

BOB LEPINE



THE FOUR EMOTIONS OF
CHRISTMAS



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WHY CHRISTMAS MATTERS SO MUCH

Ask most adults to tell you about their childhood, and at some point, you'll likely hear a Christmas story. The impact of this particular holiday on our lives and our culture can't be overstated. Most of us carry memories of Christmases past with us throughout our lives.

For me, it's memories of growing up in suburban St Louis in the '60s. Dad bringing home boxes of Bavarian Mints. My grandparents driving down from their home in Flint, Michigan, with a case of Vernor's Ginger Ale dependably stowed in the back of their car. Singing Christmas carols door to door while collecting money for the Salvation Army. And Jell-O salad which, for

some reason, only ever appeared on our dining room table at Christmas dinner.

One year, I came up with a sure-fire way to figure out if Santa Claus was real or not. I decided I would write out my Christmas list all by myself and mail it off to the North Pole without telling anyone what my list included. If I got what I wanted, he was definitely real. If I didn't, the whole elaborate ruse would be revealed. I had one big problem—I didn't know how to spell what I wanted. So I took my older sister into my confidence, enlisting her help. As I unwrapped a pair of binoculars on Christmas morning, I knew one of two things was true—either Santa was real or my sister couldn't be trusted to keep a secret!

I still remember unwrapping my first real bicycle—a Schwinn two-speed—and the ukulele I received when I was nine years old and that I still have today. We can all come up with a dozen stories of long-ago Christmases we've never forgotten. In so many ways, our Christmases as children—both the good times and the bad—shape us in ways we aren't even aware of.

CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Each year, we expect the Christmas season to work some kind of magic on us. We go to events that will help create a “Christmas spirit”. We harbor some hope that, whatever hardships or heartaches we’ve been through this year, the lights and carols and decorations and traditions will somehow realign our hearts and bring peace on earth, goodwill to men, and joy to the world.

Or at least, we *hope*, maybe they will bring peace and joy to us.

IN DAYS OF OLD

Christmas hasn’t always been the holiday it is today. Before the birth of Jesus, the Romans used to celebrate Saturnalia in mid-December, honoring Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture. When the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity early in the fourth century, he declared that an annual Feast of the Nativity honoring the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on December 25, putting the Christian holiday at the same time as the existing pagan festivities.

WHAT'S THE REASON FOR THE SEASON?

As Christmas developed into a more secular and commercial event, Jesus became a minor part of the celebration of the season, crowded out by department store Santas, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, mistletoe, eggnog, and tinsel. Christmas music starts in early November with non-stop “Rockin’ Around The Christmas Tree” and “All I Want For Christmas Is You”. And soon we’re binge-watching all the movie classics like *Elf* or *It’s A Wonderful Life*.

By the time we start humming “It’s Beginning To Look A Lot Like Christmas”, we find ourselves thinking more about what to get for the kids and how to decorate the cookies than about the birth of a baby 2,000 years ago.

And here’s the thing—every year, along with the Christmas songs and the Christmas movies, come the Christmas emotions. Because of the oversized role the Christmas season plays in our culture and our lives, we easily find ourselves with a heightened range of emotions.

Christmas joys are deeper than other joys. So are Christmas sorrows. And Christmas stresses.

The season that promises hope and peace and joy can often bring very different, very difficult emotions. Those emotions can overwhelm us. We find ourselves wondering why the magic doesn't seem to be working for us this year. We wonder why we're feeling an emptiness instead of peace and joy and hope.

That's what this book is about. Those overwhelming emotions. Where they come from. Why we experience them as deeply as we do. And how we can learn to look past some of the trappings and clutter of the Christmas season, past those Christmas emotions—and maybe, just maybe, there's something deeper at Christmas that can bring the promised joy for which our soul longs.