

A letter (from Santa)

The bells on the leather straps wrapped around my wrists are the first sound children hear as they approach the entrance of the store. They look up and their eyes open wide. They run toward me with their arms extended. The smaller they are, the faster they run and the bigger the smile on their faces – and the longer the embrace they share with Santa Claus.

I'm here as a seasonal character, a greeter and a symbol of Christmas. And maybe, as I soon realize, as a symbol of what we need more of. My only tools are a traditional red suit, a full natural white beard, a satchel full of candy canes and whatever experience I've gained as a parent.

Kids hold on to me like I'm a long-lost loved one. Maybe I am. I tell each child enthusiastically how glad I am to see them again, since it's been *almost a year* since

last Christmas. Sometimes I say, “Wow! – when I saw you last year you were only *this big* (holding my hand close to ground) and now (raising my arm up about eight inches), you are *this smart!*” Each kid is on the “nice” list, no matter what anyone says.

A young man with Down Syndrome walks up to me sideways, looking furtively in my direction. He wants a big hug and claps his hands in glee when we got close and he gets his big hug.



A female of undetermined age - maybe 25 - who has a developmental disability and a smile a mile wide watches me from a distance while her bedraggled mother stands by the shopping cart talking to a friend.

“Can we take a photo together?” I

ask the girl. She beams. I hold her hand as we walk over to the chair in Santa’s Workshop. I look her square in the eye and tell her what a pretty smile she has, then we turn so the mother can take our picture together.

A young woman brings forward her elderly grandmother in her wheelchair for a hug and a few words.

A college-age guy hobbles past me on a single crutch, an inconvenience for him. I ask him, “Wouldn’t you rather have a cane?” And then I give him a candy cane.

During the children’s visits, I hear lots of exclamations. “I saw you on the train / at the mall / in the parade / at the Rockettes show,” or “I will see you next week on the train with the elves!” or “You were on the fire truck last year!” I’m everywhere – just wherever each kid happens to be at the time.

One thin young boy stands in front of me, then leans forward and says he wants to tell me something. He whispers in my ear, “Give mommy a day off. She works so hard every day and she needs a rest.”

When I asked what he wanted for Christmas, one six-year-old boy looked me straight in the eye and said, “World peace.” I tell him what a beautiful wish that is and thank him for the request.

The letters to Santa can reveal a lot. One *ninito* wrote that he wanted “*ropa para mama, ropa para papa,*” and *ropa* for himself and his sister. *Ropa* is the Spanish word for clothing.

First Christmas babies are the best: they don’t stress, they’re curious and just look at me as I smile at them, they have the biggest eyes, and the parents are thrilled beyond words. It’s beautiful. Parents trust me with these special packages, and I love to hold the smallest kids for their first Christmas.

An elderly couple walks in together and we make eye contact; the man signals that he wants to say something. He asks, “How long have you been doing this?” I pause for a moment as if I’m thinking about the answer, and reply, “Oh, since about the fourth century . . .”

Some people go out of their way to avoid making eye contact. Sometimes they say, “We don’t celebrate Christmas. We’re Jewish.” I respond, “Well, this is a season for lights for everyone who has a holiday this time

of year. It's gets dark earlier, and colder, and all the holiday lights make us feel better.”

So many people – especially women, but also men – just want a hug from Santa. There's something about the stress of daily life, or what's in the news, the pressure of the season, or the memory of some happier Christmas past, that makes people want an embrace and some reassurance from Santa Claus. This quick gesture seems to revive them and makes them smile. This surprises me -- and comforts them. They confide their most personal and painful stories in me.

It has occurred to me that the figure of Santa Claus may be one of the last trusted institutions in society. As people look around at political figures, religious leaders, urban policemen, business executives, they ask themselves, “Who can we believe? Who do we trust?” If Santa is the last trusted institution, it's a special responsibility to uphold this and to play the part well.

Santa gets an eyeful and an earful. He lends an ear and offers a nice word. He hopes that he gives comfort and hope to the people who need it most.

That's the best part of being Santa.

We need a little Christmas every day.

William G. Armstrong Jr.

Westport