

Christmas Narrative Essay

Decorating our tree each year is like opening an old trunk filled with stories of bygone days. With lights strung and Christmas music playing, my husband, Nirmal, and I unpack our ornaments— well over a hundred in all—and lay out these serendipitous treasures and cherished memories collected over the years. Carefully, I hang each one.

I bet I'm the only person in the world who hangs her wedding cake topper. I also hang a brass cow tag to remind us that cows once grazed on the site of my children's middle school when we first moved to California 33 years ago. Perched on a prominent branch is a cocker spaniel Beanie Baby to remind us of our beloved dog, Monroe, who was part of our family for 17 years.

Onto the tree goes the Western Union Dolly- Gram—a small stuffed doll with straw hair who holds a message—sent by my husband's college roommate to congratulate us when our son, JP, arrived in 1967. I also hang my son's bright red baby booties, as well as another pair of teeny-tiny booties that belonged to a preemie I took care of and loved when I was a young nurse.

The bottom branches are filled with plastic, wood and cloth ornaments, so little hands can touch and explore. A much-handled, much-loved plastic Santa and eight weary-looking reindeer fly across a low branch. There are yarn dolls, Life Savers candy dolls and McDonald's containers fashioned into picture frames, all made by our two children when they were young. An ice cream cone ornament (a real cone filled with pink foam "ice cream") made by our daughter, Tara, is still intact after 36 years. Also from school days are a tinsel-covered toilet paper roll and a painted-milk-carton Christmas Chicken, the first ornament JP ever made. It's a stretch to say it's a chicken, but my tree is never complete without it.

My newest ornaments reflect our youngest family members. I love the one that is a grandma bear hugging all her little grand-cubs. My four cubs—two boys, two girls, ages 8 to 12—all have their favorite ornaments, but their favorite of all is a glass pickle given to me by a friend. According to German tradition, I hide it deep in the tree's branches every Christmas Eve and the first child to find it wins a toy prize.

My father, mother, brother and grandparents are no longer here, but my tree honors their memories. My mother's hand-beaded balls hang on prominent branches; I remember my father's Macedonian heritage with a stem of red hot peppers and a miniature Greek dancer; a hummingbird perches on a high branch for my brother, who was an avid birder; and a sunflower shines for my grandmother, who lived with us when I was growing up and planted sunflowers by the front door. My mother-in-law hand-quilted the green-and-red skirt spread underneath my tree, and I hang a leather camel from India, where my husband and his family are from, a gift from my father-in-law.

My heart smiles when I gaze at my tree and I feel connected—closer to those who are no longer here, closer to those who are far away, closer to the past and closer to the present. I see not only my children and grandchildren sitting around the tree, but also the generations that have been before and those that are yet to be. I see them all—my family, our lives—in the glow of my tree.