

Christmas Gift-Buying and the West's Consumer Society: An Advent Calendar to "Beat the Devil"

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State](#)
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"The task of setting free one's gifts was a recognized labor in the ancient world....the spirit that brings us our gifts finds its eventual freedom only through our sacrifice, and those who do not reciprocate the gifts of their genius [daemon, personal spirit that comes to us at birth] will leave it in bondage when they die." – Lewis Hyde, The Gift

In a capitalist culture of commodification, people have been reified and things reanimated. Our national artists – the advertisers – have mastered this trick. People become persons through things, or the things images can secure; things possess a life of their own which they can impart to their possessors. Conversely, without such things one becomes a nobody, as the poor know so well. As long as you can convince people that objects and people are of equal value, the rest is easy. You can even declare that you are not an object to be used, even as you have bought into the culture of commodification through images. Daniel Boorstin put it this way in his classic study, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*:

The deeper problems connected with advertising come less from the unscrupulousness of our 'deceivers' than from our pleasure in being deceived, less from the desire to seduce than from the desire to be seduced. The Graphic revolution has produced new categories of experience. They are no longer simply classifiable by the old common sense tests of true or false.

At no time is this more evident than in the months leading up to Christmas and the holidays. Gorging frenetically on "gift" buying, giving, and receiving in a futile attempt to appease an unacknowledged and unconscious indebtedness and guilt, people reveal the truth of a rudderless and faithless society lost in the cosmos. The secularization of the economy with the development of modern capitalism underlies our present condition. Norman O. Brown writes,

The result is an economy driven by a pure sense of guilt, unmitigated by any sense of redemption; as Luther said, the Devil (guilt) is lord of this world....secular 'rationalism' and liberal Protestantism deny the existence of the Devil (guilt). Their denial makes no difference to the economy, which remains driven by the sense of guilt; or rather, it makes this difference, that the economy is more uncontrollably driven by the sense of guilt because the problem of guilt is repressed by denial into the unconscious.

That is why so many people will be having a special guest for Christmas. Possessed by their possessions, while disbelieving in Luther's Satan, the American people are in the process of bringing Satan home for the holidays. Unseen but present, he will have a place of honor at

Christmas dinner tables throughout the land. But don't worry, he has a parsimonious appetite and just nibbles. My sources tell me that he likes turkey and ham, but isn't too keen on vegetarian fare, and forget vegan. Yet I am told he has a ravenous appetite for presents, so get shopping. I hope my sources are reliable, but I never disclose them. You can always get him an Amazon gift card.

These thoughts were sparked a few weeks ago when I sent my grandchildren chocolate Advent calendars. They are, so I think, innocent treats for children. A chocolate a day delivered out of little doors can't hurt, except I suppose Grinch would say, "Are you kidding, think of cavities!" To which I reply, echoing Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, "I prefer not to."

But I do want to think about the vast cavity in the American soul. I know Santa is cute, and even though he dresses in red like Satan, I loved him when I was a child. He once brought me a mechanical toy soldier made of metal. You wound his key and he marched to war, no questions asked. Rather than march forward, however, he went in circles, which seemed stupid until I got older and realized he was a prophet. Even Santa makes mistakes.

In those days, and today for my grandchildren, Christmas is also a holy day to celebrate the birth of a political and spiritual radical, a poor boy born in a stable, an anti-war trouble-maker bound to be executed by the state. To contemplate a newborn infant in his mother's arms – any infant – and to let your mind transport him as an adult to the torturer's prison, beaten and bloody, and taken ignominiously to his public execution as an example to all those who've heard his message of peace and voluntary poverty, redeems the day, banishes the devil from the table where he tries to poison the gift of hope and sharing the presence of loved ones brings. In the presence of intangible gifts, the gluttonous one flees. The song puts it thus: "'Tis the gift to be simple, 'Tis the gift to be free, 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be." And when Santa keeps his gift giving for children simple, while excluding adults except for token exchanges, he is a welcome jolly guest at the dinner table, unlike the nasty fellow from below.

Being a sociologist, I am aware that every day in the United States many people are undergoing exorcisms. Satan seems to be a popular guy who gets around and takes many forms, as these reports suggest. I hear he turns heads, and have read that when some possessed people are exorcised they violently cough up parts of radios, computer chips – you name it. You can see why electronics are the number one Christmas gift. Our friend from below probably has the latest cell phone and a chip inserted in his heart. I'm not joking. Trust me.

As a boy I had a dog who was like those possessed ones. He ate and pooped light bulbs, electrical cords, crayons, clothespins, etc. After he bit my little sister on her leg requiring many stitches, my parents banished him to the ASPCA. Maybe they should have called the exorcist. Of course I loved my sister, but as a child I also loved my dog, and his name wasn't Lucifer, despite carrying light bulbs in his stomach. And in those days I loved Santa too, as only a child can.

As I await his arrival now that I'm a bit older, I have created my own Advent calendar. Every day from December 1 until December 25 I open a little door and drop in something. This door opens down to hell, where our friend gleefully awaits his dinner invitation. Rather than invite the bastard, I try to dump on him all he induced me to possess so he could possess

me. Never having been big into electronic crap, my stuff is low-tech but powerful, and the “stuff” is often not any thing at all, but inclinations, habits, ideas, and illusions that keep me thinking I need more while being less – William Blake’s chains:

In every cry of every man,
In every infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind forg’d manacles I hear.

Starting slowly, on day one I threw down a few dozen very sharp pencils that were cluttering up my desk drawer. If you didn’t know it, the pencil was a revolutionary technology in its time. But I had collected too many, as most of us collect the inessential to falsely secure us against embracing the wisdom of insecurity, and rather than write with them all to kill our downstairs neighbor, I hoped to spear the prick with a few, knowing as I did that the etymology of the word pencil is “little penis.”

On day two I picked up the pace and down went the illusion that I should expect my rambles in words to have any effect on people’s thinking.

Day three: Books I’ll never read again but El Diablo might benefit from, though he’s probably illiterate like so many Americans.

Day four: The bad habit of making snide comments about ignorant Americans. This was a little selfish since I didn’t want to be not nice or naughty before Santa’s arrival.

Day five: My sudden realization that the previous day’s confession might mean I’ll get coal in my stocking.

Day six: Clothes I’ll never wear, old foreign coins, extra socks, an eight inch wide tie, a one inch wide tie, all ties, nonsense things, and anything I could lay my hands on.

Day Seven: Many habits that have become useless, but which I won’t mention. I’m sure you understand.

Day eight: The idea that there are any sane American politicians and that they don’t want a nuclear war with Russia.

And on and on they go down the slide to hell. In this way I am hoping by December 25th to have dispossessed myself of all that has a grip on me, all that clutters up my life and mind. I am hoping to have nothing left to give or take, and that on Christmas the only gifts I might receive are the invisible kind.

Then I can hold them in the palms of my hands and set them free to fly away.

Letting go like this, I will contemplate an infant’s birth, how he came with nothing and left with nothing, and because he did not seek the possessions that are the life-blood of a consumer society sick-to-death, he showed us how to beat the devil.

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