WHAT COLOR IS SANTA CLAUS ANYWAY?

If we personify St. Nicholas of Myra’s spirit of reaching out to the least among us, perhaps Santa Claus is the same color as you and me.

Several weeks ago, as I was driving my six-year-old son home from school, he spontaneously asked me, “Dad, what color is Santa Claus?” Since I did not have a stock answer and needed a moment to formulate a response, I quickly resorted to filibuster and asked him as though the answer should be obvious, “What do you mean what color is Santa Claus?” He responded quizzically, “You know, is he black or white?” Still not quite sure where this conversation was headed, I then defaulted to the Socratic method and asked him, “Well, what color do you think Santa Claus is?” Perhaps being the son of a lawyer and predisposed to effective deposition skills, my son did not relent. He persisted, “Cmon, Dad, what color is Santa Claus?” Fortunately, although a statute for his age, my son is still just six years old, so I was able to distract him and not answer his question directly, except to respond vaguely, “It depends who you ask.”

Looking back on my own childhood, I do not recall ever questioning my parents about what color Santa was. As I look at old photographs from my childhood, certainly the gentlemen on whose lap I sat at the mall was predominantly white, gaudy-eyed and, yes, white. Yet, in my home today during the holiday season, Santa will take on all different colors and even shapes in our extensive Santa collection. In fact, one of our Santa figurines is a tall, elongated version who is also dark complexioned. He is my favorite of course, because he is about as close a likeness to me as I’ve ever seen of Santa. My son would not understand this now, but perhaps when he is older, I’ll pass this answer on to him, which, as rumor has it, comes directly from St. Nicholas himself in response to another kindergartner’s curiosity.

It’s hard to understand when I don’t leave a toy.
You can’t unwrap a gift like hope, health, or joy.
My shirt has been black, white, yellow, red, and brown.
My eyes have been slanted, crossed, and even round.
Sometimes, I have been a she.
For all these things are part of me.
You may not believe all this is true.
But that’s okay, because . . . I believe in you.

It is widely accepted that through the mid-1800s, Santa’s physical appearance and wardrobe were largely open to individual interpretation. By most accounts, the image of Santa we embrace today of the robed figure in the red suit was first depicted by German immigrant Thomas Nast for the holiday issues of Harper’s Magazine during the 1860s. Nast is also credited with giving Santa a home at the North Pole. This modern-day image is a stark contrast to the more solemn image of Santa’s ecclesiastical predecessor, St. Nicholas of Myra (modern-day Turkey), a fourth-century bishop, who was legendary for his kindness and generosity, especially towards children. It is St. Nicholas’ spirit of generosity from which the “Santa as giver” concept has never wavered.

I hope that as we celebrate this holiday season, we can all personify Santa’s spirit in some extraordinary way. The recent natural disasters in our country, and abroad should be a constant reminder to all of how much we have to be grateful for. While many families look forward to this holiday season, it is equally true that this season will serve as a bitter reminder of the material possessions some families have lost and, most tragically, of loved ones who were injured or perished. It is difficult for those of us who were not personally touched by the tragedies to even imagine their grief; however, we can offer the gift of comfort. Comfort comes in many shapes and forms; be it emotional, financial, or spiritual. So, what color is Santa Claus? Well, I suppose that depends on who you ask, but if we personify St. Nicholas of Myra’s spirit of reaching out to the least among us, perhaps Santa Claus is the same color as you and me.

“This passage is an excerpt from a poem attributed to J.L. Wrights entitled, “Can Santa Be Black?”

Author: Lansing C. Scriven, Lansing C. Scriven, P.A.