

BEING PRESENT

BY Tracey Sargent

There may not be a pleasing crunch of white snow underfoot, no cold winter wind gusting through tall pine trees, and no fire warming my hearth, but Christmas is most definitely in the air. Coinciding with the heat and humidity of summer, the festive season in Australia is a very different experience to the traditional white Christmas so often romantically portrayed as the typical. Even though I do dream of one day celebrating a snow-filled Christmas, I'm actually very fond of that day in late December where the temperatures soar and the heat visibly shimmers in the air.

Yes that's right, I'm one of those people. Even though I'm not religious, have never felt the need to wear a garishly decorated Christmas shirt, and may not always bother with decorations, I really enjoy the festive season. But before you give up on me as a lost cause and ship me back to the North Pole, I'm the first to admit there are lots of reasons not to like Christmas. Of course there's the horrifyingly blatant commercial push, which encourages us to spend, spend, spend at every turn. We also have to endure the unerringly cheerful carols, which assault our ears ad nauseam. Not to mention the way that many of the shops, office and homes we visit, end up disappearing behind thick curtains of tinsel, baubles and flashing lights. This multi-layered attack on our senses can make us feel like there's no escape from all that schmaltzy good cheer.

In the lead up to the festive time of year, we can also find ourselves caught up in the unique stresses of the season. Like any occasion that is widely celebrated, Christmas has a way of bringing family and social pressures to the forefront. Combining that with the pressure we place on ourselves to meet everyone's expectations, and create a magical day in which every moment is made rich with meaning, well it's no wonder so many of us find little enjoyment in the day.

Working in a gift store for many years, at Christmas time I got to see the very best and the very worst of people. At that time of

year shoppers were more likely to suffer from an acute case of retail desperation. On the final shopping night, the store would be inundated with frantic people, each with a certain crazy glint in their eyes. They gave little thought to what they were buying, just so long as it was something. I'd find myself thinking that surely our thoughts, gestures and company would mean more to our friends and family than any bought token or trinket?

My love of the festive season isn't due to the number of presents waiting under the tree, the functions I'll be attending, or even how much time I'll be taking off work. Instead it has everything to do with appreciating the simple pleasures of the here-and-now, and recalling memories from Christmases that have come before. I think about the fragrance of fresh pine needles, the sound of wrapping paper being unrolled, and the periodic pull-and-rip of sticky tape from behind closed doors. Now that I'm older, Christmas also brings with it the comforting feeling of togetherness, as far-flung family members and friends make the journey back home to gather over a meal or a drink, catching up in a way that can't be done by phone or email.

When I think about my fondest Christmas memories, they have little to do with the gifts I received, the meals I indulged in, or how the table was decorated. Instead my warmest memories have everything to do with people and the time we spent together - hanging homemade decorations, playing a game of backyard cricket, trying out a new recipe, and laughing - there is always lots of laughter.

These are the moments that cannot be bought in any store, that refuse to be planned for, and are impossible to wrap with paper and ribbon. These happy memories will stay with us long after the wrapping paper fades, well after the tree has been taken down, and when the last of the Christmas ham has been forgotten.

By focusing our attention on people rather than things, and allowing ourselves to simply be present in the moment, we give time and space for the most wondrous of lasting memories to be created. Why not try it this year? You may just end up loving Christmas as much as I do.