

Chapel Talk
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While I don't remember the exact moment or year I stopped believing in Santa Claus, I do know that some point in my youth, somewhere on the verge of adolescence, I came to enjoy Christmas Eve much more than Christmas Day. As a rambunctious youngster, I bolted out of bed at dawn, ready to see what long-anticipated presents Santa had brought down the chimney for me. So tenacious was my desire that my parents initially put the Christmas tree inside a playpen, barring me from ripping the paper off that Matchbox car garage with ramps and elevators. When I hurdled over that feeble barricade, my father's sister slept on the sofa next the tree, guarding the loot from my pre-dawn raids. But around the time I grew out of my last pair of those one-piece slippered pajamas, I found myself sleeping in on Christmas morning, slightly more interested in the presents I was giving than those I was getting, and aware that Christmas Day was becoming over-rated, anti climactic, the morning after. What happened? Was I losing the meaning of Christmas, like the adults in "Polar Express," unable to hear the magic of Christmas anymore? What was happening on Christmas Eve that caught me?

I grew up in a small, very affluent and Republican town in Connecticut where my father was the minister of the Presbyterian Church. Our wooden colonial home was right in the middle of town, next to the village green, called God's Acre. On Christmas Eve there were two services at our church: the first, at 5:00 p.m., was the classic family service, bursting with children, noise, human sheep and the cherub choir. My father told a beautiful Christmas story, aimed as much at the adults as the children. He loved competing with the voices the children who talked and cried and coo-ed during the service. The three and four year-old angels and shepherds wandered throughout the chancel, called for their parents, waved energetically at familiar faces, undressed, and belted out "Silent Night" as if it was a college fight song. It was uninhibited, spontaneous, funny: people who never went to church during the year arrived early for this service. To me, it was everything Sunday church never was.

Afterwards, the whole town gathered on God's Acre to sing Christmas carols, lead by a volunteer brass band, surrounding a 60-foot pine tree covered with colorful lights. A thousand

residents packed the little triangle of land defined by the three main streets meeting in the town's center. If it was snowing, the scene was right out of "Miracle on 34th Street" or "It's a Wonderful Life." Generations of families stood and sang, with candles or flashlights or memory providing light to the song sheets available in that week's local newspaper. The echoing cadences to the familiar songs—"O Little Town of Bethlehem," "The First Noel," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "O Come All Ye Faithful," "Joy to the World," and always the last, "Jingle Bells"—created a misty-eyed unity to singers and friends squashed together. Being a part of something so vast and pulsating, even for a 12-year old, was new, intriguing and energizing. I felt too old to run around the legs and long coats of the grown-ups; the event was no longer a great obstacle course or playground. Instead, I was connected to this experience, singing the words, looking at people, being winked at and included by family friends, sharing music sheets with a neighborhood girl and feeling the first shock of confused excitement when our fingers briefly touched as we turned over the songsheet. Slowly, I was aware of something else occurring on the outskirts of my consciousness.

Then came supper. As I got older, I realized that this meal was a lot more than just a 40 pound turkey and grandparents and unbearable anticipation and the chorus reading of "The Night Before Christmas" and then finally bed, hoping this year to sleep light enough to hear the sleigh bells and prancing hoofs on my rooftop. Slowly, I began to notice the other people at dinner, some who came every year, some who came just once. Most were elderly widowed women who seemed to have been seventy-five years old their entire life. The regulars were the Bristow sisters, Helen and Alice, one a Democrat, the other a Republican, both primed for a political debate; Ina Wright, who came from Scotland, wore long wool dresses, dark shoes and stockings, and crossed her legs neatly at the ankles when she sat; the Blairs and their children, one of two Afro-American families in the church; Hoyt Caitlin, who brought a case of champagne, drank most of it himself, and told the story of how the Crooked Family tried to blow out the candles; Mrs. Jean Johnson, a diminutive old lady who later gave me a dilapidated second edition copy of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* because I drove her home after dinner; and my favorite, Mrs. Bruce, who always insisted on washing the dishes and couldn't be budged from the sink. Others came and went—my father and mother invited new members of the church who didn't know anyone in town; a woman recently divorced; a man whose wife had just died after a long disease; a couple who had lost a child;

parents whose children had moved away. This odd assortment of characters swelled our gathering to forty or fifty, and we ate in little circles, around tables, clustered on the floor.

