

I'm Dreaming of a Quiet Christmas

By Thomas A. McKean – 09/19/08

I'm dreaming of a quiet Christmas. Just like the ones I've never known...

I thought this month I might share a bit about how Christmas went down when I was younger.

Christmas was always chaos at my house. This came from having a large family. After some of the kids were grown, it seemed as though the family got bigger every year. Maybe it seemed that way because that was what happened.

There was always a time on Christmas Eve, when all the presents were around the tree (the same artificial tree, looking less like an actual tree every year), that my mother would look for her presents and shake the box to try and figure out what she was getting for Christmas. She said she was "*snooping*" and she felt this activity was perfectly okay and appropriate. I've often wondered how she every got any sleep those nights, as curious as she was. Looking back on it, I am somewhat ashamed to say there were times I joined her in the snooping.

Morning came and the family would gather in their PJ's to open presents. This was usually my favorite part of Christmas, of course. But even as I was enjoying it, I also knew somewhere in my mind that it was a prelude of the horror to come. This kept me from enjoying Christmas as much as I otherwise could have.

Because later in the day the extended family would arrive. Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, Nieces, Nephews, etc.

The house was quite full!

This led into two things people with autism have problems with: Sound and Motion.

As I told Oprah (and this is a direct quote), "*The senses of the person with autism are not designed to be able process rapid information.*"

There was "rapid information" a-plenty at my house come the afternoon. One person would be "Santa" (sometimes people would take turns), and Santa would dole out the presents. Everyone received one present at a time and the idea was that one person would open at a time, though it rarely went like that.

Consider that earlier in the month it was all about *giving*. You went to the store with a mighty long list because there were so many people to get presents for. But now - ah, yes - now was Christmas proper. Now it was all about *receiving*. Certainly people wanted to open their presents. Who can blame them for that? I know I surely wanted to open mine!

The rapid information during Christmas created a sensory overload situation that sometimes ruined Christmas not only for myself, but for others as well.

To be fair, I do know that my parents did not know about the autism until I was fourteen years old. Even then it was a vague and ambiguous diagnosis. We weren't certain until I happened to request some hospital records when I was twenty-seven. It seems that even now, in 2008, there are still doctors who are afraid to say the "A" word to parents, but that is a topic for another article.

Nowadays I celebrate Christmas differently. I am living in VA, far away from the family in OH. So what I do is take the money I would spend on many people, and buy a present just for one person. Every year I give my friend Vicki a \$100.00 VISA card for Christmas. I do this for two reasons. First, she does far more than \$100.00 for me over the course of the year. And second, Vicki is one of those rare, wonderful people who sacrifices for herself so she can do for others. What I do is give her the card and tell her that she can only spend it on *Vicki*. That way it forces her to do something for herself, which everyone who knows her will tell you she deserves.

Vicki isn't the only one who helps me out over the year. Two others, Danielle and JoAnn, (www.joannmcfatter.com) definitely deserve a gift as well. I look forward to the year I will have the finances to get a card for all three of them.

People with autism, *through no fault of their own*, need emotional support. That includes me. I get mine mostly from the three mentioned above. Your child will need your support and understanding come Christmas time. They are dreaming of a quiet Christmas. The more peaceful you can make the holidays, the better and more enjoyable it will be for your child. And I am sure my Mother would agree with me when I say the better and more enjoyable it is for your child, the better and more enjoyable it will be for you.

She would also tell you is okay to snoop.