

G R E G L U L L

UNCRAZY YOUR
Christmas

TIPS, TREATS AND
TRUTHS FOR THE BEST
CHRISTMAS EVER





★ Christmas is an endangered species. Even the word comes under fire every year. Not by you, of course, because you downloaded this little booklet. You still call it, “Christmas” and accept no substitutes.

You still remember...

- You still delight at the first sign of snow
- You still get out the Christmas music before Thanksgiving
- You still fight with someone in your family to put the tree up way too early
- You still remember the magical feeling on Christmas Eve when you were a kid

That’s OK. Don’t let anyone tell you it’s not. And if the crazy gets in the way, read this little booklet.

I'm with you. No matter how crazy your life gets during the holidays there is a way out. It really is a wonderful life...especially at Christmas.

So let it snow, let there be peace on earth, go tell it on the mountain, because it's the most wonderful time of the year and it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. I will do everything possible to uncrazy your Christmas!

If you've read [my blog](#) you know that I'm all about what I call the four corners of life: spiritual, physical, relational and the financial. Most of the situations in our lives relate to one corner, but some throw us into all four at once. Christmas is one of those.

So brace yourself with these tips, treats and truths that will help you enjoy your best Christmas yet!

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Christmas

THE RELATIONAL CORNER

Pure and simple, Christmas is a relationship. The birth announcement came to Mary, “You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” God wanted to have a relationship with us, we needed a Savior and Christmas was born.

Relationships continue to be an important part of our celebrations. That’s the way it should be. But our relationships, especially at Christmas, can be complicated.

Christmas stress - troubled marriages, blended families, memories of those who are no longer with us and geography can all separate us from Christmas joy. Here are some tips to remember that will uncrazy this corner of Christmas.

SET OUT TO SERVE

Some kids look for Santa’s sleigh as Christmas nears. I did too, but was equally excited about the red Mustang convertible. It belonged to my Uncle Pop and Auntie Gin, and arrived before the sleigh every year.

I remember seeing it through frosted windows in our dining room, the back seat piled high with presents. My uncle led the procession into our kitchen, threw back his red scarf and announced, “Merry Christmas!” At least that’s the way I remember it.

This annual taking-time-out-of-their-busy-lives reminds me of the

impact I can have on others at Christmas. They would later say that this visitation was one of *their* fondest memories.

Whaaaaaaat?!

But that's the way it is, isn't it? When we serve someone else it feels good to us too. So before you set out to shop, set out to serve. Put some think time into what you might do to create a Christmas memory for someone else. The mailman, the guy or girl at the transfer station, your kid's teacher, your pastor or rabbi – the list is endless, and so are the opportunities to serve. Serving someone other than yourself or your family, and involving others in the process will go a long way toward uncrazying your Christmas.

SAVE THE SURPRISES

Everybody loves surprises, yes, but there are two caveats. The first is, remember where you put the surprise. Think hard about hiding places and don't forget them. That's what I did seven Christmases ago. I put serious time into my wife's stocking, carefully hid it where she would not find it...and I never did either.

This is now a Christmas legend in our family, but it wasn't funny on that morning seven years ago when I was the only one of us enjoying my stocking. To this day I don't know what I did with it.

Surprise!

The second caveat is more important for you (because you probably won't violate the first like I did). Make sure the surprise you plan is a pleasant surprise, one that puts a smile on the person's face rather than that awkward, polite, fake smile that says, "What were you ever thinking!"

For years I wrapped kitchen implements for my wife not stopping to think that they were far from what she dreamed to see under the tree.

I did get away with a jade perpetual calendar one year, but that was when we were dating and anything would have said, “I love you.”

I think it’s still kicking around somewhere.

My point is, before you decide to surprise someone, really surprise them by thinking about what they expect and what they would really appreciate. You don’t spoil a surprise with the question, “What would you really like for Christmas?” That just shows you care enough not to give the gift that keeps on giving.

Regift, regift, regift, regift...

Keep reminding yourself, “The relationship is more important than the gift,” and ask yourself,

“Does grandma want a card or a visit?” (probably a visit)

“Does my son want to visit a museum or Star Wars Micro Comic Trading Cards (probably the cards)

You get the idea.

