

Bill Rea ? I know why the Grinch failed

?Christmas isn't just a day, it's a frame of mind.?

Kris Kringle ? Miracle on 34th Street

It's over.

It's now roughly 10:30 p.m. Christmas day.

I sit, putting down these thoughts at a table which just a couple of hours ago was the locale of a family Christmas feast that almost didn't happen. My wife sits in our living room, listening to one of the radio stations that plays nothing but Christmas music this time of year. I think she figures there's just an hour and a half of these tunes left in the year, and she's going to catch every note she can. I have nothing even approaching the necessary guts to stand in her way.

I opened this piece with a quote from one of the classic movies that's traditionally aired a lot this time of year (I have seen it twice in the last 24 hours), and the message behind this statement popped in my head a lot in the days leading up to Christmas.

I'm sure many, if not most, of you have traditions that you follow when it comes to marking this time of year, and that has always been the case with my family. True, traditions change with circumstances. For example, things had to be adjusted somewhat to accommodate Beth after she and I got married some 15 years ago, and those adjustments were made willingly, as have been lots of others.

It has been a tradition for years to have dinner Christmas day with my mother's side of the family. True, both my parents have been gone for a number of years now, as has been the uncle from that group. My mother-in-law joined us for the last several years, but she is now gone too. So while the numbers have been reduced, the tradition continues.

This year was the turn for Beth and I to host the dinner, and we took matters into hand well in advance.

And then the ice storm hit.

Like so many others in this part of the world, we lost our hydro power as a result, but we were lucky enough to get it back fairly quickly.

Such was not the case for my aunt, who lives in Etobicoke. She lost her power and it didn't come back on for several days. That came on top of flood damage sustained in the serious rain storms in July. The resulting situation has still not yet been rectified, so the loss of power and heat was the last thing she needed. My cousin (her daughter) told me that after about a day of this, the decision was made that they couldn't stay in the house any longer, and they successfully sought other shelter.

Naturally, this was a stressful situation for both of them, and we got the message in the days leading up to Christmas that they might not be up for the traditional gathering. Beth and I assured them that their immediate needs took priority. The turkey was safe in a freezer and would keep. It would be regrettable to postpone the annual celebration, but certainly not the end of the world.

I've learned over the years that you don't get very far in the adult world unless you can be a little adaptable.

My brother, who also lives in Toronto, is part of that tradition too, and he was on deck to drive my aunt and cousin to our place. He wasn't terribly upset that the schedule was falling apart, accepting the reality of the situation. He was also to host a gathering of my father's side of the family Boxing day, so he had lots to do on his own turf, especially since he only got his power back early in the morning of Christmas Eve.

By noon that day, Beth and I had just about resigned ourselves to the idea that we would have a very quiet Christmas day; a first for both of us.

In the course of the day, Beth and I discussed how we were going to handle the cancellation or delay of Christmas. We were, of course, referring to the traditional observances, but the way things were being phrased, it sounded like we were putting the brakes on a whole day, and all that it represents. I had a few contemplative moments during the day (since the major dinner we were supposed to host had been set down, I had time to be contemplative), and I realized the idea of stopping Christmas was preposterous.

Modern literature tells us the Grinch did everything he could think of to stop Christmas from coming, up to and including emptying every refrigerator he could find in Whoville. The result was he essentially made a fool of himself, as his efforts fell flat. Beth and I weren't going to do much better, even if that had been our intent.

I am not a religious man, and I believe that is a byproduct of my upbringing. My mother dragged me to Sunday school as a kid, often despite my strong protests. My dad was another matter. While he did practise a certain Christian ethic, it is a general fact that someone had to either die or get married to get my old man into a pew.

My point, which has been driven home with a certain amount of force over the last couple of days, is one need not be an evangelist to understand what Christmas is all about. The story behind it is oft repeated. The day and the occasion comes, whether we people who regard ourselves as Christian are ready or not. Fancy dinners and turkeys are not essential to the spirit.

Besides, although I had resigned myself to the fact that the Christmas feast was going to be delayed, there was something in the back of my mind telling me things were going to work out, although I had not a clue how.

Beth and I had some last minute Christmas Eve shopping to do in Bolton, and one of the items we were looking for were pull-crackers for the dinner table. The first store we tried didn't have them, and Beth decided that since we weren't hosting Christmas dinner anyway, there really wasn't any need to get them.

We had dinner that night with Beth's side of the family (tradition), followed by attending the Christmas Eve church service (another tradition). At the service, we were told to keep in mind the many people who were going through tough times because of the storm. That was something I had no trouble doing.

We arrived home shortly after 9 p.m., and found a message on our answering machine from my cousin, telling us the situation had improved to the point that they might be on deck for Christmas dinner after all. Preparations that had been shelved were back on the proverbial front burner.

During the course of Christmas Day, I found myself wrapping presents for relatives that I had for a while thought I wasn't going to see that day. In the process, I noticed that I was running out of paper, but realized there was a store within walking distance that would be open and could address my needs. As I left the house, Beth asked me to have an eye out for pull-crackers, since we now had a need for them.

They were among the first displays I saw when I walked into the store. The paper I was looking for was in ample supply too.

There is that very beautiful song entitled Ordinary Miracle, that contains a line that has always caught my attention, and that was certainly on my mind as I left the store and walked home: "It seems so exceptional, The things just work out after all."

Christmas dinner went off close to perfection. We got through it, even though we somehow set off the smoke detectors in the house while cooking the turkey (I have no idea how we accomplished that one).

When I'm a much older man than I am now, I know I'm going to reflect on what has gone on in my life, and that includes the Christmases I have experienced. I think this one just past will be prominent, and there'll be a big grin on my face as I think of it.

We did it, Mr. Grinch

