

A SANTA MENTAL JOURNEY

Gazing around a room I entered at 9:20 AM on Christmas Day 2009, I gave a "Ho! Ho! Ho!", a few thumbs up and walked to a seat in front of a cardboard fireplace by a Christmas Tree that I had helped to decorate two week earlier. As someone who can tell countless tales of bygone Christmas days, this one ranks among the best. At the age of 66, I'm an inmate at the Roxbury Correctional Institution dressed as Santa Claus. Before such an experience, I would have been grateful if it had just been a dream that woke me up at 3:00 AM in a shivering sweat. The reality of the experience generated beneficial insights.

My task was to sit and be available for pictures with children on Santa's lap. Due to understandable security concerns, I couldn't roam up and down the rows of visitors, allow them to linger in my presence or do anything but sit and be Santa. For the next several hours, this allowed me to observe and contemplate a unique environment that was simultaneously surreal, maudlin, depressing and joyful.

In a room full of so many visitors, where were the fathers? I sadly realized that they were on this side of the aisle being visited, or in my case dressed as St. Nick. Of the approximately 160 adult visitors, only 10% would be fathers visiting their sons in prison on Christmas Day. Of course, those not on a prisoner's visiting list were Permanent MIAs. Seeing that a majority of the visitors were Grand-mothers, Mothers, Aunts, a few Uncles, Sisters, Brothers, Girlfriends, Wives, Baby's Mommas, Lovers and Children visiting their Daddies answered my question about why so many low-income young men end up in places like this. With so many fathers being MIA, there were no male role models to emulate. Santa looks out into the crowd and ponders how young men just going through puberty decide who they want to be like. Their role models can't be the MIA fathers, so the youth of our nation want to be like Joe D., Mickey M., Willie M., Sugar Ray, Floyd, Mike T., Michael J., Tiger, Charles B., JFK, MLK. Monsignor, Freddie Mac, etc. Some of these turn out to be anything but a role model, but with no Dads home, the kids can't say, "I want to be like Dad." Adding to this problem are the Bad Role Models and Dads who are home but never really there for their sons.

As I sat and continued to think, I hoped that I would be a good role model today. Then as my life experiences flowed through my thoughts, I remembered my role models, my role as a Husband, Father, Son, Brother and Friend. With so many opportunities to be a role model, it saddened me to think how I had managed to take a path that ended up in prison. Now on the "Back Nine" of my life, I wondered about the "End Games" of all the intertwined lives of those celebrating Christmas 2009 in this toasty, decorated room inside a Hagerstown, Maryland prison. I was sweating, but not as Santa. Would spending this time in this environment along with so many others who had had their dreams shattered make a difference in my life? No answer came as I wondered.

I saw Grand-mothers with walkers and in wheel-chairs. Some people were dressed to the "nines", while others of all different shapes and sizes wore jeans. Little bright-eyed children dressed in their Christmas Day finest clung to their mothers as they walked in looking for their "Daddy." The many fathers here were on the wrong side of the aisle. I watched the animated conversations, the hugs and kisses with everyone so upbeat. The joyful glow and peaceful serene flow of conversations almost appeared to be the actions of those at a religious service. This seemed very appropriate for December 25th. Even the guards were hovering, anxious to go home to their families to act as role models for their children. It made me think about the kids here with their fathers missing or temporarily on this side of the aisle. Statistically many in prison now would shortly return after their releases. Is this the model the kids would follow? Do the fathers here or the children outside really have futures that do not include prison? Is there anyone out there with the political clout other than Senator Webb advocating a real good look at creating transitioning opportunities?

"Time for a picture, Santa." I was daydreaming, but wait. These thoughts race through my mind. With so many struggling middle-class and low-income families in America due to the rape of the working class by the bankers, stock brokers and rich, are more male children without positive role models destined to wind up in prison? Look out Governor O'Malley, Maryland will need a few more prisons-the 21st century's idea of low-income housing. Why not turn all of those community banks into prisons and fill them with the bankers and financial analysts first? "Time for a picture, Santa." Daydreaming again!

As an entire family crowds around me for a group picture, all are hugging. Among them, a little girl about six years old sporting pig-tails braided so tightly she must have a headache wanted to know why I wasn't back at the North Pole on Christmas afternoon. Thinking quickly, I lied and said that the weather was so bad that the three elves sitting next to me and I had to wait another night before going back. I hadn't told a lie since July 21, 2005, and it made me feel terrible, but I guess Santa is allowed to fib to insure a child's happiness. PETA would also be glad I didn't subject Rudolph and the gang to the terrible weather conditions. As the elf was taking the picture of this beautiful family, I prayed that the sins of the father would not be continued by the children. I didn't want these kids on this side of the aisle.

I wondered what would happen to me. When would Santa be going home to his North Pole? Would any of us be in this place were it not for alcohol, drugs, domestic violence/abuse, the pursuit of easy money etc.? Would this room be as full if all kids had positive role models? Questions and more questions! Why couldn't this group of peaceful, loving and caring people in this unexpected warm cozy environment be at home and together on Christmas? All of us here can make excuses for being here. We say how bad it is here and that we'll never be back, but facts say otherwise. The crowds will be larger in the Christmases to come. Inmate populations are growing, not getting smaller. But those thoughts must be put away. Time is up.

Children and adults leave, waiving to Santa. The elves hand out bags of candy, and tearful dads wave to the kids. Santa walks slowly down the hall to the changing room where he takes off his beard, his suit, hat and mask. He was startled when he looked into the mirror and saw the role model he'd been looking for almost 60 years. He slips on his jeans and sweatshirt heading not to the North Pole, but to his room while whistling Irving Berlin's favorite Christmas song.