SAY IT WITH LOVE

Every gift we give sends a message.

A bottle of wine to a recovering alcoholic screams, “Insensitive!”

A fruitcake to just about anyone proclaims, “Regift, regift, regift!”

A gift given in your name to a charity says, “Really?”

But what if a person loves fruitcake or is a charity-lover? Good question. That changes everything! So before you give the gift, learn the person’s [love language](#).

The 5 Love Languages, a relationship classic, was written mainly for couples, but the principles apply to all relationships. In short, the author says that we all experience love differently. Some by touch,

some by gifts, some by quality time, some by words of affirmation, some by acts of service.

The art of a relationship is to know the other person well enough to love them appropriately. While this is more an art than a science, it at least gives us a guideline for gift giving at Christmas. Ask yourself which of the five languages best suits the person that will receive your gift.

My wife's aunt gave the same gift to the whole family every Christmas. Popcorn balls. It is now safe to disclose the truth, that not everyone liked them. In fact they became the subject of endless chatter and backroom humor. In her own way, she created a family Christmas tradition.

We didn't love her any less, of course, but she missed an opportunity to send a message and that's really the point.

Sometimes the message gets across in spite of the gift. In the [Gift of the Magi](#) two lovers sell what is most valuable to them to buy a gift for the other. Della sells her hair to buy husband, James, a chain for his beautiful gold watch. James sells his watch to buy Della a hair comb for her beautiful hair.

A Christmas tragedy?

Not at all! The writer concludes with a lesson: "Of all who give gifts, these two were the most wise." Della and James mastered the language of love even with unusable gifts.

This Christmas don't waste the opportunity of the gift.

SYNERGY BEATS ENERGY

My father was a jack-of-all-trades, or many. He was a competent carpenter, more than competent artist and an avid fisherman. I am none of those things, in part because of something I remember him repeating over and over: "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself."

He practiced what he preached and ended up doing things well but not teaching me how he did them. He was a great dad, but unfortunately he passed on to me that same attitude.

The tendency to do it yourself at Christmas is exhausting! The perfect table setting, the perfect outdoor decorations, the perfect Christmas tree, Christmas dinner, giftwrap, party...

Ahhhhhhhhhhh!

Synergy beats energy. Synergy is defined as, “the co-operation of two or more that, combined, produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of the individual contributions.”

Simple math.

Shopping, cooking, wrapping, partying together at Christmas is less exhausting and more fun. It has the added benefit of spreading the joy around. Take a moment before the crazy happens to think of someone – a college student, a widow or widower, an orphan or someone who for whatever reason is lonely this Christmas, and include them in your celebration.

You'll feel the synergy.

**EVERY GIFT WE GIVE
SENDS A MESSAGE**



YULE BAR

CAKE

- 1 c. brown sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. canola oil
- 2 eggs
- 1 egg white
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ t. vanilla
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ c. all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{4}$ c. almond meal
- 1 heaping t. ginger
- $\frac{1}{4}$ t. salt
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. white chocolate bark, coarsely chopped
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. dried cranberries
- 1 T orange zest

FROSTING

- 6 oz. cream cheese, softened
- 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ c. confectioner's sugar
- Juice of $\frac{1}{2}$ lemon
- Zest of 1 lemon
- $\frac{1}{2}$ c. dried cranberries, chopped
- $\frac{1}{2}$ c. white chocolate morsels
- $\frac{1}{2}$ T. shortening
- $\frac{1}{4}$ t. vanilla

PREPARATION

1. Beat sugar, oil, eggs and vanilla together
2. Add to dry ingredients and stir well
3. Fold in chocolate, cranraisins and zest
4. Pour batter into a greased 9"x13" glass dish and bake at 350 until firm (40 minutes)
5. For frosting: beat cream cheese, sugar, lemon juice, zest and vanilla until smooth. Spread evenly over cooled dish
6. Garnish with chopped cranberries
7. Melt white chocolate morsels and shortening in a microwave on 70% power for about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ minutes, stirring every 30 seconds or until melted. Garnish with dried cranberries
8. When frosting is set, cut into 16 bars

Christmas

THE SPIRITUAL CORNER

Scrooge's nephew famously defended Christmas to his cranky uncle: "Though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

Whatever "spiritual" means to you, it's safe to say that there is an invisible and immaterial part of Christmas that is easily lost in the busyness and business of the holiday. This is the part that does you the most good and is the stuff of memories.

