



photograph by Amber Dorko Stopper

KRAMPUSLAUF philadelphia

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In 2011, Philadelphia celebrated its first all-comers, secular holiday event based on the pre-Christian Germanic tradition of the Krampuslauf. For a few hours on a December evening about seventy-five of us, adults and children, friends and strangers, enjoyed the company of Krampus – the Devil of Christmas, the man-goat who takes poorly behaved children away in a basket – in Philadelphia’s Liberty Lands park.

A Facebook contact of mine – the artist Arun Once-Was-ZyGoat – had held a Krampuslauf in his neighborhood in Portland, Oregon in 2010, and it was his event that made me decide that I needed to try it in my own city. I watched Arun’s event from afar, knitting and

mailing him a “Teddy Krampus” to match the one I had knitted for my own kids, and I committed to planning a Philadelphia event for 2011.

I couldn’t map my expectations, though, to anything I’d ever experienced. I knew what I didn’t want more than what I did, and initial interested parties frustrated me: “Let’s do it indoors, so people don’t get cold!” “Let’s make it a bar crawl!” “Let’s make sure it’s not too scary, so kids can be there!”

I wanted a leveled field, a blurred line between those “entertaining” and those receiving “entertainment.” I was emphatic that there was an exciting, rewarding, non-damaging way for my own children – both three at

the time – to experience Krampus the way children had experienced him for hundreds of years, without making him into a Disney character. And there were already plenty of themed bar crawls to go to; who needed another?

And so we stumbled along in our planning. At first just a few friends; then, with the organizers of the amazing Liberty Lands park (the head of which, Janet Finegar, happened to be a puppeteer with a degree in Folklore). We had a “Krampus Consciousness-Raising” table at Liberty Lands’ Fall Festival, where Krampus Lore 101 was made available to anyone who was curious. We didn’t try to “sell” the event, just let people know about it, and we modestly suggested that it was something other than a bad idea. (“Your kid has night terrors? Maybe they shouldn’t come; then again, maybe it would be the best thing for them.”)

The Friends of Liberty Lands built a fire pit in the park. As December approached, we held a puppet-making workshop, Krampus screen printing session, and made wood-and-bottlecap noisemakers – an afternoon which included, for no well-thought-out reason, an Abraham Lincoln impersonator singing Beatles songs to the kids. This event alone was deeply rewarding for me, in that I felt a level of trust and comfort growing with the families who were planning to attend the Lauf – still having, it seemed, little more idea than Janet or I did about what we would actually do.

Philly is no Alpine village. And using a Krampuslauf as the excuse to invite anyone who wished to see other comers as fellow “villagers,” without the aid of an indoor “event” with prescribed “activities,” and seeing who would respond to that invitation – was as scary as the birch switches the Krampus himself wields. And yet it seemed the only really original offering I could make.

Even given a selection of reference materials (there are videos of European Krampuslaufs all over YouTube), people were skeptical. “Why would you want to DO that?” we were asked. But I was never sure what they thought “that” meant. I myself wasn’t sure. What was going to happen, without some official starting gun, a spotlighted figure on a stage? How would we know when it ended?

In the long run, all we had to do was set a few

absolute parameters about civil behavior (regulations which were not even remotely tested, but putting them out on Facebook made us feel more relaxed), and just let it happen. It wasn’t long, or loud – just a hairy, jangly blip in the evening, with big Krampus-shaped gingerbread cookies and children and Krampus lanterns, drums and bells, one or two discreet bottles, a march through the neighborhood, a fire that was smokier than we might have liked, and dispersal when people got cold and wanted dinner.

The Stone Soup approach – the idea that no one had to bring anything grand or impressive to the event, but what they could NOT do was stand on the sidelines, challenging participants to entertain or sustain them – worked. We were astounded to see not just out-of-towners, but out-of-staters. We were delighted that they did not ask “Where’s the party?” but had brought the party with them – some fully-costumed, some with simple homemade masks, many with extra items (glow sticks, etc.) to share.

My husband, a head-to-toe Krampus with a pack basket on his back, was shocked when a pair of strangers ran directly to him and placed their infant in the basket to be photographed. There was little to improve upon other than that it would have been fun to stay out longer. And it wasn’t the costumes, or the treats, or all the photo opportunities that made it special; it was looking people in the eye in an entirely new way. We were, for those hours, villagers.

It took experiencing “festal culture” for the first time in my life to realize how unacceptable the dearth of it is. Now grassroots festal culture is something I insist upon for my family. American Halloween is well and good, but it is the practice of communal preparation (mask-making, lantern-making, etc.) that excites me most about Krampuslauf in 2012.

Since the story of Philly and Portland’s almost-bicoastal Laufs aired on National Public Radio last year, there’s been more Internet chatter of new Krampus events being planned for 2012 throughout North America. We officially and without reservation reach out to all of those groups to share tutorials, recipes, costuming tips, and even to share the box of leather Krampus tongues gifted to us by some folks in Virginia (they made us a LOT of tongues!). And it is not the idea of other towns’ blazing

spectacles that intrigues me, but the thought of what a neighborhood here and a neighborhood there might do, with little preparation and little or no funding – and the hope that they will share it.

When it comes to “growing” Krampuslauf Philadelphia, I can only think in the direction of Making: last year, we made lovely cloth banners and sewed an Alpine backdrop for photographs to be taken in front of. This year, we are planning hand-printed letterpress posters and are, to the best of our ability, making our son a Krampus-headed stumpf fiddle (or “Devil’s fiddle,” wouldn’t you know).

We encourage other “dark” or at least mischievous entities of winter to join us. I am reprising my role as Frau Perchta, the Belly-Slitter, who travels from home to home checking on young girls’ knitting and spinning, and eviscerating them if it’s not up to par. And, since Krampus also appears traditionally along with St. Nicholas and an angel, my daughter will again be an angel – saving everyone single-handedly, in her own opinion, from however many Krampusse appear that evening.

But we are ready to see new faces as well – I hope Janet gets that Golem she so wanted last year. And I would love to see a representation of the Jólsvéinar, or Yule Lads, Iceland’s possibly-gift-giving, certainly-door-slamming, sheep-harassing, sausage-stealing versions of Santa Claus.

If our Philly event ended in a bar crawl, or a cabaret performance, I would attend or at least love to hear about it. But my hope is that those events never overshadow what I feel is the most significant part of Krampuslauf, other than the preparation leading up to it: the face-to-face contact in a setting completely unlike any other. I

had never known my husband was so adept at growling and slaving, all while handing out gingerbread. The guy from my neighborhood coffee shop who showed up to act as the Lauf’s masked rear guard last year, playing pre-recorded Buddhist chants from a small boom box around his neck – I don’t think he woke up knowing that’s what he’d be doing at five p.m., but it couldn’t have been more right. These acts are not résumé-builders, and this was not, regardless of its public nature, a see-and-be-seen event. No prizes, no glory.

Philadelphia’s Lauf will never strive to be biggest or best, scariest or most-attended. Janet Finegar set the bar perfectly, in my opinion, with her hope that Krampuslauf Philadelphia would only be “attended” by those no more than one degree removed from any “participant.” I see that not as a barrier to entry, but as an invitation. To



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gather in the cold, with those you know and those you don’t. Not to see the concert or play, not to cure cancer or raise money for autism, but just to see the monster, and see what happens when the monster sees you. To be the monster, or to be the arms to which the kids can run when the monster gets too close. ☉

FURTHER READING:

<http://www.incultureparent.com/2011/11/why-kids-need-the-scary-stuff-too/>

<http://www.manymouths.org/2011/12/lauf-and-the-world-laufs-with-you/>