The Roanoke Times

DEC. 13, 2020

**O kitschy Christmas tree**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

Nothing says “happy holidays” like a Christmas tree ornament made from a Natural Light beer can.

I didn’t know the cute, metal fox was hand-painted on a can until I saw the Natty Light label on the flip side. Classy! Heck, I didn’t even know I had a hand-painted, beer-can fox until I opened the box of Christmas decorations.

Where did we get this stuff?

If it’s in the box, it goes on the tree, even if I have no idea where the ornament came from or even if it holds zero nostalgia (which is less than the number of carbs in a Natural Light).

My family has amassed a curious collection of Christmas tree ornaments over the years. Many of them are souvenirs from trips dating to the early years of marriage right up until recent visits to national parks.

There’s the wooden lobster ornament from Maine. The Santa Claus hugging a space capsule from a trip to Kennedy Space Center. Bears from the Beartooth Mountains. Ceramic, rather than wooden, clogs from the Netherlands.

My wife said we have quite a few kitschy ornaments, which means we have a kitsch-mas tree! (Rim shot played on drum ornament, which is attached to the wreath.) It’s a pure holiday hodgepodge. Knickknacks and curios, accumulated, bought, bequeathed and saved.

Some of the ornaments do have sentimental value, like an old Christmas label from a long-ago gift to my wife from her dad. We have mini-framed photos of pets of Christmases past and our current critters Tori, the sweet coonhound mix, and Audie, the ornament-smashing kitty who is eternally naughty yet somehow always gets treats in his paw-shaped stocking.

We hang a set of figures from “The Wizard of Oz” that I received from my mother (I think, but who really knows anymore) because I ineptly played the Tin Man in a high school play during Ronald Reagan’s first term. (I could still sing a verse or two “If I Only Had a Heart,” but I’m a little rusty, heh, heh, heh.) And because I pick a little bluegrass music with my buddies, we have acquired an orchestra of fiddle ornaments in glass, wood and ceramic styles.

But for every trinket that tugs at a warm memory, there might be a miniature, green, high-top sneaker hanging next to it. Why? Because it was in the box. Where did that come from? Probably a throwaway from my daughter’s days in elementary school. But it’s been part of the family collection now for years.

We do have a few classy ornaments, such as the shimmering orb shaped like a hot-air balloon, an artfully designed apple and the angel tree-topper that belonged to my mother-in-law. Crystal icicles and red orbs dangle from the branches.

We have some cutesy figures of ceramic “Santa’s helpers,” and we have an entire Ziploc bag filled with nothing but Cousin Vanessa’s handmade ornaments, like spoons and forks painted with Santa faces. One year, she even made Santas out of painted dental-floss containers with beards made from wads of floss (unused, I think). She’s crafty.

Some families have themes for their decorations or at least ornaments that go together. That hasn’t been our style.

Yes, our tree is filled with “bric-a-branch.” The tree is an album of our own travels, lives and Christmases past. There’s not much rhyme or reason to our season, but golly it’s jolly. Wait, that did rhyme.

When the tree is decorated with our jumble of ornaments, and you stand back from it, warmed by the low-power glow of LED lights, it’s really not such a bad little tree. Odd, a little quirky with rare bursts of sophistication. Just like the family whose house it adorns.

The Roanoke Times

APRIL 5, 2020

**From the Tooth Fairy to pantsless Zoom meetings, The Dadline answers**

**your parenting questions**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

The viral unpleasantness that has forced families to hunker down has prompted many questions from loyal Dadline readers. Some questions — such as “Why did we decide to have so many children?” and “Is it necessary to wear pants while in a Zoom meeting?” — were either too philosophical or too obvious for the Dadline guy to answer.

I mean, of course, pants are optional. Am I right?

Other questions included these below, which I will happily answer. You’re welcome.

**Will the Easter Bunny be making his rounds during the COVID-19 outbreak?**

Yes, he will. The Easter Bunny was designated as “essential” in recent executive orders at local, state and federal levels. He also released a statement that said, “All Easter eggs are prepared using the best safety practices, which include boiling and using bleach-based dying techniques.” Plus, because the Easter Bunny works at night and his M.O. is all about staying out of public view, the whole social distancing deal shouldn’t be a problem.

**And what about the Tooth Fairy?**

Ask yourself: Have you ever seen a sick fairy? According to a local epidemiologist, fairies are immune to ALL diseases and cannot transmit them to the general public! For families who still have concerns and wish to keep visitors outside the house, the Tooth Fairy will happily make transactions through Venmo or other online payment means. Curbside pickup of teeth can be scheduled by using the handy Tooth Fairy app.

