Finding the Jou in Christmas

By P. A. Tatum

Christmas decorations appear in store windows earlier each year. With all the glitter, hoopla and commercialism now surrounding the holidays, it is not surprising the real meaning and spirit of Christmas — a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ — has become obscured.

Not so for Brooklyn, New York realtor, mother and homemaker Gloria McCourtie, whose Christmas' as a girl in her native Jamaica more than 40 years ago were times of strong family traditions and deep spiritual meaning.

Though she was born in Montego Bay, Mrs. McCourtie said she grew up in a country parish "away from all the glitter and glamour of the townships." In the country, the emphasis was on the religious, the spiritual, she said.

Some of Mrs. McCourtie's favorite memories were of her mother sitting at the piano early on Christmas morning, with the family, singing such songs as "Love Comes Down At Christmas."

The holidays meant special church services, polished silverware, company china being pulled from the shelves and the baking of the Christmas cake. One family ritual revolved around the polishing of the brass chandelier in preparation for the placing and lighting of Christmas candles.

But in all the preparations and giftgiving, her family never lost sight of the fact that Christmas was a religious holiday.

As an adult, Mrs. McCourtie spent 15 years in western and southeastern Africa with her husband, Whorthley, who worked for a United Nations agricultural agency, and their two children, Cheryl and Michael.

In Africa, Mrs. McCourtie continued to observe the traditional Christmases she knew as a child in Jamaica, even though many Africans, influenced by a strong Muslim history, did not.

Despite the absence of an official Christmas holiday in some African countries, Mrs. McCourtie was always able to find the Christmas trees and decorations that allowed her to continue to create the kind of holiday joy, for her family and friends, that she remembered from her youth.

But Christmas is not so clearly and easily enjoyed by everyone with happy childhood memories.

New York-based actress Darlene Bel Grayson was born and reared in Chicago. As a child, Ms. Bel Grayson said, "the fun and beauty of Christmas provided ceaseless wonderment and joy." But as she grew older, the talented stage and television actress said she found the holidays were "a time of little regard for me."

She called Christmas "a tradition created by mankind, but it was not a standard for loving. It failed to serve me spiritually, merely crushed me financially, hence my reluctant participation.'





Because of a personal search for spiritual meaning, Ms. Bel Grayson will find re-newed meaning in the Christmas holidays this year. "1988 marks the return of ceaseless wonderment and great joy. Having studied the Bible myself, I'm excited about God's standard for living and I eagerly embrace it I may buy presents, maybe not; whatever the choice, whatever the day, my heart will be there."

For each of us, whether we share the uncomplicated pleasure of Gloria McCourtie or the ambivalence of Darlene Bel Grayson, the Christmas holidays conjure memories of childhood, happy or sad; of times with family and friends or of the sharpened pain of a holiday alone.

Perhaps our sometimes elaborate entertaining and decorating and our search for the perfect gift, for ourself or someone we love, or that extra little something to put under the tree is really a search for a simpler, more spiritual Christmas we remember as children. A spirit we can only find in ourselves, not in the gifts we buy.

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