

On Christmas Cynicism

The impulse is understandable. The antidote is hope.

By Nicole Ault

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Photo: Getty Images

As a child, I couldn't imagine being weary of Christmas. The season's joys confirmed life's goodness. Now that I'm in my 20s, I'm starting to understand why some people suffer through the holidays. The end of December can be an emotional wrestling match.

I'm not even sure how it is Christmas already. In years past, the ceramic Nativity and wreath came out early. My roommates and I even squeezed a small fir tree into our New York apartment. This year, a cheery "Happy Thanksgiving" banner still adorns the living room—and fails to bother me, because I have hardly registered that Thanksgiving is over. The year went by in a gulp. At this point the banner is up in defiance of time's passing.

A last-minute scramble to find gifts has given me new sympathy for husbands who shop for their wives on Christmas Eve. I grumble that the loop of holiday tunes, blasted on loudspeaker by the Salvation Army volunteer outside my office, will be my own Grinch origin story. Even Christmas traditions that I love and abide by have begun to feel thin. Christmas carols and cozy gatherings are sweet in their moments, but a fearful running voice says that these pass, and leave the dreary things of life unchanged.

I have no right to be world-weary. My life is rich beyond my deserving. Nor have I suffered the kind of tragedy that makes holidays excruciating for some. But I see how Christmas cynicism sets in with age—a dissatisfaction with your circumstances and a creeping belief that it's the dark and dull things, not the things of light and cheer, that define reality. We are ending one year and about to start the long race toward another Christmas. Why celebrate birth when seasons of death are ahead?

Of course, these temptations of mind are the reason we fight hard to celebrate Christmas, even if we become so beholden to the season's traditions that we forget the reality they remind us of. In this battle, it's good to keep company with children, who relish the holiday wholeheartedly—gleeful over gifts and lights, shouting at the top of their lungs in pageants that tell the Christmas story they know so well. There is no commercialization or pretense in their Christmas rituals. Adults begin to think they've seen it all and see through it all. But who is seeing rightly?

"Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?" asks one of the wise men who traveled to see the newborn Christ in T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." He sounds like an adult discovering how life unfolds. He "had thought they were different," but "this Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

Adults see better than children how birth is like death, how hard things come along with good things. That knowledge prompts us to choose cynicism but allows us to choose hope—like the wise man in the poem, who recognizes the world-altering reality of the birth he comes to witness. “No longer at ease” in “the old dispensation,” he says, he “should be glad of another death.” Because of Christmas, there is hope of eternal life.

Ms. Ault is an assistant editorial page writer at the Journal.