

Bill Rea ? Preparations are in hand

Is it me, or has Christmas kind of snuck up on us this year?

I know the big day is getting close, and my preparations are sort of well in hand. But I'm also behind the ball on a couple of issues. As of the start of this writing, I have not yet sent out my Christmas cards. In fact, I just bought them on my way home from work Friday. I also just finished writing my letters to the relations back in the old country (meaning Ireland). My wife was reviewing them as I wrote part of this. I usually try to have that matter taken care of by the beginning of December. Like I stated above, I'm behind on some things.

Yet I know the day is getting close. Beth has already set the radio in our living room to one of those stations that plays nothing but Christmas music this time of year. I have nothing even approaching the necessary guts to get in her way. She is also spent part of the evening watching a TV special with country and western singers performing tunes of the season ? I kept my thoughts to myself, with difficulty.

Yet some of the traditions are going exactly as planned. One of them involves some friends of mine who live in Etobicoke. One fellow annually leads a whole gang around the neighbourhood caroling. I used to take part regularly, but I let things slide a bit over the last couple of years (the season is a busy time in the community newspaper trade), but I knew the event was coming up and I told Beth I really wanted to at least put in an appearance this time.

We were a little late arriving, so we had to walk through the neighbourhood, listening for the sounds of various voices trying to sing. It didn't take long to find them, and Beth and I added our voices to the cause. We definitely added to the quantity. In terms of quality, that issue is open to spirited debate. I have sung in many choirs in my life. My participation in them is among the happiest memories of my high school days. I was a good singer in those days, but it has been a long time. My admittedly non-professionally-tuned ear told me I missed a lot of notes I should have nailed Saturday night. No matter, we were in good company, Etobicoke still stands, Mayor John Tory hasn't banished Beth and I from his constituency and we were among good company. There were about two dozen of us singing away, and no one set their dogs on us. In fact, a couple of people rushed to offer us cookies.

Who could ask for more?

My Christmas shopping is under control, but that is really nothing new for me. I actually got off to a late start this year in the shopping department, leaving it until August (I usually start around May).

One of the many advantages of my line of work is I have to attend a number of sales, exhibitions and the like. And since I know I will eventually have to worry about Christmas shopping, I usually have an eye out for ideas. That's what happened at Midnight Madness in Bolton in August, and things have been progressing from there.

There was a time, when I lived within walking distance of one of the major shopping malls, that I would stroll over there if I had time Christmas Eve and entertain myself by watching frantic people trying to get their shopping done. I felt nothing but sanctimonious self-satisfaction at times like that (I do have a bit of a cruel streak, don't I?)

The fact is I do know what it's like to be part of that Christmas Eve festive panic attack. There were lots of times when I would leave the Christmas shopping to the last minute. My late father used to accuse me of leaving everything to ?the last bloody minute.?

I kind of got turned off to that practice due to some well-meaning, but rather snide remarks from a clerk at the Eaton's Centre in Toronto. I was actually in Eaton's, which tells you how far back I'm going. It was getting close to closing time Christmas Eve, and I was paying for the last of many purchases of the day.

?He's gettin' ready. I can tell,? the clerk loudly remarked. ?He's power shoppin'!?

Perceptive, wasn't he?

That was one of those ?never again? moments. Never again did I leave things to the end.

Don't get the wrong idea. My shopping is not yet done. But it's all down to just a couple of smaller items that I can easily pick up on my rounds.

But I'm still having strange feelings that I'm not ready for this time of year. Like most people, I always look forward to it, but am also mindful that it brings with it a certain amount of stress.

There are decisions to be made.

Beth and I are already in discussion of what kind of Christmas tree to get. In past years, we got a relatively big tree, on the order of six feet in height. I really don't want something that I would need a stool to reach the top. The first year we were married, there was a lot within walking distance from where we were living where trees were being sold. We strolled over there a couple of nights before Christmas, mutually agreeing that since we had very few decorations to put on a tree, we would settle for the smallest one we could

find. It didn't take long to find a very small, but passible tree.

?How much?? I asked the guy who was running the lot.

?Twenty-five dollars,? he quickly replied.

Then he took the tree from me and shook the excess snow away.

?Fifteen,? he said.

You've got to love a guy who haggles with himself. Every time I reflect on that night, I become more convinced it was the best \$15 I ever spent.

The trees we bought in subsequent years always served our purposes well. Last year, for reasons I don't remember, we got a much smaller tree that was already standing in a pot. We put it on a table, and it answered our needs well too. For one thing, it took up a lot less room, and since we were hosting Christmas dinner in our relatively small home, any saving of space was most welcome. I think or main concern, when it comes to what kind of tree to get is how our cat is going to react to it.

This will be our first Christmas with Ella as part of the family. She's a little more than a year old, and she loves to climb up anything that's climbable, including her lord and master (meaning me). The last thing I want her doing is climbing up a Christmas tree. For one thing, she could cause it to topple, which would create a big mess. And falling Christmas trees could set off the motion detectors on the security system in our house. On the other hand, once she gets on top of things, Ella likes to knock items onto the floor, and that would probably include a small Christmas tree. The issue has yet to be resolved. We're working on it.

We're working on a lot of things. That's the lot facing us at this time of year. And no matter how far behind the schedule I happen to be, I'll find some way to make it work.

If you'll excuse me, I have some Christmas cards to work on