Scare up the ghost of your Christmases past and I bet you'll visit people and places that can't be bought for any price and are more precious than presents. Here are some tips to unwrap the Christmas presence.

THE FIVE-MINUTE DRILL

First try this version of an exercise I describe at length in [LifeDeck](#). Take five minutes and make a list of standout Christmas memories. Let your mind run free, then see what you have. Beside each one, write down why the memory is so precious to you and how you might replicate it in your celebration this year.

So many of mine relate to my children when they were younger. Trimming our tree with an elderly friend, delivering groceries to a needy family on Christmas Eve, taking a late night "pajama ride" to

see Christmas lights – these all are markers in my memory of what Christmas means. Not a one of them was expensive or wrapped in pretty paper.

Now go through your list. Ask yourself why these memories are so special and how they might live on through you. The people and places may be gone forever but the spirit they inspired is alive in you.

IMITATE, DON'T RE-CREATE

Memories are precious but only to you unless you share them. If possible make your own memories this year by sharing a similar experience with someone else. There's no need to re-create the old one, just imitate it into existence with new meaning based upon your life now.

Example. My father was a skinflint. He detested the commercialization of Christmas, even the fancy wrapping paper. Most of his shopping was mail-order (the “online” shopping of his day) and when a gift came in, he went to work.

Choosing a piece of brown packing paper, he wrapped it and adorned it with pictures of Santa, caricatures of the recipient and various symbols including candy canes, Christmas trees and holly. He started the masterpiece in black ink and filled it in with tempera paint.

At the time I felt shortchanged but looking back I realize how special that was. How I wish I had saved some of those wrappings! That's the memory, but I have attempted to imitate it by customizing gifts with notes and pictures, sometime rough poetry.

One Christmas morning I moved the kitchen table into the living room in front of the fireplace. Beside each place setting I included a menu complete with pictures of the holiday fare. I still have those somewhere.

If you don't have many Christmas memories or those memories are painful for some reason, look for opportunities to share in a larger celebration.

- Volunteer to help pack [shoeboxes](#) for needy children throughout the world
- Accept an invitation to Christmas dinner
- Help decorate your church or town for the holidays
- Go caroling with a community group
- Bake Christmas cookies and deliver them on Christmas Eve to a lonely friend
- Help organize a Christmas Block Party

You will soon find (if you haven't already) that it really is more blessed to give than to receive, and the more room you make in your heart for others, the less room there will be for self-pity and sadness.

MOVE FROM SOMETHING TO SOMEONE

Ah this can be a challenge! After all it's the stuff, the things that catch our eye at Christmas; the lights, the store windows, the barrage of television and online advertising. But it's the people that live on. I've already mentioned Pop and Gin but there were others in my Christmases past.

Vera Dietsche (pronounced Dee'chee) was my first employer, a rugged Swede who lost her husband years before and lived alone, happily but limited by severe arthritis. She called her wheelchair her "chariot," one example of her feisty spirit. Vera introduced me to the spiritual life and joy of Christmas.

When someone wished her "Merry Christmas," she would politely correct them: "It will be a joyful Christmas my dear." For her the word "merry" suggested the material trappings of the day, while "joyful" brought to mind the savior who was born.

I've always remembered that distinction and repeated the story to others. In my own way I seek to become the kind of person who directs others from something to someone.

How can you?

Make another list, this time of important people in your life. You will probably start with your family and then include your best friends or those who are lonely and in need of friendship.

Now make a plan for each of them. It might be as simple as having coffee or going shopping together. If they are far away, take the time to write a nice letter wishing them a joyful Christmas. If they are shut in, ask if you could pay a visit and bring an [appropriate gift](#).

You are now moving in the right direction and peopling your Christmas.

SAY THANK YOU

Memories can be self-serving. We wrap ourselves in them sometimes forgetting those who inspired them. This is not the kind of forgetfulness that comes with age, but rather with the clutter of activities that fills our lives at the holidays.

