



MARK SALTER

What if Santa died?

An invited response

From late October each year, bleary-eyed postal workers all over the UK sit in shifts, sifting through some 120 000 children's letters addressed to a rubicund, septuagenarian, airborne logistics expert living in the frozen Arctic. In accordance with guidelines, every letter is screened for signs of neglect, abuse or some other singularity. Every year, several escape the shredder. One year, a thoughtful 10-year-old wrote:

'Dear Santa, you live at the North Pole and come to the house of good children every year. I asked Mr Randall my science teacher about this. There are six billion people living on this planet and two billion of them are children. Not all of them are good. I know you don't deliver presents to Muslims, Jews, Hindus or anyone else like that which means 600 million children living in about 190 million houses. I know you only come when all the children are asleep which on Christmas Eve is about nine o'clock. So if you work your way west ahead of the dawn that gives you about 31 hours which means 1390 houses every second. How you park your sleigh, get down our chimney and back up again so fast is really amazing. Mr Randall says there are three explanations. One is that your sleigh travels near to the speed of light so that you must influence time and space and mass and energy in a way that is beyond our understanding. The next is that you are magic, and Mr Randall says that that is what we call anything beyond our understanding. The third is that you don't exist except as some sort of myth made up by my Mum, which can't be true because every year your reindeer eats the carrot and my mum hates carrots. . . .'

The writer has moved well beyond Piaget's concrete stage of operations, but whether she has fulfilled Breen's 'hallmark of mature reasoning', namely to distinguish fantasy from reality, is less clear. Not so long ago, a heliocentric solar system, or the notion of universal human rights, belonged more to the world of fantasy than reality. A more useful, if dispiriting, definition of this mental rite of passage would be an acceptance of *conformity* of thinking. One of the most striking differences between child and adult styles of thought and action appears to be freedom from disinhibition, playfulness and imaginative style. For adults, 'childish' as a descriptor of thought and action is negatively valued and often met with the rejoinder to 'grow up'. Those who persistently act in such a way are often stigmatised, given haloperidol or, if they are lucky, labelled as 'creative'.

Breen's reification of the 'powerful tool' that is Santa Claus, a 17th Century Dutch corruption of St Nicholas, does not really have the jolly old fellow at its heart. Santa, as she notes, is just another marker, along with the decorated home and the tree, of the fact that a certain cultural event is underway. Santa no more fosters benevolence than an infinity of other social acts involving 'the other', nor does writing to Santa help to foster attention and concentration any more than a thank-you note to Grandma. Rather, Breen is offering us a seasonally flavoured warning of a deeper issue. At its very bottom, she is asking us to contemplate not the death of Santa, but the death of imagination.

Philosophers have observed that what people really want is not knowledge, but certainty. Uncertainty is terrifying. Daily, we are reminded of the weakness of our rational efforts to resist this terror, yet we go to ever-greater lengths to use the same methods to banish it. In this struggle, the human imagination, with its infinite repository of uncertainties, is viewed by most of us as a region where only mythical figures, the mentally ill and children are allowed to tread, rather than as a world wherein we may find lamps to light the dark that frightens us. Increasingly, in a society that unwisely holds rationality above all else, the significance of myths and magic, complete with eight reindeers capable of cruising in hyperspace, are being slowly and very subtly eroded. Many apparently plausible, rational, but totally unimaginative, arguments are nowadays mustered to this end; the need for evidence-based approaches to everything; the rights of the many overriding the values of the few; the need for guidelines, benchmarks and inquiries where we have failed so far. In her closing paragraph, Breen mentions how our most obvious rational tool, technology, stands in direct opposition to the power of imagination. Why should any child running *The Sims* on the home PC need to believe in Santa Claus, when he or she can actually *be* him? Breen is telling us a home truth: our imagination is like any other part of our body – we use it or lose it. If Santa died, we would hold a Serious Incident Inquiry. If we have any sense, we should ask the Tooth Fairy to chair it.

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