

## Finding Santa: It depends on how you look

By Maria Rodgers O'Rourke

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On Nov. 30, the European Space Agency reported that Santa Claus was in the Orion nebula.

Santa's silhouette, anyway; the ESA spotted a huge cloud of high-temperature gas with a "surrounding pattern of absorbing clouds [that] gives the detected gas its Santa Claus shape, with his prominent hat outlined by the northern gas bubble." The website [www.PhysOrg.com](http://www.PhysOrg.com) provides photos of the formation.

Orion's spectacular display comes as countless children pose the question, "Is Santa real?" For our daughters' queries, I've relied on my mother's words: "Santa is love." As a second-grade teacher and mother of six, she wove the underlying spirit of her response into relevant curriculum concepts.

For example, in science lessons she explained that even the most talented heart surgeon holds only the tissue in his hands. She asked her class, "Does the doctor see love, goodness, trust and happiness as he operates on the human heart?" "No," replied the class. "Do you know love, goodness, trust and happiness in your life — the most dynamic functions of the human heart?" The answer was an emphatic "Yes!"

Mom shared with her family and students her rich perspective on life: There is more than meets the eye. Although my husband and I never were completely comfortable with misleading our daughters, we welcomed Santa into our home because we want them to share this perspective, too.

Life is enriched through acts of love and generosity, and it truly isn't so much the gift but the spirit in which it is given that counts.

As we approach the winter solstice, many of the world's religions are celebrating festivals of light, family and community. On December 22, our hemisphere will begin tilting toward the sun; by Christmas Day, summer will be on the way.

Children who've grown up with the Santa story in their homes eventually learn the truth, and it's best to let them discover it on their own, according to Carl Anderson, assistant adjunct professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin.

In his psychology dissertation on how children react to the discovery that Santa isn't real, he wrote, "They related deciding to no longer believe, or knowing the truth, as an indication that they were growing up, and they had a certain degree of pride in the fact that they were on the side of those who knew the truth."

Although a mythical figure, Santa takes these children on perhaps their first quest to find light in the darkness. Last year, I applied Anderson's advice to my youngest daughter's quest. After I evaded the question several times, the 6-year-old cornered me one evening at the kitchen counter. Staring straight into my eyes she asked: "Mom, is Santa real? Do you believe in Santa?"

I took a deep breath and searched for the words my mother told me. "Well, Katie, Santa is love. He is not only in the packages that you unwrap, but in the greatest gift we give: the gift of ourselves to each other."

I chose my words carefully, too slowly for my eager child. Impatient, she interrupted me and said, "Well, I believe in him." She stared one second longer, emphasizing her point. I smiled, gazed back and conceded, "I believe in

him, too." She hopped down and ran from the room.

Like Katie, we'll have moments in life when we have to answer the question, "do you believe?" Like the gas clouds in Orion, your answer will depend on how you look at it.

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