If you're too busy to say thank you, you're too busy.

So slow down and think of ways to say thank you. It helps me to begin with God. From there I remember the people that he has put in my life, some of them I have mentioned above. Some have passed on, some have moved away and others have fallen out-of-touch with me.

You guessed it, make a list! A mental list if you want, but decide that before another Christmas passes, you will let someone know how much they mean to you and how they have shaped your life and inspired you.

Here is my list for this year:

- The leader of my youth group in high school who took me under his wing
- My seminary professor who helped me find my first pastoral position
- My mother-in-law who welcomed me into the family and became a real mom to me
- My first employer out of college who taught me responsibility and helped me find my voice

What's yours?

**THE MORE ROOM YOU
MAKE IN YOUR HEART
FOR OTHERS, THE LESS
ROOM THERE WILL
BE FOR SELF-PITY
AND SADNESS**



CHRISTMAS COOKIES

INGREDIENTS

- ¾ lb. softened butter (3 sticks)
- 2 c. sugar
- 3 eggs
- 4 ½ c. flour
- Pinch salt
- 4 c. confectioner's sugar
- 1/3 c. milk (or enough for consistency)
- ¾ stick softened butter
- 1 t. vanilla
- Food coloring

PREPARATION

1. Preheat oven to 350
2. Beat butter and sugar until creamed
3. Beat in eggs until light and fluffy
4. Combine flour and salt
5. Stir flour into wet ingredients ½ at a time (dough will be very thick and hard to stir)
6. Divide dough in two if you wish (cover unused portion). Roll out to ¼" thickness on lightly floured surface
7. Cut using Christmas cookie cutters (tree, manger figures...)
8. Place on ungreased cookie sheet until puffed and dry, not brown (10-12, minutes)
9. Remove to wire rack to cool
10. Frosting: Beat butter and confectioner's sugar until combined. Beat in milk and vanilla until creamy
11. Beat in desired food coloring (separate into bowls if using several colors); cover unused frosting with plastic wrap. If frosting becomes too dry, add a few drops of milk or water.
12. Frost cooled cookies, add sprinkles – let dry on wax paper until set; store in airtight container.

Christmas

THE PHYSICAL CORNER

Now that we've reminded ourselves how important the spiritual elements of Christmas are, let's celebrate the five senses. That should be easy! That's who we are.

There is no out-of-body experience this side of heaven, so it's worth spending some time planning what you will see, taste, touch, smell and hear. To put it differently, we're talking about sights, food, textures, aromas and sounds of Christmas.

Celebrate the senses!

With a little effort, we should end up somewhere in-between hedonism (the practice of sensual pleasure) and asceticism (abstinence from sensual pleasure). So let's think about how we can celebrate Christmas responsibly.

EYE-CANDY IS CALORIE-FREE

I have never been one who treats the "commercialization of Christmas" as signaling the end of the world (along with global warming). My advice to those who cringe at pre-Halloween decorations in stores, pre-Thanksgiving holiday Muzak and over-the-top Christmas light displays is, "Relax and enjoy." Or keep your negativity to yourself.

Some of us love it all.

- Our kids still remember our Pajama Rides. After dark in the days before Christmas we would scoop them up from their beds, pile into the car and set out in search of the very best light displays.
- Starbucks is spot on in their celebration, rolling out the red Christmas cups and Cranberry Bliss Bars just after Thanksgiving. Not to mention the explosion of flavors, gingerbread, peppermint and eggnog and chestnut. Makes you want to sing!
- Your town probably stirs the spirit with Christmas open houses, decoration competitions, parades or vintage re-enactments. Bring it on!

We'll come to calories next, but first remember that eye candy at Christmas is calorie free! So pull up a seat and enjoy.

TO BINGE OR NOT TO BINGE?

If I answered that from my own experience it would be a resounding “YES!”

I am a recovering binge-a-holic. I had a hard time saying no to a variety of festive treats, beginning with Christmas cookies, cherry cheesecake, chocolate-dipped pretzels (with sprinkles), Apple Pie, Pecan Pie, Pumpkin Pie...(you get the idea), pumpkin spice roll with cream cheese filling, cranberry bread, stuffing, turkey, winter squash, Chex Mix, mixed nuts.

