

STAR TREK
THE NEXT GENERATION

DATA'S FIRST CHRISTMAS

RON STEIN

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"Geordie, can you explain the concept of "Christmas Spirit" to me?"

Geordie LaForge looked up from his snack, and smiled at the innocent, quizzical look on the face of his android friend Data. "*Here we go again!*" he thought. The two of them were sitting in their favorite booth in Ten-Forward, the crew lounge of the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. The two met like this just after their watch ended nearly every day. Geordie would grab a quick snack, and then they'd spend time chatting with friends, or just people watching. Ten-Forward was an ideal spot for this, with its near constant hum of activity. It was the cultural heart of the ship. For Geordie, people watching served the same purpose that it had for young men since time began. For Data, it was an education.

"Why do you ask, Data? I mean, what brought this up?"

"It is something I have noticed in the past, and I am observing it again here on board the *Enterprise*: as the Christmas anniversary approaches, beings of many races and faiths become kinder toward one another, and they seem happier. This is called "The Christmas Spirit". I do not understand."

Geordie wondered briefly how an android managed to look perplexed, then asked "Data, how much do you know about Christmas?" Knowing Data's proclivity for detail, he quickly added "Just a summary, please. I've already read the Bible."

"Of course, I too have read the Bible, as well as many other works associated with Christianity and the legend of Christ. I have also read a broad selection of fictional Christmas stories from many lands and planets with Christmas traditions. I have viewed several video presentations of Christmas lore, and read many poems, hymns, and carols. However, even after my studies, I have failed to grasp the Christmas spirit."

"Data, I'm not sure I can explain. Christmas spirit is something you kinda have to experience. It's a lot of things: kindness toward others, a feeling of kinship with other creatures, a positive outlook, happy anticipation..." Geordie hesitated, and said "It's like love, it can't be understood just by having it explained to you." Geordie paused again, recognizing the troubled look on his friend's face.

A casual observer would not have noticed a change of expression at all, but then, Geordie wasn't just a casual observer. Even if he hadn't been Data's closest friend, his electronically enhanced eyesight would have spotted the subtle change in the servo mechanisms that controlled Data's facial apparatus. "Look, Data, don't feel bad. We all run up against things like this. Take me for instance. When I look at a rainbow, all I see are readouts of prismaticly scattered light. It's interesting, but it's sure not beautiful. I just can't understand the fuss most people make when they see a rainbow. Maybe for you, Christmas spirit is the same sorta thing."

"I have considered that." said Data, "It is conceivable that this may be a subtlety which my programming cannot comprehend. Still, I sense that I have merely missed some key point."

"Well don't give up yet, Data. Say, have you spoken to Counselor Troi? If anyone can help you with this, she can. That lady has quite a knack for making sense out of this kind of stuff." Geordie found

himself becoming a little concerned; his mechanical friend was easily depressed, a decidedly emotional response from someone who wasn't sure if he was capable of emotion.

"Perhaps you are right, Geordie. I will call her."

Deanna Troi had a small office adjacent to her cabin. It was simply decorated with a fleet issue desk and chair, a bookshelf lining one wall, and a comfortable old loveseat. A lush trident plant from Canopus 3 rose from behind the loveseat, and completed the sparse decor.

Troi sat at the desk, considering her next visitor. She usually met crewmembers for consultation in more casual surroundings, to help put them at ease. In Data's case, one threw away such standard practice. There was no "rule of thumb" to guide her when dealing with Data's one of a kind positronic personality. "*Maybe Data would feel more at ease in one of the engineering repair bays, surrounded by other machinery*", she mused.

She found Data a unique problem in another important way as well. Throughout her career as a psychologist, she had been helped enormously by her Betazoid empathic abilities. These abilities, coupled with a sharp, incisive mind and a tender heart, had made her a natural counselor.

With Data, things were more difficult. His emotional resonance was almost non-existent. Almost, but not quite. Occasionally, faintly, she would sense a wisp of . . . something . . . from Data. It was always ethereal, fleeting; like a hint of salt air thirty kilometers from the sea. The touch was so light, she was never sure it was there. At these times she realized how much she relied on her empathic talents to perform her job. In trying to counsel Data, she felt like a surgeon forced to operate with one hand.

