

A Letter to Santa Claus

No, this is not a letter to Santa Claus, but it might as well have been one. In the early years of my adult life, living and working in and around social justice causes, I soon came to the realization that writing a letter to a high government official, a politician, or a celebrity in order to make a plea for help on behalf of one social justice cause or another was a complete waste of time, so much so, that I began to characterize the exercise as “writing a letter to Santa Claus.”

Even so, on occasion throughout my lifetime I continued to write Santa Claus letters. Sometimes, I wrote them because it made me feel better about myself; other times, I wrote them in order to assuage my anger, and, admittedly, on a very few occasions, I wrote with the hope that Santa Claus would answer. He never did. But whatever the reason I wrote and sent such letters, I had the personal satisfaction of knowing in advance that the letter was a waste of time in terms of achieving any positive result. Understanding this reality forced me to continue to seek new and more effective ways to develop enough leverage to force social change.

This letter to President Clinton is a good example of a Santa Claus letter. I wrote it at the request of, and out of respect for, John and Barbara Moore. The Moores raised three daughters, two of whom perished in the Jonestown tragedy, along with a very young grandson. This personal loss was of such immeasurable proportions that only their faith and good works through their Methodist ministry could make it in any way tolerable.

The only survivor of Jonestown left for John and Barbara was their son-in-law, Larry Layton, who was seized, tried and retried, was found guilty and finally sentenced to prison for what the presiding federal judge, Robert Peckham, thought would be a period of seven years. Because of the moral outrage and clamor surrounding Jonestown and its horrific outcome, seven years became seven more and by 1997 had reached 20. Judge Peckham, deceased in 1994, had written the prison authorities to oppose such an arbitrary and unusual prison extension, but to no avail.

With the close of President Clinton’s term of office coming due in a few years, the Moores and others mounted a campaign urging the president to

commute Layton's sentence before he left office. Because of my personal and working relationship with John and Barbara through Loaves & Fishes, my previous involvement in political circles, and my empathy and understanding about what had happened at Jonestown, they thought a letter from me would carry some special weight. They asked me to write President Clinton on Larry's behalf, and without hesitation, I agreed to do so.

Here follows a copy of my letter to Santa Claus.

February 24, 1997

Re: Release of Larry Layton

Dear President Clinton,

Justice has been well served; the time for mercy is long overdue.

I've been in and around politics far too long to have any expectation that this letter will come to President Clinton's personal attention. The best I can hope for is that the staff member reading this letter will be thoughtful, compassionate, and have a certain breadth of life experience to realize that Larry Layton has been in prison far beyond what justice requires and what Judge Robert Peckham ordered.

I, too, spent many years living in a "cult." During my high school years, I was permitted to visit home only once a year for three weeks and to receive family visitors only once a month. During my college years, I was not even permitted to visit home. I was required to turn over any gifts from family, relatives, or friends to my religious superior. Unconditional and unquestioned obedience to the superior was required at all times. I freely chose this monastic way of living during the 40's and 50's. It was deemed socially acceptable because the "cult" was a religious order of the Catholic Church.

Then again in the 60's and 70's, I lived, worked, and raised four small children in a movement "cult" whose mission was to organize and fight for the rights of California farmworkers. My wife and family lived in voluntary poverty, moved to any geographical location for assignment on a day's notice, lived in community, participated in endless meetings and retreats designed to deepen

our resolve and motivate our actions. We had to live under the constant threat of violence and retaliation – for us, it meant a bullet through our front window and my wife and children deliberately forced off the road by young thugs driving a pickup truck. Sometimes, I even felt paranoia about what, in other circumstances, would have been an innocent and harmless action or bantering. This movement “cult” had a strong personality/leader in the person of Cesar Chavez, who was under constant attack by agribusiness interests, but here again, this movement was deemed socially acceptable and ultimately was transformed into the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO.

In both of these “cults” there were any number of flash points, which, because of my total commitment, could have led me to lash out and strike back at hostile forces, perceived or real. I, too, could have ended up in prison as the result of living out my mission, for which I was trained and/or perhaps even programmed.

Think about it. If young men can be trained and motivated to give up their life for their country, why cannot the same be true for those trying to protect and preserve their religious calling?

The issue now before you is not whether Larry Layton is guilty or not. He has been incarcerated in prison for 19 years for his actions, which were the result of his participation in the “cult” of the People’s Temple. The issue is whether President Clinton should exercise mercy in Larry’s case and release him from prison.

With our century coming to a close, it seems to me only right and just – and yes, merciful, too – that the president wipe the slate clean for Larry Layton and for all others who have paid the heavy price imposed by justice. If South Africa can heal itself from a century of unspeakable atrocities, then certainly we can too.

In the spirit of mercy,

LeRoy Chatfield

