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“Should we tell children there is no Santa Claus?”

Synopsis

The Santa Claus myth is a myth, but it is a harmless one. Kids need a Santa Claus. It might help them. There are many other forms of lying to kids that are harmful. And remember, sometimes the truth is harmful. It depends on the context. Finally, children don’t graduate from mythical thinking to clear and rational belief systems, they cling to fantasy-based ways of experiencing their lives. Therefore, adults also cling to the fantasies and myths of their own lives, and no amount of truth and realism will change this very much. Sometimes a good thing, sometimes not.
Of course, if we were to be totally straight with kids, we would tell them Santa Claus is a myth. And they would know more, correct? They wouldn’t have a distorted picture of Christmas. But is it better to be totally straight with kids in this way? Is it appropriate to their developmental abilities, which are marked by enchantment and magical thinking? After all, we don’t take the position that we should always be straight and truthful in other situations. We don’t encourage parents to list the failings of siblings when speaking to a child. Is the Santa Claus situation a special situation?

I read recently, in the New York Times, that a surprising number of oncologists provide dying patients with a more hopeful prognosis than is realistic. I’m sure it is hard not to give cancer patients hope, and I personally shudder to think of a having a job where you have to give your patients awful news even when it is realistic. But the article went on to talk about how patients, laden with a rosy picture, would then opt for more treatment, often reducing the quality time they could spend with their families, and now burdened by more procedures that did little good. This type of Santa Claus lie seems like it can cause a downward spiral of harm. First, the patient trusts a doctor, who un-trustfully presents an overly optimistic picture, which then leads to more treatment misery. Then the patient cannot end life with acceptance, time with family, and palliative care.

So, in comparison, I’m going to take the position, backed by research psychologists, that it is not harmful to perpetuate the myth of Santa Claus. So go ahead and do it if you want. Lying to your kids about this is OK. In fact, not lying or at least shading the truth with young children can represent “brutal honesty”, emphasis on the brutal. Kids, especially younger than 7 or 8, need to understand the world in a format that is very different from the understanding adults can achieve.

Everyone would probably agree that there are far more serious lies you can tell your children that are harmful. Take the lie involved in telling your kid that they can be anything they want to be, because of their natural gifts. This may create a sense of narcissism that will be cruelly punctured later in life. Why tell your kid that a family member is not dying when they are, or to tell a kid that they will never have to lose their parents to death, which they likely will. When we avoid avoid a discussion of the reality of death, we forget that children can generally handle this topic if it is presented in a format they can understand.

Personally, I perpetuated the Santa Claus myth with my kids because my parents had done this to me, and I was disabused by an older sibling. Kids feel that when they are demystified, they are let in on this secret that makes them more of an adult in some way. The myth is found broadly in our culture, and the big kids graduate to sharing a reality with adults that marks them as big kids, not little kids. Children, especially before the age of 7, think about the world in terms of symbols that are appropriate for their age, so the presence of a fat, jolly man who knows who has been naughty and nice appeals to them. In this way, Santa Claus is like the Christian God, omniscient and able to judge us as pure or guilty. Think of him as a parent who never punishes and makes every gift a token of what a nice kid you
are. And you can even be one of his reindeer, shoved aside from the reindeer games, until your bright red nose anoints you as the most special reindeer.

Anyone could have prepared the remarks I’ve presented thus far. But you guys wondered what a psychologist would say, so here goes nothing. First, as we develop a “realistic” and fact-based reality as adults, we do not leave behind the magical thinking of our childhoods. Second, children can’t understand the realistic picture of the world that skeptics hold to. Third, there are uses for fantasy that are important to appreciate, so even if our vestiges of childhood thinking remain, they can be helpful to us, or at least to our therapists.

In my own work as a therapist, a psychoanalyst at that, patients generally form an image of me that meets their emotional need to make me who they need me to be, and who I am usually not. But by re-kindling early ties to a parent (usually), and experiencing the therapist according to these early patterns, patients are said to form a transference relationship. Then, they can work from the present to the past and understand childhood memories and patterns of relationship they are likely to be unconscious of. And transference isn’t always a lot of fun. Think about working with a person who can’t feel safe in your office and constantly finds reasons why you are untrustworthy. A typical therapist would believe that are testing you, to see how much hostility you can absorb in the relationship, to see if you’re really safe when you don’t retaliate, so that they can later share and reveal humiliating or traumatizing experiences. This is hard work, and expensive because the resolution of transference doesn’t happen in the 20 or fewer sessions that are usually needed to alleviate most symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Ten years ago, I worked with a patient who spent a lot of time talking about how he could kick anyone’s ass if he really needed to. He wondered if I could kick anyone’s ass, and if I could, perhaps we could go out and kick people’s asses together instead of talking about his life, which he considered a demonstration of his weakness. He continually asked me if I had been in any physical confrontations like the ones he was always orchestrating with perfect strangers. He thought it sucked that I probably voted for Obama, who he hated, whose ass he wanted to kick, and so on. Well, you get the picture. For no reason I could discern, one day I told him of a trip to the dry cleaners with my younger son, then only a 4 year old. My child, usually a helpful child, had reached for the shirt box of a very disturbed individual who was paying the cashier. My son thought those shirts were mine, and wanted to carry them home. This man screamed at him, “What the hell are you doing?” Because this gentleman was much older than myself, because he weighed 60 fewer pounds than me, and because the survival of my DNA is now much more important than my own survival, I got in his face and said, “What the fuck are you doing?” I told this patient the story, breaking a cardinal rule of therapy in which the therapist does not self-disclose. In the following session, the patient was finally able to tell me of being raped by an older (male) neighbor as a 12 year old, and why he had not fought back when he could have. I had passed his test, and he could tell me these things now, when he wasn’t sobbing or pounding his knee with his fist, or missing sessions without calling.

I speak of transference because it is an example of how all of us have a strong emotional need to believe things that are irrational and contrary to evidence. It’s not just children who believe in some
sort of Santa Claus. Think of how many people believe in Bigfoot, or God, or World Peace, or their right to beat up their wives.

Psychologists have studied the Santa Claus myth, and found very few subjects who carry anger at their parents for perpetuating the myth. While parents perpetuate a myth, they also provide their children with an excitement, a sense of involvement in a common view of the world, and with the promise that someone out there is actually tracking whether you’ve been naughty or nice. I mean, if you’re a kid, and no one is actually tracking that, maybe no one is really caring for you.

But my final reasons to perpetuate the myth are: 1) it is harmless, 2) other myths can be harmful, 3) children engage in magical and fantasy-based experience and can relate to the myth through the lens of their cognitive abilities, 4) an older child will debunk the Santa Claus myth, which will make them feel proud and grown up, and 5) adults cling to myths and un-realities, although more unconsciously than do children.