

A Christmas tradition for everyone

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By Hamid R. Tavakoli

Happy Christmas and Merry New Year! That's how I used to say it.

When I immigrated to the States in 1985, I often mixed up my adjectives, and it took a couple of years to get them right.

I was 12 when I left Iran to come to live with my older sisters. They had moved here years earlier for school, and by the time I arrived they'd already established their Christmas routine, had set up a tree and were exchanging gifts like most of their American friends.

We are not Christians, but I am glad they embraced this tradition. Naturally, as a kid, I really enjoyed the gifts.

Since then, through decades of marriages, divorces, kids, jobs and relocations, my family has managed to keep the Christmas tradition going, as every year we all set up trees, mail our cards and exchange gifts. When asked by friends why we celebrate Christmas when we are not Christians, I reply in jest that we are merely celebrating the commercial aspects of the holiday.

Jokes aside, Christmas is a special holiday that deserves every American's attention and respect, regardless of religious beliefs.

Christmas highlights one of the greatest attributes of the American culture: giving. Generosity and charity are ingrained in our culture here.

During my monthly social dinner with close friends, this notion was brought to light as each of us discussed how we planned to donate to charity this Christmas. The plans ranged from sponsoring toys for children of a military family to buying electronic gadgets for kids dealing with serious illnesses at Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters, or buying a few gift cards at local grocery stores to give to a needy family for a Christmas meal.

After that dinner, I thought about this some more. What we were discussing was really a microcosm of what we do as a nation for others, both here and abroad. Despite our economic hardships, we are still the most giving nation in the world.

This is evident from our involvement in recovery efforts after natural disasters such as the earthquake in Japan or the tsunami in Indonesia, as well as in long-term efforts like combating HIV/AIDS in Africa.

Quite awhile back, when I was preparing my essay to enter the U.S. Air Force Medical Corps, I called my older brother for guidance. He had just pinned on the first lieutenant insignia in the Navy. He is also the most devout patriot I know.

He asked why I was joining. I said that I needed the money for medical school. He said, "Don't do it."

"Do it," he explained, "because you want to give back. To give back to a society which has given you the opportunity to go to school and pay for it in the most honorable way."

That night I ruminated about the concept of giving - and giving back.

That is what Christmas is all about. Soon we will celebrate the birth of a man who gave it all a couple of millennia ago so that we could learn to appreciate life, to give and to be kind to one another. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Hamid R. Tavakoli, a psychiatrist, lives in Norfolk.