And this is a short list. As you may have noticed, in my perfect world menus would be reversed, beginning with dessert and working your way sluggishly toward mixed nuts, if you had any room left.

I almost forgot the gravy. I agree with the late Erma Bomeck who proudly said, “I grew up in a family where gravy was a beverage.”

But back to the question: “To binge or not to binge.” The opposite answer is, “No!” I have a little Christmas book packed with ideas for the holidays. One reads, “Don’t count calories from December 15th through January 3rd.

Now I know what they’re saying. Don’t be so rigid in keeping “on

track” with your eating that you miss out on the considerable joy of the calorie explosion that is Christmas.

Here’s my answer that, I suppose, is yes and no: relax the rules but don’t break them. And the rules are different for every one of us. If you live by a specific daily calorie limit, say 2000/day, expand it to 3000 but don’t stop tracking it. If you have sworn off sugar, maybe because of a medical condition, allow yourself a treat each day (with your doctor’s permission).

If you want to combine gift giving with binge control consider the following:

- **Fitness Tracker**

I floated this idea to my wife (Honey, hope you’re reading this). These marvels of technology follow you around like an annoying but well-intentioned friend, guilting you into good behavior.

- **Gym Membership**

Relax, you don’t have to actually use it (just kidding). This is an expansion on the first idea. Now you have multiple friends following you around. It’s called accountability, not a bad thing. And, as they say, a rising tide lifts all boats.

- **MyFitnessPal**

This website and app help you track not only your calorie intake, but keep you informed with their [blog](#). A frequent advocate and long-time user, I can testify to its impact and humbly ask that they would begin sending me commissions!

“THE FIRE IS SO DELIGHTFUL”

We once owned a house with three fireplaces. On Christmas morning – and only on Christmas morning - I would light all three, whether the weather outside was frightful or not.

I remember standing around a bonfire one Christmas Eve with some high school friends. It was kind of an outside fireplace, only more conducive to a crowd and staying warm in the biting cold was the sensory alternative to salty and sweet.

Whatever form it takes, light is the dominant sight of Christmas. So inspired by the old nursery rhyme I offer this encouragement:

If you don't have a bonfire, a fireplace will do.

If you don't have a fireplace, Christmas lights will do.

If you don't have Christmas lights a candle will do.

If you don't have a candle, then God bless you!

For me lights at Christmas will always remind me of Jesus who was born the Light of the World. That story, taking up shy of four chapters in the Bible has transformed my life and the world.

“DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR?”

Ask my daughter about her favorite Christmas memory and she will describe coming down the stairs to Amy Grant's, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” Little did she know the careful planning and re-cueing that was necessary to create that memory!

We were always the first two up and amidst the flurry of cooking breakfast and tending to the fires, I had to listen for the movement of little feet upstairs and time it just right. I can remember standing at the bottom of the stairs waiting to see her door open, then rushing back to the player to push “start.”

From the first, music has been an important part of Christmas. Those unsuspecting shepherds were just tending to their business when an angelic choir appeared singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased.” Footnote: scholars disagree as to whether the angels sang or simply spoke.

Potayto, Potahto.

SMELLS & BELLS

The two go so well together, even if you're not an Anglican. When the holiday approaches make sure you manipulate your family (in a good way) by introducing the [smells of Christmas](#). There's really not need to buy the pricey candles unless it's for a gift. Do it yourself more cheaply and spend what you save on something else.

I'm thinking a skinny gingerbread latte, no whip.

While you're at it, why not double dip? Satisfy the nose and the taste buds by filling your kitchen with waves of cinnamon, ginger, cranberry, orange and peppermint. Maybe not all at once though. Almost all of those come from my [Cranberry Christmas Bread](#).

Again, you're welcome.

CELEBRATE THE SENSES

Christmas

THE FINANCIAL CORNER

LITTLE KNOWN FACT

Jesus spoke about money more than heaven or hell.

It's worth remembering that in the story that gave birth to Christmas, there was no vacancy in the inn and the child had to be born in very, shall we say, modest and inexpensive circumstances.

