

Making Ripples

The Santa Within

by Amanda Bancroft

Whether or not one believes in Santa Claus as we know him today, perhaps everyone has a bit of Santa within themselves: generosity. Of course, it can be argued that we all have our “inner grinch” as well. As the winter wind starts whipping around, and the holidays whiz by, people can become grinchier and tired. But the historical figure upon which many legends have been based was a great example of generosity despite hard times.

The stories surrounding this saint are certainly PG-13 at least, so beware if you dig into history: reality is not all flying reindeer. But the basic life story believed to be of St. Nicholas is that of an orphan from a wealthy Mediterranean family who gave away his inheritance to help those in need, becoming a bishop at a young age. There are so many legends about Santa that it’s hard to keep track of all the variously sized, diversely colored, and temperament-challenged icons present across the world.

It’s amazing what a writer and an illustrator can do to craft culture. Clement Clark Moore’s 1822 poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” or “’Twas the Night Before Christmas” was hugely popular, and even more so once Coca-Cola commissioned Haddon Sundblom to illustrate Santa in 1931. Through advertising, we now have a red-suited, plump, classic Santa image shown in cartoons, Christmas cards, and across various mediums like coloring books. The real Turkish person who was to become St. Nicholas and inspire the stories, however, looked little like the jolly old elf. He was perhaps a bit like some of us, struggling through adversity in order to do something good for others.

According to National Geographic, forensic evidence has allowed us to see what he actually looked like. He had darker skin, a broken nose, and strong neck muscles. Eventually his image was transformed as his legend was shaped by earlier stories and new marketing. “The strict saint took on some aspects of earlier European deities, like the Roman Saturn or the Norse Odin, who appeared as white-bearded men and had magical powers like flight. He also ensured that kids toed the line by saying their prayers and practicing good behavior,” writes Brian Handwerk for National Geographic. The spirit of Santa, however, looks just like all of us.

Human generosity seems worthy of a place among nature’s great accomplishments, a bit of a misfit toy among the mostly survival-based behaviors. Yet there can be huge social advantages to being generous, and we are a social species adapted to sharing resources (albeit mostly within our tribe – so go share with someone different). Maybe the best thing we can share with each other is precious time.

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