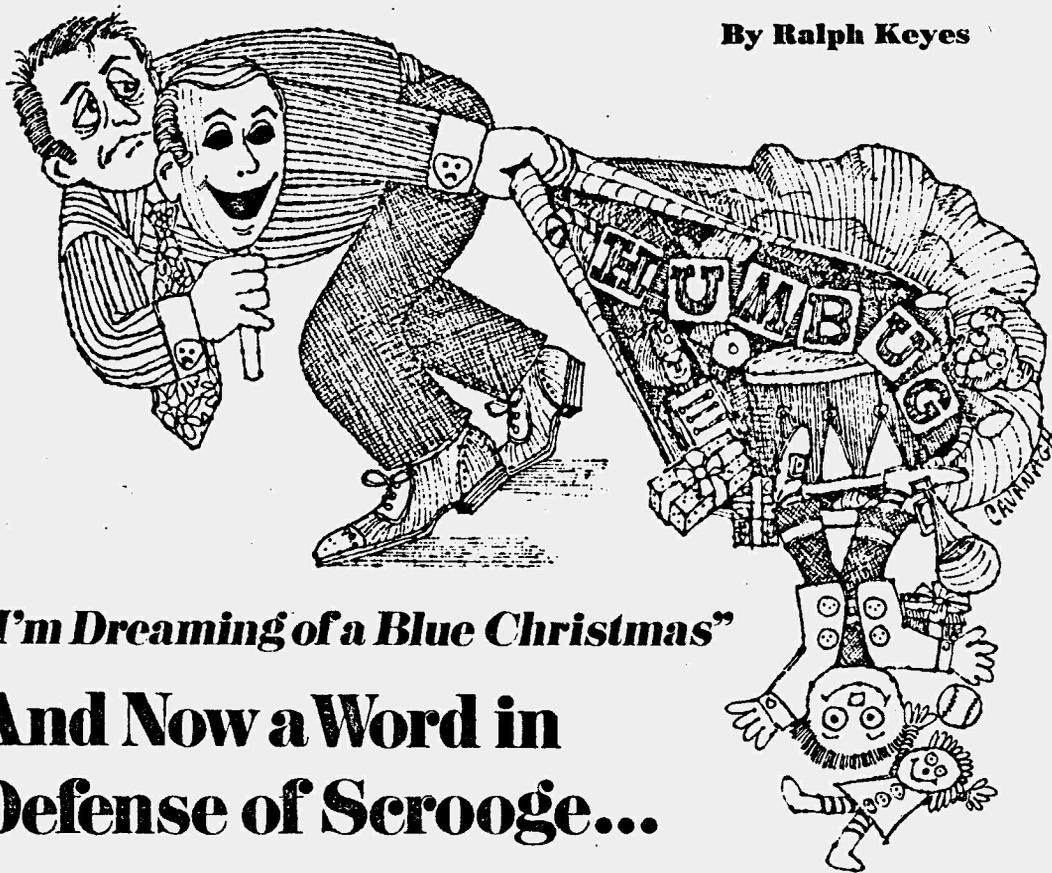


By Ralph Keyes



"I'm Dreaming of a Blue Christmas"

And Now a Word in Defense of Scrooge...

"Many of the faces that *look* happy aren't really happy. It's that they feel they *should* be happy. So the grins grow more manic, and those who can't even force a smile grow sadder by contrast."

Ever since psychology was invented, counselors have done a bumper business during December and January. The more striking thing is how casually we've come to accept trauma as a natural part of the Christmas spirit, along with mistletoe, eggnog and office-party hi-jinks.

Lyndon Johnson, who suffered through more than five years as President without cigarettes, went back to smoking two winters after leaving the White House. Asked what got him off the wagon, LBJ replied: "The trials and tribulations of Christmas."

The holiday season is not necessarily a merry one for many of America's 48 million single adults, especially the 4.2 million old people living alone (nearly double the number of a decade ago). Or for that portion of our divorced parents who will spend the holiday away from their children. Or for my next-door neighbor who must clerk at a grocery this Christmas.

Muriel and I, without children of our

own, and thousands of miles from home, find that each year the weeks preceding Christmas become more filled with worry and tension. Who will we spend December 25th with this year? The day should be celebrated around children, cooing over their gifts and doing a jigsaw puzzle together. So whose kids should we exploit this year? The Coulsons have moved to Tempe with their seven. George and Mary Mansfield have a neat family, but we already shared their Christmas once. Maybe Paul and Annie Elsbree wouldn't mind if we hung around that day, if their parents don't take them to Phoenix to be with aunts and uncles.

Holiday rituals may be suited to intimate community settings, but they just become distorted in our sprawling suburban society. Trying to celebrate Christmas as if we still lived in villages with the family system intact only makes some of us more aware of how cut off from each other we've become.

The director of a mental-health

clinic in New York says their greatest volume of calls for help comes between 9:30 and 11 a.m. on the Monday following a holiday. Many calls are from those living alone; many more are from victims of too much "togetherness" with the family on a long holiday weekend.

Such emotional trauma is not the only fallout of our Christmas celebration. December is also the month when all manner of crime skyrockets, from homicide to check forgery. Burglars especially look forward to the Christmas season because there are so many gifts to lift. Pickpockets love Christmas, because the jammed sidewalks and store aisles make pickpocketing easier than shoplifting. Fraud peddlers too, say bunko-squad members, love Christmas because it's so easy to wrap schemes as gifts.

The holidays are hard for hospitals (their emergency wards are fuller than usual due to holiday-related accidents); for police (highway patrols go on spe-

cial alert at this time of year); and for firemen (drying pine needles and overloaded electrical circuits take their toll each year).

In a perceptive paper given near two decades ago, Dr. James Cattell described a psychiatric condition called the "Holiday Syndrome." Syndrome symptoms, according to Cattell, include diffuse anxiety, feelings of helplessness, irritability, bitter replay of youthful holiday experiences, and the wish for magical solution to current problems. The syndrome sufferer, wrote Cattell, "has feelings of isolation, loneliness and boredom. The Holiday Syndrome is an exaggeration of this underlying pattern especially in view of the cultural emphasis on emotional closeness and evaluation of self."

The holiday season doesn't create emotional problems so much as permit them to surface, emphasizes Dr. George Pollock, director of Chicago's Institute for Psychoanalysis, who has studied psychological reactions to special occasions. "The enforced merriment," explains Pollock, "the enforced partying the whole enforced holiday, does not permit defense mechanisms to operate as effectively as they do on other occasions."

At Christmas more than any other time of year we feel pressure to keep up appearances of joy to the world and goodwill to men. Yet the Yuletide paradoxically, is a time of enhanced sadness for those of us who feel we ought to be happy—but can't. All many of the faces that *look* happy aren't really happy. It's that they feel they *should* be happy. So the grins grow more manic, and those who can't even force a smile grow sadder by contrast.

Unfortunately, those of us who are finding Christmas a privation this year will, as in years past, assume it's our fault, that all are joyful but us; and we will swallow our humbugs so that others can continue making merry. But I can't help feeling that the best thing that could happen to Christmas would be a relaxation of compulsory and compulsive merrymaking. As it is, those who are feeling blue this Yuletide are forced to suffer before all the grinning faces. Believe me, there is no greater torture. 