At precisely the scheduled time, her office door annunciator chimed. "Come in, Data," she called. As he entered, she motioned him toward the loveseat, and asked pleasantly "And what can I do for you?"

Again different from humans, and so adding to Troi's uneasiness, Data went straight to the point. "Counselor, I am having difficulty with certain aspects of the Christmas season. I have studied the relevant texts and literature associated with the Terran Christmas tradition, and I believe I understood them. My problem is with the concept of Christmas spirit, and the impact it seems to have on the crew of the *Enterprise*. I have noticed that beings throughout the ship, regardless of race or religious background, are displaying happier and kinder behavior. There is a subtlety here that I cannot grasp. I would like to understand."

"I see" she said, stalling. She thought for a moment, then asked "What is it that troubles you about this, Data? Is it the concept of Christmas spirit itself, or are you finding that you don't share the spirit, and that is troubling you?"

Data's pause was a classic for him: his head turned a couple of degrees from Troi, and tilted just a bit. His brow wrinkled as he considered her questions. He turned back to her. "Counselor, I would say that it is the latter: I am troubled that I don't find the Christmas spirit within me." He seemed surprised, as if the notion had been a revelation.

"*Lucky guess!*" thought Troi, with relief. At least she'd identified the problem.

"Okay, let's talk about that. Why do you find this troubling?"

Again Data paused. This was clearly a new area of self-exploration for him. "As you know, I aspire to be as close to human as possible. I want to `fit in', I believe is the expression. To fail to share in something which seems so universal, and so desirable, as the Christmas spirit would be evidence of failure. It causes me to doubt my capacity for `humanness'."

Troi stood up, her eyes downcast in thought, and slowly walked about the office. She stopped near a display shelf, and absentmindedly picked up a small Santa Claus figurine. It was a treasured gift from her father when she was nine, and was her earliest clear memory of Christmas. She stared at it vacantly.

Her eyes returned to focus, but she continued to stare at the figurine. She spoke, not bothering to turn toward Data. "First Data, I want you to understand that Christmas spirit is not something automatically felt by all humans, or all Christians either. In fact, most people will find themselves without it at sometime, and this can be due to a wide variety of circumstances." She paused again, and said slowly, to herself more than to him "But I don't think that will prove to be a satisfying answer for you."

Data sat patiently, as the Counselor was clearly deep in thought. She slowly turned toward him, and asked, almost tentatively, "Data, how long ago were you found by Starfleet?"

"I was discovered eleven years, 4 months, and twelve days ago by a Starfleet rescue team."

"And how have you spent your time since? Just a general review, please, not a detailed one."

"I spent approximately 2.8 years being evaluated in the Starfleet Analytical Laboratories, 4.1 years at Starfleet Academy, and the remaining 4.5 years have been on active duty as a Starfleet officer." He paused briefly, then asked "Counselor, is this pertinent to our discussion?"

"It could be. You see, what we commonly perceive as the `Christmas spirit' is very often a reflection of an individual's collected memories of Christmas. As a person grows, he accumulates fond memories of Christmas. These memories serve as reminders, and help promote a pleasant disposition, which is evoked more and more as each succeeding Christmas approaches. In short, they are happy now, because they were happy then."

"Of course," she continued, "this is a very simplistic definition. There are many other reasons why people may appear happier at this time of year. For some people, the Christmas season is a time to rejoice in the life of Jesus Christ, either as a heavenly Savior, or merely a gifted philosopher. For others, the reason may be a holiday entirely separate from Christian tradition; many faiths seem to have celebrations which happen to coincide with Christmas."

Data considered this momentarily, then said "I see. Then you are suggesting that my failure to have `Christmas spirit' is not indicative of a dysfunction, but rather a shortage of happy experiences with which to trigger the reaction." He said it as a statement, rather than a question.

"It's a possibility. Why don't you give it some thought? Then you can decide what, if anything, you need to do about it."

"Thank you, Counselor." Data said, rising. "You have been most helpful. I will consider what you have suggested." Then he left.

Troi stared at him as he walked away, wondering if her intuitive interpretation of the problem would be of any help to Data. And if it was helpful, she wondered, what would he do about it?

