

Where does the idea of Christmas spirit come from and why does it hinge so much on behavior?

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It's the most wonderful time of the year!

Once we've had our fill of turkey and welcomed the holiday season properly, we're constantly encouraged to get into the Spirit of the Season. This phrase is most heavily tied to Christmas in particular, but it would be hard to deny that similar themes aren't attached to other December holidays. In general, we're encouraged to be joyful, charitable, generous, kind, and forgiving—which are all behaviors that run counter to our inclined responses to the stresses caused by holiday shopping, holiday travel, and general holiday interactions. Where does the idea of Christmas spirit come from and why does it hinge so much on behavior?

The message of Christmas spirit is derived from a few general experiences. The first is an actual specter. In the seasonal classic 'A Christmas Carol' by Charles Dickens, the main character Ebenezer Scrooge is confronted by several apparitions who force him to confront his miserly ways and open his heart. If there is anyone who does not embody the alleged Christmas spirit, it is truly Scrooge: In response to a request for a charitable donation, he famously asks whether the prisons and the workhouses are not still open for those who seek charity; and says, for those who cannot get to the workhouses or would rather die than seek out these places, "If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

He manages the office coal supply and refuses his workers anything but the smallest fire to stay warm. He nearly refuses his workers the day off for Christmas—at first negotiating for a half day and stating that he would dock them half a day of pay. When he relents to the full day off, he demands that they come in earlier on the next day to compensate for the lost time.

When Scrooge gets home on Christmas eve, he is visited by the spirit of his former partner who warns him of the coming of three spirits. One of these phantoms is Christmas Present—a jolly, jovial, generous essence. In the original version of the story, he appears with a great feast and is decorated in the trappings of the season.

His purpose is to take Scrooge around town and show him that both the wealthy and the poor seek solace in the cheer of company on this day. That is, people are invested in sharing and being grateful for whatever they have, and looking for merriment in each other's company, regardless of their means.

The Ghost of Christmas Present bears a resemblance to St. Nicholas, who is the physical embodiment of Christmas spirit—and our second example for consideration. Our present image of Santa Claus comes from a few different sources. He is a combination of the Dutch Sinterklaas and the British Father Christmas—both of whom appear to be rooted in the real life Saint Nicholas of Myra, who was a saint and a Bishop with a reputation for secret gift giving. For example, he was known for putting coins in shoes left out for him. The tradition of Saint Nicholas' Day (Dec. 6) spread to many countries, and on the eve of this festivity which marks his death, presents are exchanged. Sinterklaas makes the distinction between good and bad children. He has a helper named Zwarte Piet who punishes bad children by beating them. (In some traditions, he also abducts very bad children.) Children leave their shoes by the fireplace with some hay or a carrot for his horse, and Sinterklaas leaves them chocolate coins or some other token. A sack is also often placed outside of the house or in the living room with presents for the family. Father Christmas, on the other hand, had nothing to do with gifts—though he has since merged with representations of Santa Claus, he was originally created to be the personification of good cheer.

The third form of Christmas spirit exists in the forms of Christmas decorations. Lights and evergreens in our homes drive away the imagery and meaning associated with the colder, longer days that mark the end of the growing season. Both figuratively and literally, on the darkest of days, people wish for light. As the days grow shorter and sometimes colder, and the earth stands barren until growth can begin anew, people's thoughts turn to warmth, life, and light. Light drives away the darkness. It symbolizes hope and beginnings, knowledge and safety. Lights create a beacon for others who are out in the dark and cold; they imply generosity and charity.

Taken together, the lessons from these examples pack a powerful punch. We have a moral watchman, the embodiment of good cheer, a gift giver, and symbols of safety and home. They provide strong guidelines on how to behave in a specific context, which in this case is the holiday season. We have been taught through these traditions what we should expect and how we should behave during this time of year in

particular. Why this time of year? Undoubtedly these principles should be present all year round, but the emphasis here on connectivity with your neighbor is probably tied to the natural rhythms of the seasons. In much of the Northern Hemisphere, where these traditions have their roots, the end of the year is the period following the harvest. Our ancestors would finally have time to visit with others and open their homes to guests. As it is also the darkest time of the year, we're psychologically looking to others for warmth and comfort.

The code of generosity, kindness, and charity toward others is enforced by no one other than ourselves. There are places where this code is strong, and these places (or people) are said to have strong Christmas spirit. And there are places where the opposite is true. This variation is acceptable provided that the rest of the local community buys into it. After all, we are the sum of the individuals around us who generate the collective force that governs and organizes our social structure. There are minimums that we need to acknowledge in terms of Christmas spirit but it isn't an all-or-nothing requirement. When we "act out" Christmas spirit, we're making visible this collective force, and we give it power.

It is this power that charities draw on during this time of year when they set up shop on the sidewalk to collect donations. By being physically present, they're invoking the moral code. For those who wear Santa hats or whose donation kettles are red, they're presenting symbols of Christmas spirit that we technically should not avoid, regardless of what we ourselves may believe. With the growing secularization of the holiday season, the Christmas spirit is something we should all be able to relate to because it speaks to the social-rights and social obligations that we have to each other in order to maintain a civil society.

