Dec-2000

Cultural Commentary: The Demographer Who Stole Christmas

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol19/iss2/7

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his Christmas was a dad year, at least for one of the girls. The other daughter was scheduled for mom’s, and the boy was a relatively free agent, though he had some sort of idea that he would like to start his own tradition. Luckily, I had the graduate training in sociology that is required to interpret such complex circumstances. You can, too, but you first have to picture the following.

The various members of the Aught family are planning their Christmases, and the task is made difficult by the fact that they are a bit scattered. I don’t mean that they are scattered in the sense of mental deficiency (though you can be the judge of that later), but in the more physical sense of “all over the place.” Jay and Ellen Aught are in their mid-fifties and have been divorced from each other for ten years. Ellen is remarried and lives in the suburban home in Massachusetts in which they raised their three kids. She got the house as part of her divorce settlement. Jay has been living with his girlfriend (and her two children) in the next town. The Aught’s oldest child, Laura, lives in Maine with her husband and new baby. The middle child, Grace, is newly married and making a ton of money doing something with computers in Chicago. The youngest, Bobby, is living in the basement of his mom’s and stepfather’s home. (After all, the boy is only 28 years old.) He’s trying to get his dot.com band off the ground. Got all this?

When the Aughts were raising their children Christmas was a complicated affair only to the extent that the dinner table wasn’t quite big enough to hold all the food. Ellen’s mom always came from Connecticut, bearing an entire Christmas dinner in fear that Ellen would ruin every dish on her menu. (This was not special Christmas behavior. She always brought a full dinner when she visited.) Jay’s family was sometimes represented by one of his six younger brothers, depending on which one had come east from Iowa to go to college in the Boston area. On occasion there was also an exchange student in the house. Christmas dinner tended to look like a Norman Rockwell painting, assuming Norman had lived in Billerica. There was always a big tree in the living room bay window, and gifts were opened at 8 A.M.

In time, things have changed. This year the various branches of the Aught clan had problems planning their Christmases. (Actually, Bobby didn’t. He told his mom he would go with her and her new husband wherever they found food and a tree, and promised that soon he would be out on his own making his own big Christmas and inviting everyone to “his place.” For the time being, he just wanted a few minutes notice where they were going and permission to bring a date.) But things were Byzantine elsewhere.

Since their parents’ divorce, Laura and Grace had come to realize that it would be fairest and simplest to rotate holiday commitments between their parents. For Grace, the year 2000 was a “dad” Thanksgiving and a “mom” Christmas. Laura, being what the family called “less organized,” always called Grace to find out which parent she was scheduled to see on a particular holiday. This arrangement worked well for a few years. As long as there was a daughter available for each parent the semblance of Christmas-past was maintained. But then things happened (as they say).
The girls got married, their mom remarried and their dad moved in with his girlfriend. Now each household included wildcards, people who had their own agendas for Christmas. Ellen's new husband, Saul, was Jewish. Though he had no interest in Christmas as a religious event, he knew about its importance as a family tradition. After all, for years he had traveled to Manhattan to join his brother's and sister's families to share their Christkah (Chanukah/Christmas) extravaganzas. O.K. He would give that up to celebrate Christmas with Ellen. But Grace's new husband came from a Minnesota clan with a huge commitment to Christmas in all its weight and glory including church, presents, food, football, air travel...the works. This would entail reworking the alternating mom-dad schedule so that it was no longer alternate years, but every third year for each component. Work it out for yourself.

Laura's case was worse. Her husband, Joseph, also had a large family to be blended into the Christmas scheduling, but his parents were also divorced. They would also have to be included into the schedule. So, Laura's Christmas would alternate yearly between her mom, her dad, and Joe's mom and dad. (I'll stop spinning out the complexities in a few sentences, though you should know I could go on indefinitely.) In addition, Laura's new baby, Crouton, had become the center of the universe, and all bets were off in the desire of the grandparents to spend important occasions in the glow of his frequently naked personhood. By last count, Crouton had at least five people that he called grandma, including Saul and Saul's mother. (Saul's mother, dissatisfied with the frequency with which her own grandchildren called her, had glowing hopes for Crouton's potential as a more responsible adult, and sort of gloomed onto him in a step-great-grandmotherly way.)

I will not attempt to explain the outcome of all the delicate negotiations. Suffice it to say that there were more than a few carefully split schedules, as in "We'll open presents at dad's then fly to your place for dinner by evening." There were also quite a few bruised feelings. There was, however, no Norman Rockwell painting in the bunch.

Where had Christmas gone? To a sociologist like myself, Christmas is not just a religious holiday and an economic tidal wave of marketing and expenditure. It is also an important focus for the expression of belonging in society. At Christmas time families, religious groups and entire communities come together in ways that reaffirm what they mean to one another. So when Christmases change in a society, we begin to suspect that the change is a marker for change in the society. In the case of the Aughts' Christmas, it was the demographer who plays the part of the Grinch. To understand this, consider some of the data about the family in America since World War II. One way to calculate the divorce rate is the compare the number of marriages in a given year with the number of divorces. In 1950 about 1.67 million Americans got married. In that same year 385 thousand Americans got divorced. This translates into a "divorce rate" of 23 percent. (385 divided by 1,670) By 1970 the divorce rate had climbed to 33 percent, and by 1980 we had reached a divorce rate of 50%, the level at which the rate has remained since. (For two decades about 2.4 million Americans get married each year and about 1.2 million Americans get divorced.) This alone would make for lots of families who can't figure out where to serve Christmas dinner. But there's more. Looking at data for women who divorced since 1970, approximately 70 percent remarried within ten years of their divorces. (Remember to add to the Christmess planning their new husbands and the children from his first marriage.) Then, of the 70 percent of divorced women who remarried, 60% of them are re-divorced. (I'm not making this up. All this data is from the U.S. bureau of the Census. However, they have no Christmas dinner data I could find.)

Actually, the Norman Rockwell Christmas of my youth (right after World War II), was always something of a distortion of the American reality since at that time only 40% of American families consisted of what we normally call a "traditional nuclear family" (married couples with children, and no one else in the household). Since the 1950's the percent of American families fitting this description has fallen to nearly 20%. In fact, the trend is toward the "blended family", in which at least one member of the adult couple is a stepparent. Current estimates predict that within a decade between a third and a half of today's young people will become stepsons and daughters.

In a healthy society the practices and institutions change to reflect the changing needs of its members. Society adapts, though social change makes for discomfort. While we mourn the loss of treasured traditions of our youth, we still need to think of how to save the old and adapt it to our new world. The demographer may not have actually stolen Christmas, but it certainly looks different with all those weirdos around the table. ("Get away from my grandson with that idiotic parsnip pudding, whoever you are.")

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