Data went back to his quarters to consider Troi's suggestion. He put on his Sherlock Holmes hat, sat in his overstuffed chair, and, fiddling with his pipe, he began to think. Perhaps he could share this human experience of Christmas spirit after all! Maybe all he needed was an accumulation of pleasurable memories.

Data had long suspected that his creator had provided a capacity for him to feel, or at least simulate, human emotions. There were several clues: he had functional tear ducts, a portion of his neural network had no discernable function, and perhaps most intriguing, there were two unusual feedback circuits which were linked to this unused neural area. One of these reduced his available power by up to 20% when stimulated. It made him "ache" all over when activated. It had first activated spontaneously the day Tasha Yar was killed.

The remaining circuit boosted his power by as much as 10%, which seemed to give him a mild 'high'. This circuit had only been activated in laboratory tests.

Data began a systematic review of his Christmas research to locate stories which were considered pleasant or happy. He then sorted this information, isolating the activities which seemed to produce happiness at Christmas. He screened religious or philosophical means from the sort, since he was neither religious or philosophical. He found that the remaining sources of happiness could be roughly grouped into two categories: "Giving" and "Getting".

The "Getting" entries all required the un-coerced spontaneous cooperation of at least one additional person. Since this was to be a personal experiment, the 'Getting' entries were eliminated. To experience pleasure at Christmas, Data would have to try "Giving".

The center of the distribution of successful "Giving" entries, out to about three sigma, seemed to be associated with gifts of special personal significance to the receiver. Such gifts were uniquely adapted to the receivers wants or needs. To be successful would require great subtlety in Data; he would need to be especially sensitive and discerning. This was going to take some thought.

He began to plan. There were but 3.2 days until Christmas.

The next morning, Data approached Commander Riker, First Officer of the *Enterprise*. "Sir," he said, "may I make a suggestion? There are just over two days until Christmas. Might we not replace the holographic Christmas tree in the ballroom with a real tree for this years festivities?"

Will Riker looked at Data, an amused smile on his face. "Well, that certainly sounds like a grand idea, Mr. Data, but there are no Federation planets within two days of here. How do you propose to procure a real tree in two days without a Federation planet as a source?"

"Sir, while it is true that there are no planets nearby which are Federation members, the planet Keeg-Xuled 4 is just over four hours from our present position. It supports a human culture placed there by the Preservers. We should be able to remove a single tree from the planet without violating the Prime Directive."

The 'Preservers' was the name given to an undiscovered race which had 'seeded' this area of the galaxy with populations of various primitive Human, Klingon, and Vulcan peoples. The Federation had charted over twenty such planets, all at different stages of development. In each case, the seeded planet included a

full complement of flora and fauna as found on the home planet. Keeg-Xuled 4 would certainly have pine trees.

Obviously pleased, Riker said "Excellent Mr. Data! To quote the Captain, 'Make it so!'"

At Keeg-Xuled, locating a source for Christmas trees was a simple task. The ship's scanners quickly found a snow-covered mountain valley with a large population of various pine tree species. The nearest human inhabitants were over fifty kilometers away. Captain Picard even authorized a two hour shore leave for all ship's personnel, 'for purposes of tobogganing and snow-ball fights'. Data even arranged a simple lottery for the ship's children, with the winner being given the privilege of selecting the ship's official Christmas tree.

Those who chose to take shore leave (about 2/3rds of the ship's company) had a wonderful time. There were snowmen built, toboggan races, sled runs, snowball fights, snow angels were made. Some went skiing, others skated on a nearby lake, still others managed to go ice fishing.

And Data was in the middle of it all. He mastered the art of snowball, and made a snowdroid. He tried his luck at downhill skiing, but fared better on a replica Flexible Flyer. He was just about to strap on ice skates and have a go at the lake, when the call to return to the *Enterprise* came. There was, after all, a schedule to keep.

His final chore before leaving was to supervise the transport of a huge Noble Fir up to the *Enterprise* ballroom.

Late at night on Christmas eve, when all of the bridge crew were huddled all snug in their beds, a twenty third century Santa Claus strode silently into the transporter room...

On Christmas morning, Deanna Troi woke feeling especially happy. She had a date for breakfast with Will Riker, a tradition the two had enjoyed for as long as they had known one another. She also knew that Will would have a gift for her, another happy tradition to look forward to.

