



# Death, Hell and Santa Claus

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My kids are reaching a certain age, and they are finding stuff out. About six months ago my seven-year-old -- she will want me to point out that she was 6 at the time -- asked me if there really was or

was not a Santa Claus.

She had asked the question before, but then it was with a look on her face that seemed to say, "You won't believe what some of the kids at school whose folks are divorced said." This time, the look said, "I already know."

So I told her. "Santa Claus is a disguise for all the moms and dads and grandparents of the world, who want to show kids how much they love them, but don't want credit for doing it."

Not bad for no warning, right? Anyway, she bought it, especially when I took her aside and told her that now she was on our side, and it wouldn't do to spoil the fun for her little brother, 3.

My daughter is a gentle soul, and she absorbs these changes gracefully. But I can't get over the feeling that I am only giving her one thread of the tapestry at a time. I am aching to spill the whole kettle of beans in one summary blurt-out to her. "No Santa Claus, and we die, and there may or may not be a God, and if there is, maybe there is a hell you go to when you die, and injustice is not always punished in this life, absurd household accidents claim a million Americans every year, people's lives hit unspeakable dead-ends, they marry the wrong people, their kids move away, marry bums, and break their hearts, the social system breaks their spirit, and the universe is a gigantic pulsing mystery, and your parents have sex."

That is too much to lay on a kid. In fact, I'll bet you're a little shaken yourself -- I know I am. But adult life is a robust catalog of this kind of gloom. Whenever we tell our kids to grow up, what we really mean is get wise and give up.

I don't remember when I first learned about death. Probably Red Ryder meant to shoot a gun out of someone's hand, but the bullet ricocheted (zing!) and pierced his heart instead. But real death, as opposed to TV death, revealed its nature only with the passage of years. One night when I was 7 my mom had to pack quickly for a trip to Michigan. Her mom had had a heart attack, and was dead. In her grief, my mom said Grandma was "with the angels now," ostensibly to comfort me -- but probably more to comfort herself. To me it raised the specter of my Grandma -- a lovely warm-hearted woman whom I had seen tear a still-warm chicken apart at the kitchen table -- cavorting with angels. Surely that was as absurd as no afterlife at all?

In those days people were less nervous about death -- it happened, and you cried. We hadn't yet learned to be properly anxious about it. I'm 41 now, and I and a lot of my generation are listening with much closer attention to talk about such things as living wills, actuarial probabilities, and claims about canola oil and rice bran. The signs of our ripeness -- bulging bellies and IRAs -- are signs that we are ready to be plucked from the vine. And our kids, these precious custom units sent to replace us, are just barely coming to grips with "reality."

Family life gave us the basics, but it took the nuns at school to platte out the full ideology of death. We die because of Adam and Eve's sin, they said. If they had not indulged themselves at our expense, we would live forever.

I spent at least a year cursing Adam and Eve's stupidity. Then it dawned on me that they hadn't been given a very complete instructions manual for the Garden. God told them they would surely die. But what did they know of death? And since when were all the rest of us included in their fate? I can see

Adam and Eve having to die, but what did I ever do to deserve to die? I had always been aces to everyone I knew.

Well, maybe not aces. Maybe not even deuces. By the second grade I had accepted the concept that someday, probably when I was really old and really didn't care much one way or the other, I would die. This was hard in itself. What made it worse was the new knowledge that I would almost certainly go to hell.

Hell? Yes. In its ancient wisdom my religion had decided that the death of the body was insufficient deterrent in and of itself. The soul must also be perishable -- it could be caught in the throes of death agony throughout eternity. If you were not really, really good. A classic case of double jeopardy.

As for why I would go to hell, it was only logical. There was just too much dishwater over the dam -- mostly lies. Virtually everything I said was a lie. Couldn't help myself -- still can't. So, around age 8, I adopted a modified limited hangout strategy. Yes, I would die. But on the day of judgment, realizing God had to make a lot of snap decisions amid all the hubbub of Armageddon, I intended to make a dramatic plea for clemency -- on the grounds that I was weak, that I was sorry, that I had always had the feeling that, somehow, God had a special feeling about me, and now was the time to put that feeling to the test.

That might not work, of course, so I probably had to be working on Plan B all along. In Plan B you look to others to save you, you work like crazy all your life to make a positive impression on people. Perhaps, if you did great and memo

rable things, when you died, a part of you would carry over -- your reputation. Maybe you would earn a line in the World Almanac, or have your picture appear in the daily paper, holding a big fish. Or maybe all you would be is a cherished thought in the minds of those who knew you, and they maybe would build a wax diorama of you doing something typical, like clipping your toenails, just off the living room of your great great grandchildren's house, and you would sit like that for eternity, a grin on your face and your foot in your hand. And the effigy would be smiling, because through it you had cheated the grave, sort of. That's if things went really, really well.

I haven't told my kids about hell. It's bad enough they know all about death already. All those people on getting gunned down on the news, blowing up, and going over cliffs in cars. They know all about death.

Maybe. One day my daughter threw herself on the sofa. "I wish I were dead!" she sobbed. But when I asked her why she wanted to be dead, she said she fell and scraped her knee on the bus, and whenever she flexed it it stung. If she were dead, she figured, she wouldn't feel the sting.

I was glad she didn't know about dying. I went through a morbid streak when I was an adolescent, in which I lay awake for hours at night, certain a tumor was working its way through my head, certain blackness, oblivion, and unfulfillment were my destiny. It was all about me, that death -- only I would make that dark crossing.

When my stepdad died last fall, after a long illness, I took the kids to the vigil. There lay my dear old dad, who had been a lion in life, always roaring about one thing or another, then sick and feeble, and now, all done up by the embalmer, well, he looked great -- noble, calm, patriarchal. My stepdad was

what you would call a great guy. Always doing for other people, and impossibly generous. Even when I was on the outs with my family he always slipped me a few 20s when he saw me. His employees loved him, everyone in town loved him -- even his wife and children loved him. Toward the end he let his white beard grow, a kind of Santa Claus himself. When he came down sick, with a real brain tumor, this rough, loud man surprised everyone with a sudden meekness and peacefulness of heart. It was a tough time, and he bore it well.

I held my young son against my chest as we viewed the casket. He did not disgrace me. He stared solemnly at his grandfather's face, said, "Poppa's sleeping," and absently raised the arm of his Donatello figurine.

I worried how the funeral might affect the kids, if they would have nightmares, or what. On the way back, outside Chicago, I noticed a tear in Daniele's eye. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm just sad Poppa is dead."

Maybe that's how it is, then -- fantasy death giving way to the real thing, obsessions and compulsions giving way to grief, and life going on, like a young girl. We drove home singing the happy hiker song, and that night I dreamed of the body of Santa at night, reposed in soft snow, and high above the crisp, still sky, the stars of heaven sparkling.