

Finding Holiday Spirit Wherever You Are

It doesn't mean you have to live in a gated community

By **Kat Avila** | Published on LatinoLA: December 3, 2011



Finding a toilet shouldn't be so hard. I walk over to what I think is a public park. Wrong, the area behind the tall wrought iron fence belongs to a gated community. You need a key to open the walk gates. As I continue my search, every house I pass is behind the same fence or a high brick wall.

Now sitting on a cold bench at the bus stop, I read the holiday parade of lamppost banners in the street median. One says: LOVE. The one after that: PEACE. Still one more: JOY. Then the sequence repeats again, and yet again.

Across the street from me is another gated community. See the lovely steel-bar fence. The whole thing reminds me of a prison.

Poor people would call the place "a cage" if they were forced to live behind bars. During WWII, it was called "an internment camp." These days we call them "gated communities."

Families in gated communities live with the illusion of security. Statistics show there isn't a big difference in crime between gated and ungated communities. Police patrols are hampered by the gates, but nonresidents aplenty, such as cleaning staff and service repairmen, stream in and out.

The message of gated communities is "YOU cannot be trusted. YOU are a thief. YOU are a threat. We have to protect ourselves against YOU." Whoever that "YOU" is. Last time I checked, a person only needed a pile of cash to buy into a gated community. An angel's halo doesn't come with having money.

LOVE - PEACE - JOY.

Two days later, it's the first of December. I'm in front of the UC Irvine main library staring at yellow barricade tape: POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS. Danger from falling branches from the unusually high winds? Or did a student off himself from the stress of final exams?

"No," says a passerby who is explaining how to get around the tape. Apparently nutcase Terry Jones had planned to speak at the flagpole nearby. He's the Florida church leader who got worldwide attention for book burning, namely the Koran. Even though his speech was cancelled, the campus remained on high alert. After all, UCI is home to the bad-boy Muslim 11.

LOVE - PEACE - JOY.

Next, while waiting to cross the street, I watch with surprise as a small dark car jumps the gun and zooms off before the light changes to green. Yards away, it crazily careens into the sidewalk curb, then takes off again.

LOVE - PEACE - JOY.

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To kill time until the bus comes, I pull out a large shortbread cookie in the shape of a gingerbread man. A smile slowly crosses my face as I untie the colorful crimped ribbons at the top of the clear cello bag. I free the cookie from its prison and bite its head off.

LOVE - PEACE - JOY. It's out there. You just have to look a little harder for it sometimes.

A writer who enjoys eating cookies more than making them, but she might surprise everyone this month by trying to make some microwave sugar cookies (recipe at Cooks.com).

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