

Santafying (2007)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

I got an inside look at how Santa Claus works this week.

The church I attend hosted the PTA Christmas program at an elementary school where they really appreciate community involvement -- so our teens and middle school people agreed to do chili supper, Christmas program, and Santa photos.

Where I came in was the Santa photos. In that context Santa is a come-on, to benefit the PTA: two bucks a shot, which is pretty reasonable for a photo with a legend. There was a brightly decorated corner of the hall, with a wintry backdrop, inviting fake Christmasly wrapped parcels, and a nice rocking chair for the costumed old shill.

I was not looking forward to it. It's confining, and the work space is hot and itchy; an unpleasant surprise is that there is only a narrow slit for Santa's mouth between the mustache and the beard, so it's hard to keep plastic whiskers out of Santa's mouth. Besides, I was the third choice: our new youth minister has a tendency to candor which she'll probably outgrow. I thought it would be a ho-ho-hum evening.

But then came the kids, and it was, all at once, Christmas. As soon as they turned the corner and their eyes found Santa, the Santa smile bloomed on their faces! In a single instant unbelief and cynicism vanished, and they were believers, again. They say drama involves a "willing suspension of unbelief?" That's what Santa does, with a single glance. Santa doesn't even have to bring his A-game, the client does most of the work.

Everybody took a turn on a knee; occasionally both were occupied, with siblings. A quick bounce on the knee, the obligatory litany about what's on your list this year, then "Look at the camera and say Merry Christmas!" a flash of light, and down you come.

It was the belief, that got to me: the eager rush to trust that familiar character, hugged close in memory for a whole year. Ten year olds, four year olds, even one year olds -- not really knowing what this was all about, but only that it was supposed to be FUN -- for that ninety second oasis from Iraq and

the Middle East and politics and poverty -- and it worked. The parents' eyes mirrored the same joy as they trusted their greatest treasures to the knee of a total stranger. Word was out: it was a safe place to be, you didn't have to worry about how cold it was or how hungry you were, it was okay there with the guy in the furry red suit. The simple need to believe overcame everything, one more time.

What I'd dreaded as a drag and an evening shot, turned out to be Christmas once again, by accident. May something similar accidentally happen to you, in the next few days.