**What is the record for most consecutive meals that include toast?**

The current record is 167, set by the Clabber family of Bemidji, Minnesota, during the harsh winter of 1978. Based on the present rate of toast consumption in my house, that record will fall around April 12.

**Should my children be planning for college or hoarding toilet paper?**

Both. If they’ve hoarded a lot of toilet paper, they could sell it and use the money to pay part of their tuition. Now, if they’ve hoarded, like, tons of it, they could skip the college part all together.

**Years from now, when my kids are asked by their own children, “What did you do during the coronavirus quarantine,” will their answer make them proud?**

Absolutely. Lying around all day. Playing video games. Noodling on Instagram and Snapchat for hours. Perhaps not since the days of the Great Depression and World War II has a generation risen so heroically to meet such a mighty challenge. As Roanoker Jessica Bates Edwards posted on Facebook about her own teenagers, “This is the public health emergency they were born for.”

**After all the social-distancing is over and people go out in public again, what will be the biggest difference we’ll notice?**

People forgetting that they don’t have any pants on.

Hang in there, everybody!

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MAY 17, 2020

**Stop telling the Class of 2020 to just get over it**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

This graduation address for the Class of 2020 is directed not to the seniors, but to the senior citizens, some of whom need to stop telling the children to just get over it.

Look, just about all of us, young and old alike, sympathize and grieve with the Class of 2020 — which are really classes of 2020, because every high school and college provides its own distinctive experiences and traditions for its students.

Graduates didn’t just lose their commencement ceremonies and the chance to wear ankle-length gowns and tasseled mortarboards. They also lost the things that made their schools unique, whether they be drama club plays, choir concerts, sports seasons, senior-class traditions or other school customs that made their school experience different from anywhere else.

These graduates have been celebrated with online postings, yard signs and other commemorations that remind us not only of the students’ achievements but also of their losses. Entire school communities of parents, grandparents, teachers, friends and neighbors have pulled together to honor the Class of 2020, who richly deserve it.

But there’s a small segment of cranks who relish in telling the students that they should stop whining about their fate, that missing their graduations and proms is no tragedy or that losing their last-ever chance to play team sports or perform in a concert constitutes no sacrifice.

When Virginia Tech professor Nikki Giovanni wrote to this newspaper to suggest that the Hokie Class of 2020 deserved some type of monument to recognize their lost year, you’d have thought she had proposed to burn down the War Memorial.

I don’t want to sound too harsh, because the overwhelming majority of people, be they millennials, Gen Xers, boomers and on up, fully support and sympathize with the Class of 2020. However, a not insignificant number of folks keep telling the Class of 2020 to stop whining, even though none of these youngsters is doing that. It’s the “these kids today” crowd, old-timers who all got to go to their own graduations, ball games, recitals, debutante balls, Sadie Hawkins Dances and corn shuckings.

Now, before you call to tell me that you dropped out of high school to join the United States Army and fight for your country, or that you quit school at age 16 because you had to go to work to support your family, let me just say that I sincerely thank you for your service and I commend your unselfishness and commitment to help those who needed you. I agree that those actions are true sacrifices. Let me add that you would have been an exception to practically everybody else you went to school with.

Pretty much all of us had a senior year. Some of us had the times of our lives and others of us rejoiced when it was all over, but at least the experience wasn’t ripped away from us.

I talked with my father recently over the phone, because we have not been able to meet in person for more than two months now, and we discussed what it would have been like to have lost springtime of our own high school senior years. I recounted some of the things that happened my last semester of high school, from playing baseball to having a role in the school’s spring production of “The Wizard of Oz,” just a couple of things that have been memorable not just for me, but for my family, too.

Even my old man admitted that it was impossible to fathom a world where those experiences never happened.

Look, the Class of 2020 did not deserve for a virus to wipe out their senior springs, nor have they asked for pity. We’re all going through things that generations of Americans have never had to experience. Everybody’s simply trying to make the best of the situation that confronts us. Some families have lost loved ones to the disease, which is far greater than losing a game or ceremony. Everybody knows that.

None of that, though, makes what happened to the Class of 2020 easier to bear. The sting of loss is real and the raw emotions are genuine.

Besides, these kids will be incorrigible grumps themselves someday. Think about it. Decades from now, when some bratty youngster whines about how rotten his pitiful life is because his robot maid went on strike or dad’s convertible space cruiser is out of nuclear fuel, the Class of 2020 will say, “Ha! You think you got it so tough, you don’t know how good you have it! Let me tell you what my generation went through, kid! I didn’t even get to graduate!”

Maybe they don’t need a pillar of granite that memorializes their loss, or maybe all of us do, but don’t say that the students didn’t sacrifice for the greater good. One definition of “sacrifice” according to Merriam-Webster is the “destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else.” Sounds like what happened to the Class of 2020’s spring.