

A Christmas Thought for Children

A letter was received in the mail:

I am eight years old. Some of my friends say there is no law. Papa says "if you see it in the Green Bag, it's so." Tell me the truth, is there law?

The letter was signed by Virginia O'Hanlon. The Bag is pleased to publish the following response provided by a subscriber.



Virginia,

Your friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except what they see. They think nothing can be that does not fit their belief that all men and women are possessed by the mendacity they see in much human conduct, including perhaps much of their own.

Not believe in law! You might as well not believe in Christmas or the sentiments we celebrate on that day. True, Santa does not satisfy all our wants and needs. One reason is that he has fewer helpers than he needs, and there are sometimes people who get in his way. As you have observed, when we try to provide our winter birds with seeds we cannot prevent the squirrels from feeding. Those little rodents do not share our concern for the nourishment of birds and they seldom if ever deny themselves a benefit merely to accommodate our purpose. Alas, people are creatures in some ways resembling squirrels; all of us some of the time, and some of us all the time, are prone to claim sweets and toys intended for others. Were that not so, Santa would have an easier time and there would be more Christmases for more children. But the Christmas spirit of kindness and generosity survives. It withstands all our greed and mendacity much as our affection for other creatures survives our knowledge of their greed and cruelty to one another. Those poor souls who do

not believe in the spirit of kindness and generosity are in error.

And yes, Virginia, there is also law. It exists as certainly as honesty and intelligence and self-restraint exist in the human heart. Like the spirit of kindness and generosity, law, too, is a benefit intended to serve those who most need its protection. It sustains our communities, most often by expressing our shared morality and confirming our right to self-respect when our behavior gives no offense to the rights of others. There are always squirrel-like creatures seeking to find its defects and weaknesses so that they can secure a benefit or a protection intended for others. Just as no one has invented the squirrel-proof bird feeder, so those who make laws have found no way to make them proof against all the mendacious behavior brought to bear against them. Because law often fails to achieve perfection, there are those such as your friends who say there is no law, that law, like Christmas, is an illusion intended to beguile childish citizens.

No law? Thank heaven it lives. It is a spirit that inhabits the hearts of those who cherish their fellow citizens and the republic they share. If you believe (and who can deny it?) that men and women can share a thought and record it so that others can understand it, and that they can conform their behavior to the needs of others, then you must surely believe with us that law abides, and will abide with humans so long as they live together in communities and share governments.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Paul D. Carrington
Chadwick Professor of Law
Duke University

