

Selected articles from Tymes Magazine

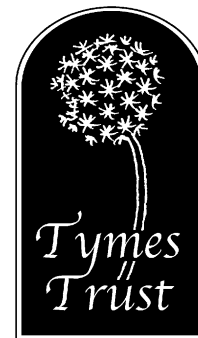
TYMESplus

STORY OF MY CHRISTMAS

Extended from DOCTORS WITH ME

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by Dr Anne Macintyre



*Advancing the
care of people
with ME*

Christmases Past and Present...

I try not to think about Christmas until about mid December. This saves energy and anxiety!

Cards

I look at last year's cards, and realise with shock how many people I meant to contact after last Christmas to say 'sorry I forgot/thanks for your news/this is now my address' etc...

(And what do you do with cards that say 'to all of you from all of us!' with no clues..?)

I remember decades ago making recycled cards, cutting out the pictures and sticking them on folded stiff paper – why are we now so wasteful and lazy?

I fish out unused cards from last year and find most of them have no envelopes that fit. I buy great sheets of stamps that then get crumpled or self stuck in my handbag. I start with cards to people I never see, especially distant friends and relatives (to whom a card means a lot) but then remember to buy the special overseas airmail letters, which got sent as always too late last year.

I never write Christmas cards to people I see regularly such as neighbours. I carefully write a list of those I have sent, to refer to next year, but often forget to

put which year this is. I am told that it's a good thing to keep all these lists on the computer, also all the addresses on a system which prints them on sticky peel-off labels; I have not discovered how to do this. Wouldn't that be a useful way to occupy the long hours after New Year?

Presents

As I cannot walk round shops, especially in crowds, I do my Christmas present shopping either before by mail order (there are some lovely things to buy from various charity catalogues) or at the last minute in local charity shops especially Oxfam.

As a 10 year old, in central Scotland, we would cycle 4 miles to the village on Christmas Eve and buy family presents in the village shop.

Some years when I have been too ill, I haven't sent cards or presents, but phoned special people instead.

Christmas Eve

I am usually already in Bristol, to spend Christmas with a close friend and his cat. One of my routines is to go to the centre for rough sleepers – or the Salvation Army (Bristol has thousands who are homeless over Christmas) and hand in warm clothes, thick socks, old clean blankets etc that I have collected over the year. They

especially need good cheerful warm women's clothing.

This in my opinion is of more value than posting more expensive presents to wealthy faraway relatives I rarely see.

I like to wrap and label presents for my companions – man and cat both! – while listening to the nine lessons and carols from Kings College on radio. This is also a good time to stuff the bird; it can be done sitting down.

When I still worked in a hospital, I used to 'nick' some strong black suture thread and curved needles from the theatre to use on the turkey...

We lay in food supplies for several days, but I often cook something simple such as a fresh free range chicken bought from Devon where I live.

The decorations have got less in recent years – neither of us can stand safely on a chair or steps to attach things to ceilings or picture rails. A few years ago I swallowed my pride and purchased a fold-up plastic tree from John Lewis, having become fed up with dead pine needles. This has become a bit crumpled, but if you can manage to screw the bits of plastic stem together and find the silvery things carefully put away last year, it goes quite well in the kitchen corner.

The cat, Tigga, now aged 18 and frail, still manages to 'help' unfold the silvery things and gets tangled up in them. Last year, we found that most of the presents when unwrapped from the tree appeared to be tins of salmon or Whiskas for her.

When we were very young, my father who was a rector at St James, Leith, had dressed up as Father Christmas at the church family party that morning. We kids went to bed early, as usual very excited about the great man leaving our filled stockings during the night....

*I was woken by a great crash and amazed to see Father Christmas himself falling over the large toy car for my brother, in the real red coat with a beard! But the awful truth came out when he shouted "O *\$@%#!", in a familiar voice – a private Macintyre family swear word!*

Christmas lunch

I used to love cooking, but arthritic hands and wrists make this quite a labour of love! The trick is to keep it simple and not panic.

I simply cannot begin to cook if there are people or noise in the kitchen, so I encourage my loved one plus any friends to stay awhile at the drinks party at the neighbours, leaving me in peace.

I like to put on a CD of Handel's Messiah, and sit quietly at the table to prepare vegetables (chopping parsnips is the hardest). If you get good fresh ingredients and don't try anything fancy or new, it usually works out OK. But you must check that the old oven gloves with holes in have been replaced...before lifting the hot bird out of the oven...!

Memories of bird disasters – in 1956, our mother obtained a large chicken for Christmas, as important guests were invited – (an exiled Hungarian musician and a Japanese bishop).

Our only cooking facility in those days was a coal fired Rayburn stove – there was no gas in our remote Perthshire community. As usual, the stove was heavily fired up early in the morning, in went the expensive bird, and off we all went to church.

Honoured guests were later being poured sherry in front of our specially lit living room fire, when there came a great anguished cry from the kitchen. The stove had mysteriously gone out hours ago, and I believe that we all ate tinned spam and bread and butter! In those days we didn't even have a fridge.

A more recent bird accident occurred when I placed the free-range turkey I had carefully stuffed and closed with surgical sutures on Christmas Eve in the downstairs cloakroom (to keep cool overnight) and forgot to close the door – in the morning most of its breast had disappeared, and large wet paw-prints belonging to ‘Outside Cat’ led to the cat-flap.

I never do Christmas dinner in the evening, as my energy is gone by then – the one occasion we tried having a grown-up evening Christmas meal, with best glasses, candles and invited guests, it was a disaster and I just couldn’t cope. Christmas pudding nowadays is a doddle, thanks to ready-made ones you put in a microwave. I think it’s worth the expense to pour heated burning brandy over it – very dramatic, the difficulty lies in hiding the rest of the bottle until next year.

Church and Carols

If only someone else would cook on Christmas Day, I would love to go to the midnight communion, but like most of

you, I have to choose how to use my energy. Late nights are a no-no for me, so I prefer to go to an early simple service, then get back to start the battle with the bird. Otherwise, I enjoy singing in my local church choir for their carol service, fortunately it is a week or two before Christmas Day, so there is time to recover.

Everyone who is connected with this illness in any way (and many ‘healthy’ people too) know how exhausting and sometimes emotionally stressful Christmas can be, and the difficulty sticking to plans and expectations.

If I have any advice, it’s this: Christmas is about sharing yourself and your love with people who matter to you.

It’s not about cooking a perfect meal, or giving perfect presents, or being the perfect guest/son/daughter/parent. The greatest gift you can give anyone is yourself, your love and your understanding, these can be given unconditionally even if you are unable to physically join in all the activities!

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