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The yearly Christmas letter demands a good editor

by Melissa Musick Nussbaum

My Table Is Spread
Christmas 2013

The day after my mother's funeral we were talking and telling stories. My kids were remembering various scrapes they escaped largely thanks to their grandmother's help. As he listened to stories of fender benders and missed classes and parties cleared away and hushed up before we, the parents, got home, my nephew said, "Well, I never read about any of this in the Christmas letter."

I said, "Oh, sweetie, the kids never had a perfect life. They just had a really good editor."

His comment reminded me of the year a college-aged friend, whose family we have known for many years, sent his own letter in response to mine. In it, he described his mother, sitting in a rocking chair near the Christmas tree, reading the annual Nussbaum missive by the twinkling lights and "weeping over her own rat-bastard sons." He also knows a thing or two about editing.

The Christmas letters will start pouring in just about the time you decide to throw away the Thanksgiving turkey carcass. Looks like you're not going to make homemade stock. Again.

One of the letters may be mine. And it's not so much a letter, as a pamphlet, a booklet. Think of it as a Kindle single, only one you didn't order.

I thought of the skills required to craft a good holiday letter sitting in a movie theater watching "Gravity." There's a scene where Sandra Bullock, playing the medical researcher, Dr. Ryan Stone, is alone in an abandoned Soviet space station. She sheds her bulky spacesuit and we see her floating amid the debris of the spacecraft. People familiar with life in space tell us that a real astronaut, having taken off the pressurized suit, would be weightless in adult diapers, that is, Space Depends.

The director chose, instead, to have Bullock floating in cute, tight boy shorts (and a tank top -- the view from space is, indeed, breathtaking). She's still alone, still desperate, still in danger of death, and still without a survival plan (or George Clooney!), but looking mighty fine.

So the basic story line isn't altered. But, and I think you will agree, the director's choice keeps us from looking at the absorbent bulk and wondering, in light of the many space explosions and gruesome deaths that have kept Dr. Stone busy all day: "Just how long has it been since she changed that thing, anyway?"

The Christmas letter author needs a director's eye and a film editor's willingness to leave hours of the story on the cutting-room floor.

Though it may have taken up a good part of your child's eighth-grade year, how much, really, do old neighbors and college roommates need to know about the search for a cystic acne treatment?

Who really wants to hear about the various body parts relocating south or the supervisor who has you searching the Internet at midnight for job opportunities in Abu Dhabi?

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Do people want to know that you visited Italy? Perhaps. Do they want to know the details about the cryptosporidium parvum you're pretty sure you picked up at a café near the Uffizi Palace? Probably not.

The Christmas letter is to writing what cocktail parties are to conversation. You want to be interesting and informative and, if you can manage it, witty.

The problem is: You need material. Five children provide lots of material, but as they grow, they are less and less interested in entertaining your childhood friends with their clever and heartwarming antics. Enough Christmases of pictures and stories deemed embarrassing (pictures) or overdone/apocryphal (stories) marked my decision to concentrate on the grandchildren.

The oldest two grandchildren just turned 10 and the youngest is 1. So far, they don't pay attention to Ma-Maw's Christmas letter. So I probably will tell you about Baby Helena. Ask her what the cat (or the duck or the Bosc pear says) and she will let out her most ferocious roar and then fall over laughing. Her first joke, and a pretty good one, too.

I will tell you how 2-year-old Clement squeals as I push him in the swing, "Here comes joy!"

I will tell you how Bess, almost 2, accompanies me everywhere. When I perform in the bathroom, she claps her hands, smiles and says, "Good job, Ma-Maw."

I will also tell you about the six older grandchildren at Cousins Camp 2013. I'll tell you what happened, but I'll keep the image of those boy shorts handy when I decide what to include (holding hands and jumping off together into the creek) and what to omit (the push -- accidental? -- into the creek). Because the kids are getting older. For the first two, adolescence is looming.

I expect the letter will shrink to manageable size during that awkward phase between college-aged grandchildren and tiny greats. And I may not be able to tell many stories without giving you a glimpse of the dread Space Depends. So, I'm already trying out some possibilities. They always seem to boil down to this:

"We're still here ... barely."

Ho ho ho.

[NCR columnist Melissa Musick Nussbaum can be found online at thecatholiccatalogue.com.]

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