She crawled out of bed and set about her morning routine. After some light exercise, she enjoyed a leisurely half hour of bathing, then dressed in a comfortable, festive red jumpsuit. She tied it at the waist with a green sash, which formed a bow above her right hip, making her look like a Christmas package. "*Quite a present for Mr. Riker*" she thought, giggling.

She went to her nightstand and got out the gift she had selected for Will; a scale model of the solar wind racing vessel he had piloted during his academy days. She had often seen him intently watching such ships when the *Enterprise* made ports of call at places civilized enough to have them. Troi had been pleased when Data offered to produce the finely detailed craft for her.

As she left her boudoir and went through the sitting room toward the hallway exit, she saw a delicately wrapped package on the entry table by the door. The wrapping was a simple pink paper with a cream colored ribbon and a flowered bow. The tag on it read "From Santa Claus". Her eyes twinkling with delight, she sat down and opened it.

Inside was a beautiful wooden jewelry box. It was made of a light colored, burl wood of fine grain and finish. It was trimmed in a darker brown wood, and the top had inlaid flowers of yet another wood. The

flowers were stained in soft shades of pink, yellow, and orange. When she raised the lid, a clockwork chime began to spin. It softly played a sentimental old love song. *It's Rachmaninoff! Paganini's Theme!*

Beneath the lid were a half dozen sinful looking chocolates. A note which lay across them proclaimed. "Caution: These candies are made from 100% natural ingredients using techniques developed on old Earth. As such, they have little or no nutritional value. Enjoy them in moderation."

"Chocolates! Real Chocolates!" She smiled and said simply "Will Riker".

"Deanna, I swear they aren't from me!" Riker said, a little embarrassed. "I wish I'd thought of this, but really, I didn't!"

"But Will, if you didn't send them, who did?"

He shrugged, perplexed, and said "Santa Claus, I guess."

Geordie opened the envelope. Inside was a traditional old Christmas card which proclaimed in bold letters "MERRY CHRISTMAS !". It was signed simply "Santa Claus". Along with the card was a scrap of bright paper, the words "Holodeck 3, voice coded program SPECTRA" neatly penned on it.

"What the heck is this?" Geordie muttered. "*Okay, I'll bite*", he thought. He dressed quickly and took the turbolift to Holodeck 3, just down the hall from Engineering. He stepped up to the door and said "Computer... load program SPECTRA, then open."

In a moment the doors hissed open. Geordie looked in on an alpine meadow during what appeared to be late spring. The scent of wildflowers was heavy in the air, and something small skittered away in the grass before him. He saw an old fashioned umbrella leaning against a tree just inside. As he stepped through the door, he heard a distant rumble of thunder, and gentle raindrops began to fall on him.

Geordie picked up the umbrella, and began to walk across the damp meadow. As he walked, he saw clouds dropping sheets of rain on the far off mountains, and watched a sea of grass wavering in the breeze. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the rain stopped around him. The breeze blew warmer, as the clouds overhead began to break up and dissipate.

"*Someone went to a lot of trouble to get me wet*" he thought. Just then, sunlight burst warmly across the meadow before him, while the clouds surrounding the distant peaks grew darker and lashed the mountains with bolts of lightning. Geordie gasped, as a multicolored, translucent display of shimmering light arced across the sky. The lights were distinct, each with its own hue, but they blended strangely where they intersected. Try as he might, he couldn't focus on the lines where they met. He couldn't resolve the edges, he couldn't even get a readout of its distance. "It's a rainbow!" he whispered, "It's beautiful! Who...". Then he knew: "Data." he said simply. He stayed for a long while, as the storm broke over the far off mountains, and the rainbow slowly faded.

The ballroom had been fitted out as a huge living room to receive the "family" which was the crew of the Enterprise. In the center was the huge Christmas tree which had been cut on Keeg-Xuled 4, now extravagantly decorated. It glowed with thousands of lights, and little animated creatures played out

scenes on its branches. On top was a life-sized Santa Claus, who seemed to be throwing magical handfuls of snow into the air around him. The snowflakes glowed and twirled and sparkled, but they never seemed to reach the floor. A light scent of natural pine flavored the air. People strolled about in small groups, children ran and played, and in one corner a piano was surrounded by an impromptu choir softly singing Christmas carols.