So how has Christmas become a time for lavish spending and deepening debt? According to Forbes it's a combination of being wooed by sales that are too good to resist and pressured by the desire to keep up with the Jones's or to give your children the things you never had.

Humbug!

Let's get reel – and by that I mean reel in the spending this year by practicing a few common sense principles.

MAKE A BUDGET

And stick to it! Resist the temptation to go crazy (remember, we're trying to uncrazy Christmas) and set a spending limit per person. Who will you be buying for and why? Make the hard decision of trimming your list to those you care most about and who will appreciate a gift.

WINDOW SHOP

Impulse buying is the Grinch that stole Christmas, or at least your bank account. As online shopping surges (over 40% of total dollars spent), you are only a click or two away from a bad decision. Whether you're in front of your laptop or headed to the store, decide beforehand that you will only look, not spend.

Put the credit card away and replace with a notepad or your Smartphone. Jot down your ideas and walk away. You'll be smarter and richer than probably 90% of your fellow shoppers and you can still tell those who ask, "How's your Christmas shopping coming?" that "I got a plan!"

SLEEP ON IT

Take the time to go over the list with someone you trust, or maybe just talk to yourself. Discuss the pros and cons of a purchase, then get a good night's sleep and when you wake up decide if it still seems like a good idea. If you want to go one step further put your list under your pillow and...

No wait, that's for the tooth fairy. Forget it.

If you're like me you will often wake up and say to yourself, "What was I thinking!" Then you can congratulate yourself for having been so smart.

BRING IT!

Now you're ready to bring it, just the way the Magi did in the story. They went through the mental process every gift-giver goes through: the desire to appreciate, the determination to acquire an appropriate gift and the time and effort to deliver it.

If you're a king, you can afford gold, frankincense and myrrh. For the rest of us loyal subjects, it's a matter of managing our money,

especially at Christmas, and buying within a budget for those we appreciate.

HO, HO, HO...OR HI HO, HI HO?

I saved the worst for last. Work.

Work suffers greatly during the holiday, or causes great suffering. You may not have any control over your workload in or out of the home, but you can certainly manage it so that it doesn't dampen your spirits.

Whoever said you shouldn't combine work with pleasure never celebrated Christmas with a job. Let's face it, the traditional office Christmas party is just the boss's way of apologizing for making you work during the most wonderful time of the year.

Don't be too hard on him though. He probably has a family too and makes as many or more sacrifices as you do. You'll both get through it and this will help.

- **Remember**

Because it's easy to forget what Christmas is all about. Remember that your job makes possible everything that you associate with Christmas. So say "Thank you" to your boss for putting up with you. He or she will probably be so shocked you can follow up by asking for a raise. Worth a try. Remember to make the days leading up to Christmas all about the ones you love and less about you or your job. Plan special times in the evenings or weekends for activities that stir up the spirit of the season.

- **Mingle** (rhymes with Jingle by the way)

You will probably never confuse your job with holiday celebration, so why not try to find something the two have in common. If your employer isn't already planning a community outreach at Christmas, suggest it. Even ask to coordinate a gift collection or food drive. Send cards to your fellow workers telling them how much you appreciate them or invite them to a Christmas party at your home.

- **Resolve**

OK this is really important. Does Santa stop half way around the world and head home to the North Pole? No. Did Good King Wenceslas leave the peasant in the cold and retreat to the comfort of his palace? No. And

what about the true story behind these stories? Did God decide that sending his only son to be born and die was too great a price to pay for you and me? No. So this Christmas resolve that you will not allow your job to get in the way of those most important to you.

It's sad that the season of giving is the one we most associate with receiving. The secret to Christmas joy is realizing that it's not either/or but both. Read my post on ["The Crazy Math of Giving"](#) and see that it really is more blessed to give than to receive.

And not only at Christmas.

