

## THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS CARDING

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### *Adapting old conventions to good intentions*

It started innocently I guess I don't know how many years ago. Growing up WASP[1] middle class, my parents, our family, would receive Christmas cards from various sources as the season approached. Through the turbulent '60s when many in my generation were upending any seemingly materialistic social custom they could find, I never focused on any alleged superficiality of sending greeting cards for the holidays; it was hardly an issue compared to the draft and the war (Vietnam).

Married in the mid-1970s, as radical libertarian guy doing my wretched best to fight "The Man"—on two fronts, left and right—I still succumbed to many conventional behavior patterns: including Thursday night bowling, home ownership (when interest rates were double-digit!), and multiple-adult-beverage lunches. In any case, it was becoming obvious to me that many ancestral rites are not easily abandoned. So when my wife and I suddenly became a middle-class grownup couple on our own—geez, we were only kids a minute before—the holiday greeting cards would come and we needed to figure out a suitable response.

Fueled by a perversely headstrong and self-righteous dose Randian egoism in those early married years, I decided social customs were primarily the province of the womenfolk. But despite the blockheaded chauvinism, I do recall making a few personal comments on cards we'd send to friends and family, and I enjoyed taking the time to handwrite the comments and the addresses. Then after the divorce, I slowly got into the habit of using this time of the year to "stay in touch," to reach out and express some kind of warmth in my own unique literary fashion, however brief, to those I loved... including my ex. :)

I was never one of those who wanted to put the Christ back in Christmas; I even used to enjoy the tacky pagan glitter and gross corporate commercialism. Socially maturing, *finally*, through my 40s I found that I looked forward to personally writing Christmas cards every year... to the point I'd plan to spend several hours normally through the week of Thanksgiving sending up these heartfelt messages.

Receiving cards is nice, too, don't get me wrong. Especially cards prepared with a bit of the personal TLC I put into my own tiny missives. But a true Christmas carder does it merely for the simple creative joy of the write, the send, and the metaphorical touch. It doesn't have anything to do with the baby in the manger or Santa Claus (though don't these two make a nice starter kit?). Or whether you get something back. No doubt some of the recipients of my cards think it's a bit nutty for a bonafide advocate of natural philosophy to make a big deal out of a holy-day ritual calculated to make fortunes for Hallmark and Blue Mountain. But for the money it's certainly harmless enough, and I like it.

On the other side of the coin, no one should feel obligated to reciprocate on the tradition. The way I see it, you either have the desire or you don't; it's no stigma on anyone whether, in the grand scheme of the cosmos of activities during this often overwhelming period of the year, they pick this sedentary, reflective task. But you may be surprised to find how calming and connecting it can be: sit yourself down, minimize the distractions, take out your best AT Cross or Papermate fountain pen, make up your list, then one by one take a minute to think about who you're sharing a moment with, then scribble a few hopefully clever phrases, and move on.

As a practical matter, I've had to keep my list pared to something like 100 recipients, which can be somewhat of a challenge for someone so rich and famous :). But seriously, it's really not too difficult to keep a good list, and regardless of the expansion of your social circle you find the people you were once close to fall away for one reason or another being replaced by others. Another side benefit is the folks you care about acquire a distinct priority.

Interestingly, you'll find quite a few people or couples that you once were simpatico with on a casual basis, though certainly not in the best friends category: they stay on your list (especially if you stay on their list) through thick and thin over the years. Even if you never see them again. For example, I had a neighbor lady when I lived in a condo in Farmington Hills, she made these delicious rhubarb cookies. Most of my conversations with her were about how awful the Bush economy was and how her son was still looking for work after two and a half years, etc. They go to Florida for the winter now, and we still exchange cards. Same with a chef and the waitress he married from the fine establishment where I spent so much time back in my prodigious gentleman-drinking era. Aspiring hardworking youth of America, and now they have two kids and a home in the suburbs! I remember he shared my view that *The Matrix* is one of the most important and revolutionary movies ever made. (I wonder what he thinks of *V for Vendetta*?) This couple was also buds ten years ago with my "Samurai Bartender" friend, now Little John the Pizza Mon. Time flies.

You get the picture. I can write an interesting story about virtually every one of the people on my list: their lives are unfolding in fascinating ways. And taking part by contacting them and hopefully hearing from them, even if only once a year, helps me to partake in what Betty Friedan used to refer to as "the warm center of life." So I realize this year it's probably a little bit late to get into the habit of holiday carding, but give it consideration for next year.

Merry Merry and Happy Happy!

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[1] White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

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