Near one wall, most of the bridge crew were clustered, chatting together, tinkering and teasing with gifts they'd received. Captain Picard and Transporter Chief O'Brien were happily occupied, planning final assembly of a model ship in a bottle which the Captain had mysteriously received. The ship was a replica of the first USS Enterprise, a captured British twelve gun sloop used by the Americans during their war of Independence.

Lieutenant Worf was amused by a hand held holographic projector which pitted carnivores from various planets against one another in mortal combat. A computer program inside the machine extrapolated probable attacks, defenses, and victories, and gorily displayed the results. His roars of delight periodically startled the other celebrants in the room, as one conflict after another came to its imaginary end. The projector itself was a replica of one currently popular with pre-school children in the Klingon Empire. Of course, Worf didn't know about that.

Beverly Crusher moved from person to person, showing a video cube to anyone who would look. Each time the cube was turned, it displayed a different scene of her son Wesley as he was growing up. Most of the scene's made Wes cringe, and he used it as an excuse to find a quiet corner for himself. Wesley was also fascinated by a surprise gift from "Santa": a series of research papers published by his father during his years at Starfleet Academy, as well as some recently declassified personal log entries his father had made aboard the "Stargazer" during the final months of his life. Wes sat quietly, reviewing these new treasures, entranced.

Deanna Troi and Will Riker were off to the side sharing a private moment. Will was trying his best to talk Deanna out of one of her chocolates; she was enjoying having his undivided attention. They played at negotiating the surrender of a mushroom shaped white chocolate bon-bon.

Captain Picard looked up and announced "Ladies and Gentleman, I believe we're about to learn who our mystery Santa Claus is." They all turned to the direction Picard was looking, and saw Lieutenant Commander Data and Geordie LaForge approaching.

"It was really a very interesting experiment, Geordie." Data was saying. He wore a Santa Claus cap and a silly looking white beard, which clashed badly with his trim Starfleet uniform. "I began by researching your visor and its operation, then accessed Dr. Crushers medical library for information on nerve impulses. From that I determined what signal was necessary to cause your brain to `see' a rainbow. From there it was a simple matter to program the holodeck for a display which would stimulate your visor to send the proper signal to your brain." He paused, and said almost sadly "But Geordie, unfortunately, only your visor will interpret the display as a rainbow. For anyone else, the display is not in the range of visible light."

"So I've got my own private rainbow! Thanks Data!" The two of them looked at the smiling faces of the friends they were approaching. Geordie hesitated, then added softly "And Data, ...Merry Christmas!"

EPILOG

Personal Log

Lieutenant Commander Data

USS Enterprise

Stardate 52936.4

"It is now late on Christmas Day. I have spent the last several days exploring various aspects of Christmas celebrations, seeking the Christmas spirit, to see if it is a response I am capable of. At the suggestion of Ship's Counselor Troi, I involved myself in as many Christmas related experiences as possible, to attempt to accumulate pleasant memories. Counselor Troi's theory is that Christmas spirit is predicated on a series of happy memories associated with Christmas. She suggests that I may not have had a sufficient number of these for Christmas spirit to propagate itself spontaneously within me.

Results are inconclusive at this time. I participated in as many classic Christmas scenarios as time allowed, however, pleasure in such events is a difficult thing for me to measure, and perhaps that is a piece of this puzzle yet to be addressed.

I am able to make the following observations:

One: Christmas spirit is not a simple or automatic phenomena. I believe that humans who experience it must participate in its development just as I have attempted to do. Those who want to have Christmas spirit will have it. I believe that in most cases this is done at a sub-conscious level.

Two: There is an important subset to the Christmas experience which I think of as 'Giving'. That subset is 'Sharing'. I believe that without the 'Sharing' of joy in the 'Giving' mode, there is no positive experience to record. To simply Give is probably not enough to trigger a positive memory reflex.

Three: While this conclusion is extremely preliminary, there may be some validity to Counselor Troi's theory. It will take some analysis to confirm, but I believe I experienced a .1% power surge while accepting thanks from my friends in the ballroom. Perhaps it is a start.

I find that the lines from a centuries old Christmas carol keep surfacing in my mind:

And so I'm offering this simple phrase

To kids from one to ninety two;

Although it's been said, many times, many ways,

MERRY CHRISTMAS to you."