

A Few Minutes at Christmas Can Lead to a Lifetime of Gratitude

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I know for most of us, we are rushing through the last days of our busy Christmas preparations. These preparations will (hopefully) culminate in a holiday that's full of love, fun, traditions, family, food, and presents.

When I was a child, our family used to attend Christmas Eve services. I always had to sit next to my grandmother because when the congregation sang, *Silent Night*, she'd start to cry. My job was to hold her hand really tight and try to give her comfort. I always assumed she mourned my grandfather, who died when I was nine. And I'm sure she did. However, years later, she told me that the music of *Stille Nacht* brought back memories of her wonderful childhood Christmases in Germany. In those moments she grieved for the loss of her father and siblings, and the warmth, love, and traditions of those times.

One time I wrote out her description of her childhood celebrations. I wanted to preserve the memory of a time long gone.

In Germany, Christmas Eve is the most important time of the Christmas celebrations. Our family festivities started around 6 o'clock. Earlier in the day all the children had taken a nap so we could stay up as late as we wanted. Then we dressed in our best clothes and went downstairs to wait impatiently in my father's study. We would hear a noise, as if St. Nicholas was leaving. Then my father unlocked the doors to the Christmas room and ushered us in.

When we went into the room we would see before us a Christmas wonderland. The large, beautifully decorated Christmas tree first drew our eyes. Burning white candles in little gold holders lit the tree. Round glass bulbs, icicles, and figurines hung from the branches. Silver tinsel glittered in the candlelight. In addition to the glass ornaments, the

Christmas tree also held special treats of marzipan shaped into flowers, fruit, and miniature bread loaves, also different types of chocolate figures, and candy rings filled with sugary liquid.

Each child had his or her own little table piled high with their gifts. In those days we did not use wrapping paper and so might see that much-longed-for present. Also at each table sat a "Buterteller," a colorful plate filled with cookies, exotic nuts such as almonds in the shell and Brazil nuts, as well as special South Seas fruit.

Before we could go to our tables, we would sing Christmas Carols. We started with singing to the Christmas tree. I don't remember the name of our first carol, but the first line was "On the Christmas tree the lights are burning". The second song was "Oh, Tannenbaum." We sang several more carols and ended with "Stille Nacht." Then each child would recite a poem about St. Nicholas.

I struggled to wait patiently until the singing and reciting finished. The whole time I'd eagerly examine the tables from afar and try to pick out which one belonged to me. Finally the singing was over and my father or stepmother would lead each of us to our own table. We didn't have much time to examine our presents because we could only choose one gift before dinner

After each child had picked a gift we went into the dining room. The table looked festive with brightly lit candles, decorations of evergreen, and the best china and crystal.

The traditional Christmas Eve meal was always carp from our pond. The entire carp, including the head and tail was beautifully arranged on a big platter. The carp would have a slightly blue tinge. One year I wandered into the kitchen to find out how the fish came to be that color. The cook showed me how she prepared the carp with vinegar in order to take away the sweet taste. The vinegar caused the blue color.

By my childhood, most of the people in my grandmother's memories had passed on, and I'd never known any of them. Russian soldiers in WWII had destroyed her family's beautiful home. Although she never said so, I had the sense that she wished she'd made some different choices in regards to appreciating her life at that time and verbalizing more of her love and gratitude to her family.

Because of my grandmother's experience, I wanted to make sure I didn't reach a time in my life where I'd regret not appreciating what I had when I had it. So, about ten years ago, I started taking a few minutes of quiet during the chaos of Christmas. I wanted some time to *feel* the presence of every family member. I knew as the years went by, the family would change. Many of those present would pass on. The little ones would grow up and start their own families. Perhaps they'd move to other parts of the country and not make it home for the holidays. Someday (although I don't like to think about it) *I'll* be an old woman, mourning the loss of earlier Christmases.

So in those few quiet moments, my thoughts touch on each member of my family. I feel my love for them, and theirs for me. I feel our *togetherness*. I allow gratitude to fill my heart for all of them. And I give thanks to God for all my blessings.

I've continued to do this every year. And I'm so grateful that I have. For in those ten years, my father and my grandmother have passed on. Now when I take my quiet time on the holiday, I also remember them, and imagine I feel their presence. And I feel blessed.

So during this busy, stressful, yet wonderful Christmas season, I wish for you a few quiet moments to *feel* your blessings.

Dr. Debra