at fault for any of the dysfunction that has grown up around his image. In his defense, Santa is in a no-win situation as children are constantly bombarded with the seasonal chorus, "What do you want? What do you want?" The better they get at answering the question, the longer the list and the greater the likelihood that disappointment will follow.

Over the years, it has become customary for parents to require that their children "believe in" this mythical character to an extent that is akin to a religious faith. Arita says, "The problem is that grownups can forget how easy 'make-believe' is for children. Adults don't mean to take the game so far from its original innocence. They just get caught up in the fervor of their own play. Unfortunately, children who 'believe in' Santa often experience an abrupt and often uncomfortable 'unbelieving' that lies waiting around the bend, ready to ambush their celebration at any moment."

In Arita's "expanded" story, Santa becomes a game that everyone plays and a story that each child can tell in his own way. She says, "Santa is as real as anything else in the child's world of imaginative play. In my book, I give parents suggestions on how to encourage their children to play along in the story as recipients and also how to invite them to play Santa themselves. After all, secret giving is a deeply rewarding game. I suspect that is why parents want to extend their own experience as Santa--because giving anonymously is an expression of unconditional love for their children. With the expanded Santa story they can meet that goal without even a hint of deception."

Arita maintains that most children have stopping believing in Santa for about two years before they let their parents in on their newly-found sophistication. She says they do this for three reasons--they are afraid their parents will not be pleased with them for their discovery; they are concerned that they will get fewer presents; and they don't want to disappoint their parents, who seem to be having so much fun playing Santa.

Even after they "know" about Santa, Arita tells us that some children continue to make-believe--partly still believing and partly no longer believing--so they can hold onto Santa as long as possible. They make up a story that works for them. It's what kids do best when left to their own devices.

So how did Arita accomplish her extreme Santa make-over? "It was simple really," she playfully responded. "I exfoliated the dark character lines that had accumulated over time and restored him to the rosy-cheeked story of his earlier years. By giving children permission to play Santa along with him, his burdens were considerably lightened. He breathed a big sigh of relief and instantly appeared even more jolly. The transformation was amazing, as if he'd spent a month being pampered in a spa. He was delighted because his primary role as our happy hero of joyful giving had been fully restored for the first time in generations."

Arita's expanded Santa is also the hero of a new song, "I'm Being Santa," which she wrote with her husband, Mark Horwitz. A delightful music video of the song, featuring the Agape International Children's Choir, can be seen on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbh45srDylc>. The song celebrates the pay-it-forward nature of anonymous giving and the joy it engenders as children learn to play Santa.

Before the big make-over, Santa is a manipulated mythology tainted by pretense and greed. After his make-over, Santa is the magical hero of anonymous giving and a game for everyone to play. Now here's a Santa ready for your holiday celebrations!

Now don't expect this new version of Santa to be touted by commercial forces. Unlike the spins that come from Hollywood and Washington, each person is in control of his own spin on Santa. I urge you to join me in Arita's quiet revolution and give Santa your own make-over now.

Whether your child is a toddler who is ready to experience Santa for the first time or an older child whom you want to gently and lovingly guide into Arita's expanded story, her book, *The Santa Story Revisited*, gives you details and scripts that will take you through the process. Excerpts from the book can be found online at www.TheSantaStory.com.

We must act quickly. One home at a time and one child at a time, let's give Santa the make-over that he deserves and that our children deserve.

Photo: Meryl Ann Butler

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