

Dear Friends,

This is it, dear ones, big number ten in the list of annual letters. You can read the first nine online at <http://euclid.nmu.edu/~apoe/christmas>. Although most people seem to enjoy the letters (last year only three letters were returned stamped “deceased and would have preferred not to have been born”), the number one criticism is that the letters never actually say what I’ve been up to during the year. Well, that is sort of the point, but in that this is an important milestone, I shall include some personal information at the end of the letter. First, though, I have some very important research to share with you.

I was researching the Clausian manuscripts as I frequently do this time of year, and I noticed something very interesting, something so small that it has evidently escaped previous notice, but it is significant nonetheless. “He’s making a list, checking it twice.” Why would Santa (or anyone) need to check a list at all, much less twice? The only reason, of course, would be to safeguard against error, which directly implies that Santa Claus is fallible! When I have the computer perform a complex calculation, for example, I don’t have the computer check its own work because I know the computer will not err. Santa Claus, however, would appear, in this respect, to be no different from any other obese bearded geriatric man living in the Arctic.

Now, people are people, and I know that most of you reading these words are now beginning to realize that if Santa can make mistakes then it might be possible to “beat the system,” so to speak, to be naughty and still receive the desired amount of loot. My research has uncovered several examples of this very thing! Santa probably doesn’t want me to share this information, but it dawns on me that Santa has brought me underwear every year of my life except last year—the only year I really needed it—when the airlines lost my luggage forcing me to wear the same underwear every day until I made it home. (See, this is why I don’t like to talk about my life too much; it’s not really all that exciting.) Anyway, what’s Santa going to do? Not bring me underwear next year?

In 1947, Billy Peterson of Des Moines, Iowa built a huge mound of snow outside his family’s parlor window, then opened the window and let the wind blow the entire mound into the house. However, on Christmas, Billy received his much-desired erector set. How did he do this? Very simply. Billy had enacted his bit of mischief on Christmas Eve when Santa was already in transit. (So many people forget Christmas Eve isn’t just a night to Santa. When it’s noon on Christmas Eve in Des Moines, it’s already Christmas in Japan; Santa begins his journey far sooner than most realize.) When Santa returned to the North Pole, his elves informed him what Billy had done, but there wasn’t much Santa could do. Billy’s gift had already been delivered, and since it had occurred in the 1947 fiscal year, Santa couldn’t penalize him in 1948. Now, don’t get any bright ideas. The fiscal year boundary is now the Winter Solstice, specifically in response to this incident. If you perform mischief after the Solstice, you’ll still get your loot this year, but you’ll get hosed next year.

In 1972, little Gavin Flaherty of New Rochelle, New York demonstrated remarkable creativity. On New Year’s Day of that year, Gavin announced to his parents and the world that he was converting to Judaism. After eleven months of holy hell, Gavin converted back to Christianity on December 1 and spent that month a model child. Well, it turns out that the elves did not record Gavin’s behavior for those eleven months (including the Fourth of July when Gavin poured kerosene on the lawn where kids were about to play with sparklers. No one was hurt due to a fortuitous downpour) so all they had to go on was December when Gavin rang a bell for the Salvation Army, delivered meals to the elderly, and single-handedly shoveled out the school parking lot so that a snow day would not have to be called. And so, little Gavin, who in March had scrambled robin eggs and fed them to Mama Robin, received his Close ‘N Play phonograph! As a result, the elves started maintaining exhaustive records of Jewish kids (and Muslim kids, Buddhist kids, Shintoist kids, Sikh kids, etc.) just in case, and this was a good idea because, guess what little Gavin did on New Year’s Day 1973? Yep, he converted back to Judaism! But Santa was wise to him this time and didn’t get him anything that Christmas and wouldn’t have even if he hadn’t been under prosecution as an adult. However, that has not stopped other people from attempting the same scam; Madonna comes to mind.

John Langer of Seattle, Washington misbehaved every single day in 1933, yet got exactly what he wanted. He wanted coal. Strange kid. These kinds of scams are extremely difficult for Santa to catch, and some slip through the system even today. If you are fascinated by insects, fecal matter, or underwear, this might be the con for you. However, it doesn’t always work. Mary Sue Robinson of Honolulu, Hawaii reasoned this way in 1965: considering that

the Pacific Islands are the last places Santa visits on his westward circumnavigation, Mary Sue's presents would likely be at the bottom of the sack anyway. Thus, if she were to behave in such a way as to warrant coal, there was every reason to believe that the weight of everyone else's presents might crush the coal to diamond before Santa got to her house. However good Mary Sue might have been at misbehaving, chemistry wasn't her strong suit. She still got coal, and, since she didn't need it to heat her house (she was Hawaiian, remember), she buried the coal and put a rock on top of the spot hoping the rock would crush the coal to diamond. She never learned whether this strategy worked because, alas, she had elected to bury the coal in a rock garden and never found it again.

So, yes, it is possible to outsmart Santa and get whatever you want no matter what. However, it is extremely difficult to do, and your best bet would simply be to lead a model life. So, have a great 2006, and be good!

This year, I performed a wedding, went somewhere on vacation, met my new niece, got a promotion at work, and was in a play.

Andy P O E
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