

Editor's notes:

With all the giving that you're doing this season, are you providing your kids with financial common sense? With credit card offers flowing in to young people as they go off to college or set off for that first job, parents need to help their children make good financial decisions while they're still at home.

According to a survey by Visa with parents who have children under age 18:

- 85% say they talk to their children regularly about money management;
- 34% talk to their kids daily on the subject;
- 31% talk to them once a week;
- 14% speak about once a month;
- 6% report that they talk about money issues with their children only a few times a year. Certainly, with today's economy, there would be no shortage of examples to demonstrate how not to manage your money. Surprisingly, sixteen percent of the respondents, however, admit they never talk to their kids about the wise use of their funds.

Here are some special dates to consider this month:

Saint Nicholas Day, December 6 -- Saint Nicholas is one of the most venerated saints of both Eastern and Western Christian churches. Little is known of his life except that he was Bishop of Myra (in what is today Turkey) in the 4th century, and from early times he has been especially noted for his charity. "Santa Claus" and his presentation of gifts at Christmas are believed to have derived from the acts of Saint Nicholas.

Hanukkah, December 21 -- Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights, commemorates the re-dedication of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in 165 B.C.

First day of Winter, December 21 -- The ancient Celts believed that on the winter solstice, the sun stood still for 12 days. To banish evil spirits and to lure the sun to return, they lit a yule log on the first day of winter and burned it for 12 hours. The winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, marks the astronomical start of winter.

New Year's Eve, December 31 -- Here's a toast to the New Year:

*Here's to the bright new year;
And a fond farewell to the old;
Here's to the things that are yet to be;
And to the memories that we hold.*

Countdown to 2009

This year is about to come to a close. New Year's celebrations take many forms across the globe. Here are a few still practised by some in the countries listed:

Brazil

Brazilians start the year by honouring the god of the sea. On New Year's Eve, up to a million people in Rio de Janeiro visit the beach at night -- dressed in white, lighting candles, and dancing. At midnight, fireworks dramatically signal the new year.

Denmark

Throwing dishes may be a sign of domestic anger in Canada, but it means good things to the Danish at New Year's. People save their broken or discarded dishes all year and throw them on their friends' doorsteps. Many broken dishes are an indication that you have many friends.

Japan

Japanese Buddhists visit their temples on New Year's Eve and ring the temple bells 108 times to free people from the 108 earthly desires. They return on New Year's Day to pray for prosperity and goodness.

Spain

The Spanish make special use of the very last seconds of the old year. They gather around a chiming clock, and at each stroke of midnight, each person has to eat a grape, considered a food of good fortune. Each grape represents one month of the year. So if, for instance, the fifth grape is sour, May could be a difficult month to get through. All the grapes should be eaten by the last stroke of the clock.



Santa Claus has the right idea: visit people once a year.

-- Victor Borge

Merry Christmas!

The Twelve Days of Christmas

The 12 days of Christmas refer to the period from Christmas Day, December 25, which commemorates Christ's birth, to January 6, the date of the Epiphany, when Christ was revealed as Messiah to the Gentiles.

According to the Catholic Information Network, the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas" dates back to the 16th century when Catholics in England were prohibited by law from the practice of their religion. The allegorical song was written as a memory aid to help young Catholics learn the tenets of their faith. The refrain "my true love gave to me" refers to God as the true love and "me" signifies every baptized person. Christ is represented as the partridge in the pear tree in memory of his sadness over the fate of Jerusalem: "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often would I have sheltered thee under my wings, as a hen does her chicks, but thou wouldst not have it so."

The other symbols mean the following:

- 2 turtle doves -- the Old and New Testaments
- 3 French hens -- the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity
- 4 calling birds -- the four Gospels
- 5 golden rings -- the first five books of the Old Testament
- 6 geese a-laying -- the six days of creation
- 7 swans a-swimming -- the seven Sacraments
- 8 maids a-milking -- the eight Beatitudes
- 9 ladies dancing -- the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit
- 10 lords a-leaping -- the 10 Commandments
- 11 pipers piping -- the 11 faithful Apostles
- 12 drummers drumming -- the 12 points in the Apostle's Creed

The Gifts of the Magi

According to the Bible, the first Christmas gifts were made to the Christ child from the three wise men who brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The form of the magi's gold -- coins or otherwise -- or what happened to it, is never mentioned in the New Testament.

The other two gifts -- frankincense and myrrh, yellow and brown resins -- were nearly as valuable as gold at the time. The fragrant saps had medicinal value -- myrrh for treating infections and as a pain killer, and frankincense as a salve for cuts and to stem bleeding. They were also burned as incense or ground into a powder and mixed in holy anointing oil.

All three gifts were said to symbolize Christ's priestly office: gold representing the spirit; frankincense, the body; and myrrh, the soul.

There is nothing sadder in this world than to awake Christmas morning and not be a child.

-- Erma Bombeck

The Tradition of the Ball Drop on New Year's Eve

Millions of people around the world watch on TV as the ball drops in Times Square in New York City on New Year's Eve. This Big Apple tradition can trace its origins back to the 1800s, when sailors had no way to check the accuracy of their ships' clocks, though knowing the correct time was essential for navigating. In 1818, a captain with the Royal Naval Academy suggested that a ball be dropped at 1 p.m. from a high pole each day so nearby ships could note the local time, a practice that many port towns around the world adopted. In 1904, the owners of One Times Square began holding roof-top celebrations on New Year's Eve. The ball drop to mark the stroke of midnight was added three years later.

A Personal Message from Sieg Pedde

Christmas has always been a special time for me. My earliest Christmas memories are not about 'stuff' -- toys and clothes and gadgets -- but are instead about family. In my parents' home, at Christmas we would talk, sing, and eat wonderful home-cooked meals. I miss those days. I miss my parents. Now, I should be the one who is carrying on the traditions I so enjoyed as a child.

I'm sometimes afraid that I am not doing a very good job. Through the decades since my childhood, I was always busy and have sometimes been neglectful of maintaining relationships with friends and any other than immediate family. I have a son, now age 16, and I am afraid that he might not have the fond memories I have of Christmas when he reaches my ripe old age. Sure, my wife and I do our best not to fall into the trap of over-commercializing Christmas but I still feel that we are fighting a losing battle.

Why do I feel that way? I think we all become jaded to some extent. I think that being relentlessly bombarded by the insanity of human strife and hatred worldwide is a factor. I think that the imputed importance of the size and number and value of Christmas gifts is a factor. I think the competition for our attention from hundreds of television channels, numerous video games, and God knows what else is a factor.

How do you feel, dear reader, about all of this? How are your Christmases today, compared to those of your youth? Do you think, as I do, that we need to get back to basics somehow and to learn how to interact with each other both individually and in society at large? Agree, or disagree, if you have any thoughts on this topic, please write me at Helix or send an email to spedde@helixcourier.com. I am curious as to whether I am simply out of touch with reality or if others are, like me, nostalgic for simpler times and values.

I am going to try extra hard, this Christmas, to make it as much like the Christmases I remember from my youth. I hope that all of you, friends of Helix Courier Limited, have a very special Christmas season and that you have all of the warmth and love, from those closest to you, that you deserve.

Merry Christmas!

-- Sieg Pedde, President