

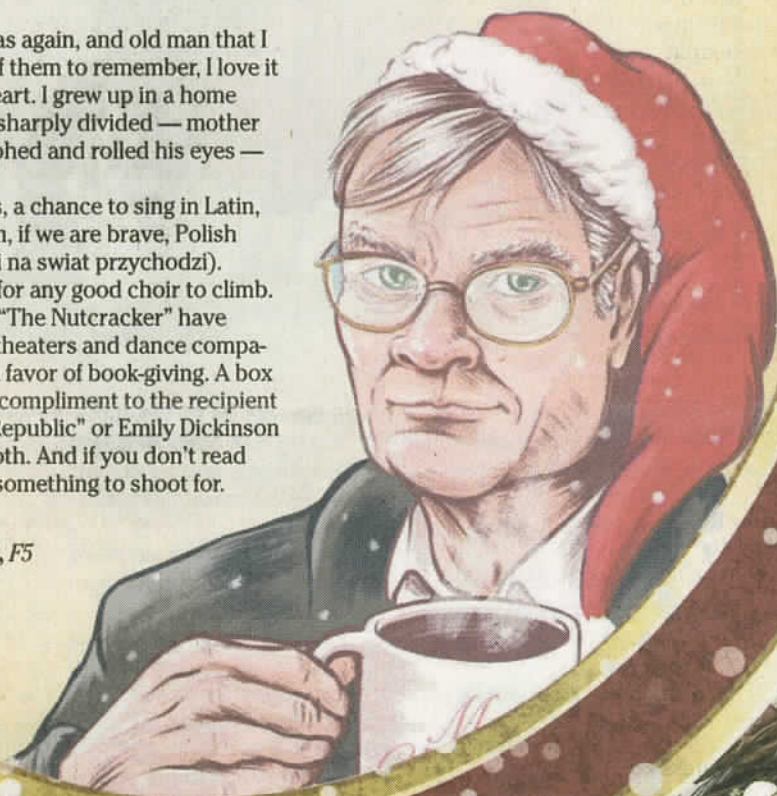
# THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT THRIVES

*Garrison Keillor offers a special holiday message*

So here it is Christmas again, and old man that I am, with so many of them to remember, I love it with much of my heart. I grew up in a home where management was sharply divided — mother adored it, father harrumphed and rolled his eyes — so I know both sides.

The carols are glorious, a chance to sing in Latin, German, Norwegian, even, if we are brave, Polish (*Gdy sie Chrystus rodzi, i na swiat przychodzi*). "Messiah" is a mountain for any good choir to climb. "A Christmas Carol" and "The Nutcracker" have filled the coffers of local theaters and dance companies. As an author I am in favor of book-giving. A box of chocolates is no great compliment to the recipient compared with Plato's "Republic" or Emily Dickinson or the complete Philip Roth. And if you don't read them, still they give you something to shoot for.

*Please see* **KEILLOR, F5**





# KEILLOR

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The basic idea of Christmas is a cheerful one: that we are connected to all of creation, the fish, the forests and mountains, the stars, the solar systems and infinity itself by the love of the Creator who came to Earth in the form of an infant and was first recognized as divine by poor uneducated shepherds and by travelers from afar — a story that endures despite all the tinsel and glitter. You can take the story literally or partially or as metaphor, and it will warm you. A gift from us Christians to all of you Spiritual but Not Religious.

To my mother, Christmas was the magical triad of decorating/shopping/baking, and to Dad it was a wasteful carnival of false piety. They loved each other dearly, and their quarrel was a quiet one, but they stuck to their principles. He sighed and shook his head, she beamed and fussed over the wrapping and cooking. It was like having Scrooge and Mrs. Cratchit under one roof. I sat on the living room floor, carefully unwrapping a large odd-shaped thing that turned out to be a miniature

garage with gas pumps and a hoist and another one, a printing press with movable rubber type, two careers opening up, auto mechanics or publishing, and my father peered down at them and saw money frittered away, a child indulged, corrupted, launched into a life of waste.

It was instructive for me at a young age, knowing Dad was correct but Mother was right. We were sanctified brethren, and nowhere in Scripture are believers told to celebrate the birth, only the death, of our Lord. And the hullabaloo around his infancy by those who ignored his teaching

struck Dad as an absurdity. But

Mother had grown up in a family of 11 children whose mother died of scarlet fever when Mother was 7, and her motherless youth was austere. Christmas

was a burst of extravagance and color and music in a pale abstemious world. No wonder she loved it so. And every year she managed to produce it for us, mounds of gifts, a shining tree, a classic dinner, and in the end Dad could not help but smile on it. And so we learned that it is right and good to give pleasure.

I remember the Christmas when the dark angel of projectile vomiting visited us and the Christmas when I decided to have a Dickensian tree, one with candles, and lit them and swung the door open and Mother almost fainted from shock: her lifelong fear, a Christmas tree fire, there before her. The one I best remember was 1956, when I was 14. Dad had just gotten out of the hospital after falling off his cousin Harold's barn roof while nailing shingles and landing head-first on concrete and fracturing his skull. Mother spent weeks at the hospital, tending to him. The three younger kids were



parceled out to relatives, and we three older ones boarded the school bus in the morning and sat down to a quiet supper with Mother at night. She didn't say much, but we knew by the fact that we couldn't go visit Dad that it was bad. She did warn us that there might not be Christmas this year.

One Sunday, at church, I noticed a shoe box on a table in the coatroom, wrapped in white paper, a slot in the top, and marked "For the Keillor Family," and I felt intensely ashamed to be the object of charity. I told Mother that I didn't want Christmas this year. No presents. The idea of church members looking upon us poor Keillors with pity gave me the creeps. I avoided people lest someone pat me on the head.

And then Christmas began to appear. A smaller tree than usual, a few presents, the smell of baking. And then our father came home. Pale, somewhat withdrawn, slow afoot but still himself. He lay on the sofa, a blanket over him, and Mother sat at the piano and carefully chorded her way through "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright," and we sang and it was Christmas again. All we needed was each other and that song. Last week in New York, I stood in a crowd of strangers, some believers, others not, and someone started singing about the calmness and brightness, the radiant beams, and everyone sang along, quietly, a cappella, and we were united in a common mystery. There it is. Unto you a child is born in the city of David. Make of it what you will. God bless you all, each one.

Garrison Keillor is host of "A Prairie Home Companion," which airs at 6 p.m. Saturday on Hawaii Public Radio-1, repeating 6 p.m. Sunday on HPR-2. This article was distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.