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Saturday, December 26, 2009

Two Christmas presents and a lump of coal.

Hi everyone,

Just as Christmas landed, St. Nick dropped off a couple of Christmas presents for our local library and the citizens group [nice] which, together this year, stood up to some Scrooge's who wanted the library to censor its catalog [naughty].

Do you remember when Santa used to call out naughty children for their behaviour, you know, before our advertising culture started eliminating any unpleasant consequences for being mean?

Me, too.

And so, [Saturday's column](#).

Naughty or nice?

Library issue brings St. Nick & Krampus to town

“He’s making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice”

In America, most people get Christmas presents even when they’ve been naughty but, back in the Old County, across Europe, St. Nick is accompanied by a more sinister companion. St. Nick makes sure good kids get what they deserve – candy and toys – while his companion makes sure the naughty kids get what they deserve, too. Depending on the country, naughty kids can get lumps of coal or even be whipped.

That’s Old School.

This year St. Nick brought some great presents to the nice kids in town: specifically, the nice kids at the West Bend Community Memorial Library and in the West Bend activists for Free Speech who were awarded two national accolades for – well, for doing the right thing. They deserved ’em, too. It’s hard to do the right thing when it isn’t popular with some of the other kids.

The library was awarded the 2009 Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award, given by the faculty of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the West Bend Activists for Free Speech, the association of citizens who banded together to help the library stand up to the anti-gay pro-censorship lobby, were selected by the Wisconsin ACLU to receive this year’s William Gorham Rice Civil Libertarian of the Year Award.

William Gorham Rice, a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School, was one of the principal founders of the ACLU. It's not surprising that a UWMadison law professor would help establish the ACLU, but Professor Rice was a man whose understanding of justice was matched by an equally great character. Before his law school days, William Rice was awarded the French Croix de Guerre for his service as an ambulance driver during World War I. The West Bend Community Memorial Library and our neighbors in West Bend Activists for Free Speech were both on the battlefield this past year, making sure to keep our civil liberties alive and well – so this award, like all presents from St. Nick, fits perfectly.

So much for that candy. Now, what about the coal?

It turns out there are all sorts of options. In France, for instance, St. Nick's companion is called Pere Fouettard (usually translated as Whipping Father, although in eastern France he's their idea of the bogeyman). He brings a buffet of special treats for naughty children, ranging from coal all the way up to flogging. Seriously, flogging. One early version of the Pere Fouettard story explains that he and his wife were inn keepers who murdered three boys while robbing them. St. Nick discovered the crime, resurrected the boys, and then forced Le Pere into service to atone for his crime. Next door in the Netherlands, the Dutch have Black Peter and in Germany there's Knecht Ruprecht, whose main function is to scare naughty kids until they start behaving themselves. We could probably use him in Washington. The variations on this theme become more grisly as we move closer to the Alps. Bavaria has Hans Muff, Pelzebock, Drapp, and Buzeberg. In Switzerland he's called Schmutzli.

The scariest of all is Krampus, from Austria, who is sort of a half-goat, half-devil character. I'll bet he keeps bad kids ducking for cover. I know we like everything to be sugary and happy but I'm one of those people who liked the original Grimm's Fairy Tales (you know, the unexpurgated version in which Cinderella has her wicked sisters dragged behind horses afterward). They have a kind of psychological balance missing from the diabetic coma of our current, Disneyized, high-fructose corn syrup version of American reality.

Anyway, in the spirit of preserving the wisdom of the past, let's put Krampus to work. If the nice kids won national awards for doing the right thing, even when it wasn't popular, then who should get the coal? Or the whipping?

This year, Krampus needs to visit the naughty folks who attempted to sneak past the U.S. Constitution, and decades of Supreme Court rulings, and force a narrow and partisan morality on the rest of their neighbors by asking a governmental agency (the public library) to censor material – all behind the cynical rhetoric of protecting children. This year, they get coal in their stockings. Let's hope that next year St. Nick can bring them treats instead.

Krampus will be watching them.

In the meantime, those on the nice list can take joy in these gifts of freedom and pride in the neighbors who kept those gifts alive for the rest of us.