

Yes, There Really Was a Virginia...

"Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." You've heard that quote all your life, right? It's one of the most iconic and well-known of Christmas-related quotes. But do you know the story behind that famous sentence? Did you know that it involved very real people, and not characters from a fictional Christmas tale?

Here's how it happened...

Nagging Doubts

Virginia O'Hanlon was 8 years old. And she was beginning to have doubts. All of her life she had believed in Santa Claus. All of her life she had believed in a kindly, benevolent old soul who mysteriously slipped into her home every Christmas Eve and left gifts that he hand-picked just for her.

But Virginia no longer considered herself a child. After all, she had reached the ripe old age of eight. She was becoming wise to the ways of the world. Her friends were, too. And they were circulating some rumors about Santa Claus; rumors that made her feel sophisticated, wise and worldly - and also a bit empty inside.

According to those rumors, Santa was just a myth. He wasn't real. Those gifts that Santa brought her every year? They weren't *really* from Santa; they were from her parents.

She had cherished the notion of Santa her entire life. She had *believed* in him all her life. *All* of her life! Could it really be possible that he didn't even exist? But her friends were awfully smart. They were mature and worldly (some of them were even ten years old!). She couldn't just dismiss what they were saying.

So she turned to the next-smartest people she knew: her parents. She asked them flat-out: Is Santa real? Their answer was less than satisfying. They didn't exactly say that there was no such thing as Santa. But they didn't quite say that he was real, either. (Could it be that they didn't know?)

But she had to have an answer; she just *had* to! And so in desperation she turned to one other trusted source, an inviolable fount of wisdom that her own father declared printed nothing but truth: the newspaper. She sent a letter to the editor of the *New York Sun*.

An Answer of Unchallengeable Wisdom and Truth

Virginia's question to the editorial staff of The Sun was straightforward and direct: "Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?"

Imagine, for a moment, that you're the editor tasked with responding to Virginia's question. You're a hardened newspaperman, accustomed to dealing with the gritty realities of life on a daily basis. Editorializing about prickly political issues and reporting upon the tragedies and triumphs of people worldwide are all in a day's work.

But this? This is different.

How do you respond to this child without crushing her? How do you respond truthfully without tarnishing one of the most revered icons of childhood - not only for Virginia, but also for the countless other children that will learn of your response?

Fortunately for Virginia - and for all of us - that editor was apparently a man of rare wisdom and compassion, for his answer was perfect: "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see."

The Greatest Christmas Gift?

The editor that responded to Virginia's question went unnamed until after his death in 1906. That's because the newspaper had a policy of publishing only anonymous editorials.

But his name was Francis Church. And as a former Civil War correspondent, it's likely that he was very acquainted with the most brutal realities of life. Perhaps that better enabled him to cherish and nurture the precious, ethereal innocence of childhood.

Virginia's question and Mr. Church's response was first published in 1897. And it's been reprinted countless times in the many years since. It's become an integral component of modern-day Christmas culture.

"Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus..."

A simple and wise answer that granted permission to believe, not only to Virginia, but to all of us. Has ever a more precious Christmas gift been given?