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To the many who have cared,

I've often found that the tasks that bring me the greatest satisfaction are often the ones that challenge and, on occasion, frustrate me most. Writing comes naturally to me, but producing a letter that I deem worthy of your time and attention can be another matter altogether.

Each of these letters is a labor of love, but it is this one, the Christmas letter that speaks to my heart most of all. And so, when the time came to put pen to paper and my mind remained a blank, a subtle but persistent anxiety began to pester me day and night. I considered the possibility that I already possessed a suitable subject for the letter but failed to recognize it. I remained alert so as not to miss a potential story, should it cross my path. Then, without warning, I stumbled upon my Christmas story as I approached a supermarket where I routinely shop, although it would take me nearly a week to realize it.

The supermarket anchors the front entrance of a nearby mall that opened last year to coincide with the arrival of the Christmas season. As I entered the mall I gasped, stunned by what was before me, the site of which usually cheered me. My body tensed and I lowered my head to stare at the ground as if preparing for an unforeseen assault. It was only the middle of October and although December 25<sup>th</sup> remained 2 1/2 months away, the mall had been decked out in all of its Christmas finery, manipulating the arrival of the season, tainting the Christmas spirit with its insatiable appetite for profit.

Anything but joyful, I made haste to the supermarket, and then hurriedly shopped, wanting to bid the mall adieu as soon as possible. I seethed with anger all the way home and into the next day, vowing to shop elsewhere in silent protest of the mall and the persons there responsible for forcing Christmas upon its customers not long after the arrival of fall.

It is now November and I have yet to return to the mall. Nor do I plan to soon, which is not to say I'll never return or fail to return to specifically witness the mall at Christmas. One evening last year in December, I took my Guatemalan family to the same mall to share a cup of hot chocolate and savor the man made wonders of the season. For the mall is a marvel to behold at Christmas and this December we'll continue the tradition begun last year.

There are many other Christmas traditions that we honor in our home, some of them cultural, some religious. Among my favorites is watching the Christmas programs and movies that, each, in its own way, adds joy and meaning to the season. This tradition has its roots in the U.S., many years ago when, one Sunday each December I would travel to my older brother's home to watch an unchanging selection of Christmas specials with my brother, his wife and their 3 children. It was a highlight not only of the Christmas season, but also of the entire year, for anticipation for

our gathering began weeks before the arrival of whatever Sunday had been chosen to host the event.

More than 3 decades later, in another country the tradition carries on in an adapted format. Each night during the final days leading up to Christmas, my Guatemalan family and I come together in our living room to watch a different seasonal classic. Only one selection remains from the tradition's early days with my brother's family, and it always begins our Only A Child 'Film Festival.' It is *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

The story of Charlie Brown and his search to find the meaning of Christmas in the midst of a society evermore pushing the profitability of the holiday transcends time and place. In our home, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* never fails to equally delight those of us tuning in for the first time and those of us watching it for the second, third and even fiftieth time. Comments about this genuinely special *special* continue long after we eject the DVD from its player.

Charlie Brown's search to find not only the meaning of Christmas, but also, meaning *in* Christmas, remains the central theme throughout the program. All of his efforts are thwarted until, while directing his school's Christmas play, an exasperated Charlie Brown desperately calls out to his companions, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" The usually timid Linus asserts that he does and dragging his faithful blanket, walks to the auditorium's center stage and calls for a spotlight. Linus then reads from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 2, in which an angel announces the birth of Jesus to a group of humble shepherds. "...Do not be afraid, for behold I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. '"

Linus' response to Charlie Brown's question is brief, but at that moment *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and, arguably, Christmas specials in general, come in to focus.

My nephew Eric, who, with his family, watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* with me throughout his childhood and into adulthood, is now 36 years old. He is married and the father of 3 children. As busy as he surely must be, especially during the month of December, he takes the time at Christmas to send me via the Internet a video of Linus' revelation. I wait for it to come each year and, upon its arrival, watch it without delay. This all-too-familiar moment renews me and, once again, the hope and promise of Christmas fills my heart with peace in ways that the finest commercial Christmas display simply cannot manage, beautiful as it may be. The story of the Nativity remains the most moving one I know.

I do not oppose the cultural traditions of Christmas, or the celebration of them. To the contrary, I have cherished them from the moment I first witnessed them as a small child. But there seems to be an ever-increasing push to eliminate the spiritual significance of the day, to take the Christ out of Christmas, to rob the holiday and holy day of its soul. Unassuming Charlie Brown, only a child, ever the block head, understood that the strictly commercial Christmas he witnessed left

him empty and unfulfilled. The program first aired in 1965. I can't help but wonder how Charlie Brown would respond if he could travel through time and witness Christmas today.

Many of our youngsters arrive at our door hurting and disillusioned. Their lives have been robbed of much of their promise and hope. (Four of our current residents were orphaned as children. The pain of the loss does not simply vanish upon entering adulthood). Their wounds are deep and touch the soul. They come to us, not only in search of a better life, but also, on some level, trusting that Only A Child will find a way to facilitate healing and sooth their troubled souls. I sincerely believe that healing on a spiritual level must involve a renewed relationship with the Source of all life, our Maker, our Higher Power, the Divine, God. I am often asked what keeps me going. My answer is unwavering; mentoring these young men, giving them the best example I can muster in terms of what it means to be a godly Christian man.

Overseeing Only A Child can be a daunting responsibility, the demands on my time and energy often overwhelming. But daily being involved in the process of restoring hope to lives in search of meaning gives me more than ample reason to continue with this mission.

Thank you for seeing us through another year, our 22<sup>nd</sup>! Thank you for continuing to reach out to Only A Child, thus enabling us to continue to reach out to young lives in need of healing.

Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. May God bless.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be the name 'George', written in a cursive style.

George