As I got older, I understood why this night was so rewarding, why the Bristow sisters felt like grandmothers, why it was important for Mrs. Bruce to do the dishes, why Hoyt Caitlin had to slur through the Crooked Family tale. On this night, these familiar, lonely people had a home. Their broken lives or recent pain or sadness or lost direction was now a part of a larger family – not magnanimously my family, but all of us, together. Slowly, I sensed that their lives and history offered a present for me, in the form of an old book or a pat on the hand or a teary-eyed smile as they left into the cold, dark air. Gradually, I saw that these eclectic lost souls had riches to share; I never knew who would be the epiphany for me during this meal, who would renew me with a gift I didn't know I already had.

The final ritual of the evening was the 11:00 p.m. service, which for years was too late for me; and besides, I needed to be asleep waiting to hear the arrival of Santa, and anyway why would I volunteer to go church twice in one day? Perhaps because the service initially was forbidden to me; or because it was held such a different time than normal church; or because it was attended only by adults; or because since my father officiated and my mother sang in the choir I was to some degree “free” to sit where I wanted to—although not more than a seat away from a grandparent or aunt—: whatever it was that captivated me about this unknown service, the service itself, when I was finally invited to attend it, captured me with its magic and mystery. Walking in from the dark, the church was quiet, exhausted, expectant; low lights and candles radiated stillness and reserve. The cacophony of the earlier service was replaced by a brass and string quintet playing Handel “Messiah”, and the music seemed to incarnate something larger about Christmas than I thought possible. Could the violins at the end of “For Unto Us a Child is Born,” or that trumpet volley in the middle of the “Hallelujah” chorus, arouse me more than the hopeful arrival of hockey skates or the dreaded discovery of the most feared Christmas present, new shirts and pants?

After communion—another new rite of passage for me—in this packed, silent, serene church, an atmosphere so different from six hours earlier and from what I thought Christmas was supposed to be about next morning, my father would begin the final prayer by saying, “It is now

midnight, the traditional hour of Christ's birth." Every year that I can remember having a watch, it was indeed midnight. How could that happen, I initially questioned? How did he script that so exactly? Later I realized this moment wasn't about clocks and timing. As a child in an adult world, this harmony thrilled, scared and arrested me the same way Grinch couldn't understand how the Who's down in Whoville could still sing without their presents.

The last custom of the night, of this long day's journey to Christmas and chaos, was walking with my dad down the hill from the church, past our house to the bank to put the money from the two offerings that evening into the night deposit slot. There was something secret, forbidden, a little risky about being old enough to accompany him on this trek—the brown satchel hidden inside his big coat, the chilled air rising in mists from our chapped mouths, all the houses and streets silent, the lone traffic light blinking yellow for no cars passing by, the mysterious key appearing to unlock the metal lid, the furtive glance to make sure we weren't being followed, the brisk walk back up the street to our home, the only one still lit. The adults had one last drink, the first they'd enjoyed all night. Final presents were wrapped or, in the worst case, put together one of my younger siblings. Stockings were filled, first with a clementine for the toe, then many silly presents, and arranged on sofas and chairs in the living room since we didn't have a fireplace. Bed and sleep came well after 1:00 a.m. The house was set, triggered for the first child's awakening a few brief hours away.

Santa had come to our house: I'd seen the tree and the bounty and the stockings readied, poised; the kitchen was cleaner than it had been all year, since the last time Mrs. Bruce had scrubbed it the previous Christmas Eve; the loud talk and laughter and clinking of glasses muted; the dinner guests back in their own cavernous homes. On this late, late night, I started to sound out the word "tranquility," as if I'd just discovered the word myself—its four rolling syllables, four comforting vowels, its gentle consonants. Falling asleep, I thought more about the night just passed than what was about to explode downstairs in barely five hours; knew something had transpired in those conversations with the Bristows or Jean Johnson or even once with Sue Noon, who was batty but that particular night blessed, a messenger, maybe one of the archangels pointing us to where the manger really was. I wanted to hear the violins again, or the chorus of thousands caroling on God's Acre. Those were the sounds I heard, not the sleighbells or reindeer hooves or the fading "Ho-ho-

ho visions surrounding my younger brothers' and sister's dreams. Around this time I began to be the last to wake up on Christmas morning, dragged out by my impatient younger siblings, greeting the sunlight and package ripping bedlam hungover, emotionally spent from the night before.

