

It's the most wonderful time of the year! I love the Christmas season and everything about it.

I love the decorating as evidenced by my outdoor display. Yes, Virtual Santa is up and you can watch him through my window delivering gifts nightly. I won't even call the police on you for peeking through my windows!

I love the special foods! At our house we have your standard seasonal fare, but to that we add a night of fondue, a special brunch with my biscuits and sausage gravy, and our special once-a-year treat - super deep-dish pizza from Giordano's in Chicago shipped in. That love of seasonal food is evidenced by my seasonal weight gain.

I love giving presents to my friends and family. It is usually the biggest disagreement my wife Jen and I have every year – when to stop with the gifts. She seems to think the limits we established on spending for each other's gifts are, well, a limit. I like to think of the present limits as general guidelines to be acknowledged and then quickly ignored. So I go a little over the top sometimes. Like the time Jen asked for some caramel popcorn for a gift and I bought her 5 gallons of it. Or the time she wanted a gel pen so I got her a set of 50. Or the time my daughter Alayna wanted a stuffed teddy bear and I bought her, I mean, arranged for Santa to bring her, a six-foot stuffed bear. Of course this present buying is evidenced by my credit card balance at the end of the season –and a six-foot bear in my living room.

I love the music this time of year with it blaring throughout the house. I LOVE the movies! We have a large stack of DVDs we work through from Thanksgiving until Christmas Eve, everything from two different versions of A Christmas Carol, to Elf, to a Christmas Story, to Die Hard (yes Jen! It is a Christmas movie!).

Mostly, though, I love the reasons and thoughts of the season. One of my favorites is Peace on Earth. To me it's not just a line from Christmas songs or part of a Nativity play, but something that may be truly achieved someday. Maybe not in my lifetime, but someday.

Before you roll your eyes and tell me to go back to hanging lights outside my house, hear me out. There is a very thought-provoking book that Bill Gates of Microsoft fame suggested everyone should read called *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* by Steven Pinker. Let me warn you though, it is a long book filled with incredibly gruesome stories of just how horrible mankind used to be to itself.

I won't bore you with a full book review here, but the author conducts a meta-study, pulling together the works of researchers on various forms of violence. The research shows how in instance after instance our time of peace is growing so that the chief cause of death in the world is not war and the problems associated with war (famine, disease). It's now heart disease. According to Pinker and the hundreds of studies cited in the book, the world is much better place than it was in Roman times, or the Dark Ages, or the Old West, or the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

We have been on a downward slope of ending violence. We don't sanction dueling on the lawn after insults, burn cats for entertainment, cut off people's noses for spite, and declare war over perceived slights. Murder rates around the world are lower, human rights are up. We are better people now. Why? Why have we gotten more peaceful, and, more importantly, when will Brian get to the point of this article since it's supposed to be about the college in some way?

The author lays out many reasons for the decline and I invite you to read them all yourself, but my personal favorite reason is education. (Ah, here it comes – my point at last).

Example after example shows that more people learning how to read led them to read stories about other people, stories such as Uncle Tom's Cabin which turned much of the nation against slavery. Stories about the effects of torture, the treatment of women, child abuse, animal cruelty, and on and on showed people what life was like for those on the receiving end of violence. Thanks to literacy and good storytelling, society started to develop empathy for those who were being brutalized because they could imagine what life was like through someone else's eyes.

Learning about how another human on the planet with us lives their life and developing understanding about another culture makes it a lot harder for us to hate that culture outright. Knowledge is the enemy of hate. Knowledge of our shared human condition leads to empathy and understanding. In this information age, and the expansion of education around the world, people are connecting, embracing diversity, and learning that we are more alike than we are different. Those things make it hard to declare war on someone.

Embracing diversity is one of the many aspects of our college mission and purposes statement. We achieve this through coursework, extracurricular activities, and through hiring employees from all walks of life and admitting students from all over the country and the world. This purpose of embracing diversity is important to prepare students for living in a diverse world. The optimist in me believes that if more people developed empathy and embraced diversity, it might lead to something much larger one day.

Peace on Earth.

Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and a Happy New Year from the Inbodys to you and your family!

If you have any questions or comments about this article please contact me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).