**PLAN SPECIAL TIMES
IN THE EVENINGS
OR WEEKENDS FOR
ACTIVITIES THAT STIR
UP THE SPIRIT OF
THE SEASON.**



CRANBERRY CHRISTMAS BREAD

INGREDIENTS

- 3 ½ c all-purpose flour
- 1 ½ T instant yeast
- ¾ t salt
- 1 ¼ c. very warm milk
- ¼ c melted butter (or margarine)
- 1 egg beaten, room temperature
- 1/3 c. sugar

PREPARATION

1. Combine first three ingredients and whisk together
2. Combine milk, butter, egg and 1/3 c sugar; whisk together (make sure mixture is very warm)
3. Combine dry and wet ingredients and stir; add enough more flour (or warm milk) to form dough that pulls away from bowl when stirred
4. Turn dough out onto floured surface and knead for five minutes
5. Place dough in oiled bowl and leave covered in warm place until doubled
6. Punch down dough and divide in half; divide each half into thirds
7. Roll each lump into a foot long strip and place strips beside each other in groups of two and braid.

TOPPING

1. To make cranberry compote bring to a boil 2 c. whole cranberries, ¼ c. sugar, 2 T. orange juice, 2 T. butter and 1 t. cinnamon. Lower heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Set aside.
2. For streusel combine ¾ c. sugar with ¾ c. flour. Add 1 T. water, 1 ½ t. cinnamon and ¼ c. softened butter. Mix until crumbly.
3. Spoon compote into crevices of braided loaves and top with streusel.
4. Let loaves rise in warm place until double in bulk.
5. Bake at 350 for 30-40 minutes or until light brown on top
6. Cool for 15 minutes and drizzle icing (conf. sugar, milk and vanilla) over loaves and sprinkle sliced almonds if you wish.

THE ABC'S OF CHRISTMAS

A - ANGELS

These messengers of God appear throughout the Christmas story. They announce the birth of Jesus to Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth; they appear as a “heavenly host” to announce the good news to the shepherds. An angel appears to Joseph urging him to take his family to Egypt to escape the wicked King Herod. Read the story of [Shabiah](#), and remember that angels are God’s gift to you, not only at Christmas.

B - BELLS

We take bells for granted throughout the year. They wake us, warn us and spill out of our smart phones in different tones. But at Christmas they earn our respect. The earliest Christmas bells sounded from church steeples to... In 1857 James L. Pierpont immortalized them with the words of “Jingle Bells,” written in a Georgia tavern. Originally intended to celebrate Thanksgiving, it has become a Christmas tradition, especially among children.

C - CANDY CANE

There are few more visible reminders at Christmas than the curly red and white treats. Candy canes have an interesting history. The familiar red-striped canes began to appear on Christmas cards at the beginning of the 20th century but it was a Catholic priest named Gregory Keller who insured its place in modern history by inventing a machine that automated production, the Keller machine.

D - DECEMBER 25TH

The Bible gives no date for the birth of Jesus. So why is it that we have all settled on December the 25th? The answer is as sticky as Figgy pudding, whatever that is. One tradition traces the date back to the Roman celebration of Saturnalia and the desire of Christians to mainstream the celebration of Jesus. Another sees it as a Christian adaptation of Hannukah, the Jewish celebration

E. - EVERGREEN

You should probably thank the ancient Romans (not Martin Luther) for the evergreen Christmas tree. They would adorn their homes with evergreens, a symbol of life, in the New Year. Early Christians spurned the practice, but missionaries in the Middle Ages softened their view, proclaiming Christ the Lord of such symbols. Medieval plays featured “paradise trees” that linked the Nativity with the creation story and the Christmas tree was born.

F - FRANKINCENSE

Gum resin from the Boswellia tree used for making incense. This was one of the three gifts presented by the [Magi](#) to Jesus along with Gold and Myrrh. These were common gifts given to kings and deities.

G - GIFTS

Historically gifts have been the companion of many celebrations. Christmas gift giving is inspired the Magi who brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child (Matthew 2).

H - HOLLY

Holly was the sacred plant of the Roman god, Saturn and was used to honor him. Later the prickly leaves and berries became associated with Christ’s crown of thorns and was used by the early Christians as a Christmas symbol.

I - IVY

The green creeping vine is a symbol in the ancient world of eternal life. More an English Christmas green, it is used to adorn Christmas wreaths and is a companion green to the holly leaf.

J - JESUS

The name which means “Savior” was given by an angel both to Joseph and Mary before his birth in Bethlehem. It has become for Christians the “name above every other name.”

