

A Hindu Christmas philosophy: “Why *not* celebrate?”

BY BRANDON BEARD

Santa Claus resident Shanthi Thake has lived in the United States for the last 40 years, but she was born and raised in the Indian country of Malaysia, more specifically its capital city, Kuala Lumpur. Though India is home to over a billion people of diverse backgrounds, faiths, and cultures, a large majority (nearly 80%) of its citizens practice the religion of Hinduism. Shanthi herself grew up in a Hindu family and remains a faithful Hindu to this day. There are, of course, millions of Christians, Muslims and Buddhists who also populate Malaysia, and according to Shanthi, followers of the various religions often celebrate each other's holidays as a sign of unity, friendship and respect — including Christmas.

“The culture of Malaysia is that, when the Muslims have their festival, they open their homes and we all go,” she explains. “So it's always open house — we go from house to house celebrating with them. And when it's Christmas, we go to our Christian friends' houses. When Hindus have Diwali, everyone comes to our house. So it's that kind of culture. When we were in school, our friends would invite us to their house, and then we'll just go to their cousin's house — we don't even know them, but it's just that kind of hospitality in how all the different holidays are celebrated in Malaysia.”

Shanthi's family had a very close friend, a Christian, who would invite the family over for lunch or dinner every year on Christmas. And though her family obviously did not decorate their own home for the Christmas season, they did receive an annual visit from a very important Christmas figure. “When I was very little, my father had a British friend — an old bachelor — who would dress up as Santa and come to our house. Every Christmas without fail, he would dress up as Santa, bring his toys, and walk in our front door — and

I'd run right under the bed. I was petrified of Santa Claus,” she recalls with laughter.

One of her most precious Christmas memories from her life in Malaysia was the first Christmas she got to share with her future husband, Tom, a Christian and Chicago native to whom she has now been married for 41 years. The two met and began dating in 1976 when Tom was volunteering with the Peace Corps in Malaysia.

“It was his first Christmas away from home,” she begins. “And my mom said, ‘Oh! We should do something for him! How do we do it?’ So she made Tom top her Evergreen in our backyard. And of course we don't have ornaments — we are Hindus! So we popped popcorn and strung it, and got red beads and strung them, and had Christmas for Tom. My mom did not want Tom to feel like he'd missed out on Christmas.”

Tom and Shanthi married the next year and have called Santa Claus their home the last 25 years (who would've thought that the little girl who was so terrified of the Jolly Old Elf would end up living in a town named after him?). The couple, who have three grown children, continue to celebrate Christmas together, along with the Hindu holiday of Diwali, which normally takes place just a few weeks before Christmas (between late October and early November).

Diwali is derived from the word “deepavali”, which translates to “a row of lights”. Also called the Festival of Lights, Diwali is celebrated by Hindus in honor of King Rama's return from a 14-year exile as well as Lord Krishna's defeat of a demon called Narakasura. “It's essentially about light overcoming darkness, so we put lights everywhere,” Shanthi explains. The lights — mainly consisting of little oil lamps with wicks — are placed all around both the interior and exterior of the house as a way to ward off the darkness and welcome in the light of good.

“It's just like Christmas — lights every-

where,” Shanthi continues. And also like Christmas, Diwali celebrations include lots of food and gift-giving.

In observing both Christmas and important Hindu traditions like Diwali, Shanthi and Tom say they have instilled in their three children a respect for people of all faiths.

“That's how we raised our children,” Tom says.

“And that's how my mom raised me,” Shanthi says. “She would always say, ‘You look at the sun — if you wear different shades of glasses, you will see Him in a different light. It is the same sun.’”

Shanthi recalls how, after Christmas, her mother would sometimes find pictures of Christ that had fallen onto the street — perhaps by an absent-minded child or a busy parent who had unknowingly dropped the pic-

ture while corralling his or her children.

“My mother would pick those pictures up off the ground, because she didn't want anyone to step on them. And she would put it in our altar, so we have our Hindu altar and we'll have that picture of Christ there, because he's a person of faith. That's how we believe.”

And that's how Shanthi Thake, as a Hindu, sees Christmas, too. “It's a holy day, so why not celebrate and honor it?”



Tom and Shanthi Thake

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