

Life Lessons Learned from Christmases Past

By: Scott Westerfield

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When I was asked to share a personal story about a life lesson from a winter holiday gone by, I embarked on a personal, Charles Dickens-Christmas-Carol-esque journey down memory lane. I didn't receive a visit from the Spirit of Christmas Future, thankfully, but I did get plenty of the Greatest Hits from my Spirit of Christmas Past.

The first Christmas that came to mind was when I was six-years old in 1963. My parents divorced when I was still a toddler, and I was living with my dad at the time. President Kennedy had just been assassinated the month before, but my dad and stepmom made sure I and my two older brothers, two new stepsisters and one year old baby brother had a warm and jolly season. That Christmas was when I got my first, candy-apple red bicycle with training wheels and tassles coming out of the handles. That bike taught me if you don't want to fall down, you need to keep moving forward! And when you do fall down, crying isn't going to get you back up. That bike was my absolute favorite. My favorite, that is, until the following year, in 1964, when I got an orange/gold Schwinn Stingray with butterfly handle bars and a white banana seat. I have to say that one is still my favorite.

12 years later, in 1976, during a junior year semester abroad in France, another memorable holiday was Christmas-on-the-cheap in London followed by my first trip to Paris on New Year's Eve. I had a wonderful dinner with a fellow student in a café on the Left Bank complete with a bottle of champagne and followed shortly afterwards by a bout of food poisoning. New Year's Eve was spent on my knees in front of a toilet. But it was my first trip to Paris, and I was determined to make the most of it, so the next day I dragged myself out of bed, and I saw the sights. That taught me what counts is not so much what curve balls life throws you, but how you respond to them. Also, I learned you can snap back really fast when you're 19 years old!

But into every life, some rain must fall. Some Christmases were sad. When I was still in grade school, I lost two grandparents on successive years, both around Christmas time. Even sadder, on Christmas Night of 2007, my mother passed away suddenly, and now, of course, every Christmas I remember that. She had a wicked sense of humor and a penchant for drama. Somehow I can't help thinking the timing wasn't completely coincidental, and every Christmas she's giving me a little wink from on high.

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But of all my Christmas memories, the one that sticks out was my 8th Christmas in 1965 when I was in 2nd grade. I was still living with my dad and stepmom at that time in San Clemente, the Supremes Merry Christmas album had just been released, and we were listening to that and Andy Williams and Robert Goulet non-stop. My mom, who I missed very much, was living at the time in Sherman Oaks, in a one-bedroom apartment, and working as a social worker for Los Angeles County. She was supposed to come down for Christmas Eve, and I couldn't wait to see her. Hours went by, but no Mom. I was so excited I could hardly eat dinner, but dinner ended and still no Mom. Dad kept on saying she was coming but would be late. Finally, when it was bedtime, my dad told me she had to work late and wouldn't be able to come at all. I was crushed and angry and inconsolable.

Several months later, the circumstances changed, my mom remarried, and my two older brothers and I went to live with her in Simi Valley. I was young enough that I didn't fully understand the situation, but I was happy to be with my mom. At some point, the topic of the prior Christmas came up, and she explained that on Christmas Eve she had had a client who was pregnant, single, without any food and sick with German Measles, which was going around that winter. She said it broke her heart not to see us for Christmas, but she couldn't leave this woman by herself. So she bought her food out of her own pocket and spent Christmas Eve with her.

To be honest, folks, at the age of 8, I still didn't think that was a very good reason. But in later years, I grew to understand what a sacrifice that was and how much love it really took to do that. And, apparently her boss thought so too, because before leaving social work in 1966 to have Michele, my youngest sister, she received a personal commendation for extraordinary service from Pat Brown, the Governor of California. I will always be proud of my mom for what she did that night and grateful for the example she set, which really was my best Christmas present ever.