K - KINGS

The tradition popularized by the Christmas carol, “We Three Kings” tells of those who came from the East to worship the Christ child (Matthew 2). Scholars do not agree on their identity or their number. Although probably not kings, they were likely wealthy men who sacrificed much to search out the child.

L - LIGHTS

What we now know as Christmas lights have many ancient relatives. The first may have been the star that guided the Wise Men or kings (see above). Jesus was proclaimed to be the “light of the world” and an Old Testament prophecy of his birth reads, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

M - MISTLETOE

First the bad news: Mistletoe is a parasite that attaches itself to trees and is poisonous. It’s true! Now the good news: It is also used as a treatment for cancer. Go figure! Its Christmas tradition originated with the Druids who would call a truce with their enemies if they passed

under it in the forest. The kissing came later (18th century) as a more festive and romantic gesture.

N - NOEL

The word comes from a Latin verb meaning, “to be born.” The word made its way into the French language as “Nowell” and became associated with the birth of Jesus in French advent traditions and the English carol, “The First Noel.”

O - ORNAMENTS

The popularity of Christmas ornaments followed from the Christmas tree. The first were more natural such as nuts and apples. By the 18th century German and Irish immigrants undermined the Puritan contempt for such celebration by bringing their own ornaments. By the 1890’s they became more mainstream.

P - POINSETTIA

The star shaped flower is native to Mexico where it became a Christmas symbol. In the 17th century it began to be called “La Flor Nochebuena” (Holy Night flower) and legends emerged that explained how it was born. One featured a poor girl named [Pepita](#) whose gift of weeds became miraculously a brilliant flower.

Q - QUINCE PIE

Although the humble quince traces its origins to the cradle of civilization, it became a prized fruit in colonial America where it was included at Jefferson’s Monticello. The pear-like fruit appears in a Christmas bill of fare as early as 1660.

R - RUDOLPH

The ninth reindeer on Santa’s team was the brainchild of Robert L. May whose story, “Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer” first appeared in

1939. Ten years later May's brother in law adapted the story into a song. Recorded first by Gene Autry, it reached #1 on Christmas week, 1949.

S - SANTA

The full-bellied gift giver has a history all his own. His predecessor, St Nicholas, was born around 280 AD in what is now Turkey. Many traditions tell how he gave up his wealth and traveled around the world helping the sick and poor. His fame spread to Europe where he became Sinter Klaas. Washington Irving popularized his story in America referring to him as the patron saint of New York. His legacy was secured when, in 1822, Clement Clark Moore wrote a Christmas poem for his three daughters entitled, "An Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas," better known as "The Night Before Christmas."

T - TIDINGS

The word, meaning "an event or happening" comes from the Norse and later Middle English. The happy event of Christmas is announced using this word in two songs of the season: "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" and "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."

V - VIRGIN

In the Christmas story, an angel appears to Joseph who had decided to call off his engagement to Mary because she was pregnant. The angel explained that she had not been unfaithful but rather God was fulfilling the words of prophecy, "A virgin will conceive and give birth to a son." The virgin birth continues to be the heart of the gospel.

W - WREATH

Like its relative the Christmas tree, the wreath harkens back to ancient Greece and Rome. Used to honor gods, it was worn atop the head and symbolized unity, victory, eternity or divinity. Christians apparently adapted the wreath to symbolize Christ's victory over sin and to

express the spirit of Christmas.

X - XMAS

Short for Christmas. The “X” is the Greek letter, Chi, the first letter of $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ or Christ. Although it is criticized for disrespecting the name of Christ, the letter X has a long and sacred history as shorthand for the name.

Y - YULETIDE

Although the word is drawn from early Norse legend, it now refers to the season that starts 12 days before Christmas, concluding on December 25th. The yule log is burned on Christmas Eve in anticipation of the birth of Jesus. Latter Christian traditions took the form of cakes that were baked and rolled up in the shape of a log.

Z - ZECHARIAH

This man appears at the very beginning of the Christmas story. An angel appeared to him and told him that he would be the father of John the Baptist who came before Jesus, preparing the way for his ministry. His wife, Elizabeth was Mary’s relative.



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