These days, some of the rituals for my family are different, yet I'm still the last to fall asleep on Christmas Eve, and usually the last to wake up, although Christopher has started to repeat my former ways with his late morning stirrings. This past Christmas, my children were with their mother and her parents in Vermont, while I was with my parents in New Hampshire. I was in my own home. None of my siblings and their children was due up till after Christmas. On Christmas Eve my parents and I went to church and then dinner at the home of old friends with some other people; and during the meal, amid the candle light and gravy and safe conversations, I recognized that yes, I now was one of those misfit invited guests, the recently divorced, the alone and sad, feeling acutely at this highly charged time how different my experience was from what I had thought it would be, what I felt the culture dictated it was supposed to be. The chorus from the Beatle's song, "Eleanor Rigby" kept playing in my head: "All the lonely people, where do they all come from?" Is it any wonder why movie theaters are filled at Christmas, or that blockbuster films like "Ali" open on December 25th, offering a momentary sanctuary for millions of disjoined people?

What crystallized for me this year was stated clearly by Ms. Roche in her chapel talk about Advent. Yes, Christmas is wonderful, but it's also tough—T. S. Eliot wrote a poem called "The Journey of the Magi," which begins with one of the three kings lamenting about his trip to Bethlehem:

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'

Certainly not the words of adoring kings paying homage to the savior child. One of the difficulties of Christmas is that it's a forced celebration, and then we move on. How quickly, after December 25th, we throw out the wrapping paper, discard the tree, box-up the ornaments; how rapidly the presents disappear and break; how abruptly we stop singing carols, wearing snowman ties or holly pins or red and green; how fast the window and tree lights become obsolete, despite how long they had been up during December or November. Mr. Kunz told me how fast the baby Jesus grows up: two weeks after Christmas, the church readings have him a grown adult, baptized. Even the Bible doesn't let us linger on Christmas Day. As Ms. Roche noted, it's not the day but the preparation; and I also believe it's a preparation or an experience that starts not just in Advent, but on December 26th.

On December 26th, we start our journey away from one Christmas toward another. The readiness, I gradually realized growing up, was more important than the event we were preparing for; it was being open being surprised, especially on Christmas Eve. It was an affirmation of what Samuel Beckett writes in *Waiting for Godot*: "What do we do while waiting?"—because the meaning, the trip, the present, is what we are doing while waiting these next 364 days until December 25th arrives again.

Part of the commitment to this pilgrimage is making Christmas and its rituals happen not just during the holiday season. Do we "watch and wait" only on Christmas Eve? Do we invite in the lost souls only during December? Can we think about the needy and the cold only when their plight is in direct conflict with our abundant festivities? What prevents us from giving presents in March, July, October? Do we hear and see the Angels only at Christmas? What presents last and are unbreakable?

What strikes me about my experiences on Christmas Eve as a young adult was that they caught me off guard, offering me a present when I was so myopically focused upon that big box beneath the tree. It was as some spirit was giving me a last chance, just before it was too late, before I became enmeshed in the hurly burly of Christmas morning, to understand what was really happening. This year, the revelation, ironically, came to me on Christmas Day. It was the smallest present of all: a tacky, three-inch Christmas ornament, probably purchased for \$3.99 at a local

Happy-Harry's type drug store, shaped like a Christmas wreath. Inside the wreath was a picture, a photo of our dear friend and former teacher here, Hoover Sutton, soon perhaps to one of the silliest and most cherished of the Heavenly hosts. There he was smiling out of a "Made in China plastic wreath. Only Hoover could transform that absurdity into a treasure; only someone who ferociously understood about the doing while waiting could incarnate that lifeless trinket with everlasting wonder, memory, grace and communion—an immortalized smile which will nourish and sustain generations to come, simple decoration which will adorn future Christmas trees with undying stories and anecdotes and guffaws embraces. There's the angel you don't have to wait to see, because it's chuckling out from its overpriced frame all the time. It's a sacrament that proclaims "Merry Christmas" throughout the year.