

Always Winter and Never Christmas: Simplicity or Austerity?

When our grandson visited us last Tuesday, he was horrified to discover that the tree was gone, the decorations were gone, and, worst of all, the Santa on a plane that circles around our dining room at Christmas was gone. It is hard to explain seasonal holidays to a three year old who thought the Christmas tree, all the lights, and the presents were heralds of a new dispensation, a time in which every day would be Christmas. If most adults are thoroughly done with Christmas by early January, children think it's just a good beginning. Learning about the balance between feast and fast, our own desires and the earth's limits is tough. Even when we are happy to have the work of Christmas over, we still struggle with how to live without the lift that Christmas gives us, especially in these days when it seems it's possible to have a sort of Christmas every day. At least until the credit cards give out.

I found this year particularly challenging in terms of buying for others. So many people are on special diets or have told me that they are cleaning out their houses. Overflowing houses, overflowing wastelands, what, if anything, can people want? Clearly there is not much we need. In our relationship to the earth, we, too, need to think about diets. How much can we continue to take from the earth? How much junk that we've created has impeded the earth's ability to function? And yet

we still want the excitement and interest that Christmas, birthdays, and other special days give us. We still want to show our love for our nearest and dearest in the time-honored way, by giving them something.

The title of this sermon comes from the children's book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis. Many of you may have read it, or read it to your children. It was made into a movie several years ago. I'm not going into the details of the plot, only to say that 'always winter and never Christmas' is the phrase used to describe the curse the witch in the title puts on the land of Narnia, perpetual winter without the warmth and festivity of Christmas; death without the hope of future life.

For those of us living in this clime, that can seem like an apt description of our lives after the last of the decorations are returned to the attic, after the last of the holiday lights are extinguished and we face the next few months of grey skies and cold weather without much in the way of fun to anticipate. There are Winter Festivals, when not cancelled by lack of snow, and there's Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day but no matter how much they are promoted by various commercial interests, they are but a weak glimmer compared with The Season.

On the other hand, many of us may welcome an end to the demands of the many days of this holiday. By now, if we have a live tree, and we always do, it has

shed its glory all around and is looking both depressing and flammable. By now, the garlands and decorations, so beautiful when we first took them from their storage bins, have been displaced and disarrayed and are becoming a nuisance. By now, the beautifully wrapped packages have revealed their sometimes more practical interiors and these items are clamoring for houseroom with presents bestowed upon us last year and the year before and the year before that.

We often speak of greed as a force, usually the greed of others. But we don't pause to consider one of the main drivers of greed, fear. Fear of scarcity, fear of starvation, fear of not having enough for ourselves or our children. It's an old, atavistic fear for most of us, but it's there, in the oldest part of our brains, written even into our bodies. As any dieter will tell you, and, as numerous studies have shown, diets, particularly extreme ones, work in the short term but in the long term they set the dieter up for greater weight gain. This is because, after a diet, when normal eating is resumed, the body stores and uses calories differently, clinging onto every calorie it can get and releasing few. Our bodies, terrified of starvation, unable to respond to the reasoning of women's magazines and any of the many diet regimes, revert to the old ways of staying alive. It is true, not just my justifying mind, that a person can get fat on less than what used to make them gain before.

So we have now the old fear of want and privation colliding with constant inducements to spend. Our economy depends on us as consumers wanting more and more and more and every bit of our world is filled with images and words that tell us to do so.

It was not always this way. In our northern hemisphere, it is easy to see the pattern of feasts and fasts that used to rule people's lives. Fast and feast are old ways of survival. People fasted when necessary, feasting to use up surplus before it went bad. Fasting and feasting with others, in established patterns that all shared was an acknowledgement that without others, survival was not possible. The great religious holidays, in which all people, lowest to highest, were supposed to feast or fast, made festivals of necessity. The old pattern was to fast through Advent, feast at Christmas, fast at Lent, feast at Easter. Those familiar rhythms were borrowed from the old religions that Christianity displaced. In other places, the necessity of that pattern assumed different rhythms, but all forms honored the brutal fact that the earth could only produce so much at any time. It also made those limits sacred. Whatever the climate in which rituals began, all said that there had to be some way to recognize a restoration of balance in nature.

We don't think so much about nature now. We don't have to. We live in a highly artificial environment in which the bounty of the earth appears to be poured

on us at all times. And yet, we know this is illusion. Our awareness is expressed, however, not in terms of the bare branches on the trees or the thick, cold snow that covers the ploughed fields. It is expressed in the money in our accounts, the balance on our credit cards. We see that, if for some there is perpetual feasting, for others there is perpetual fasting.

We also see that perpetual feasting takes its toll on the body of the earth. We watch resource after resource dipping to critical levels or we watch the pollution that results from extracting resources for our use. The planet is no longer in any kind of balance and our efforts have only made things worse. We see the earth as divided up among those who can afford to control and seize its riches and can't conceive of the bounty of the earth as belonging to all of us, including the plants and animals, since all living creatures have this home in common. When air and water are for sale, we know we are in big trouble. In ancient China, people, all people, were said to have a debt to the earth for their lives. All people, rich or poor, owed something for the resources taken by generations to bring them into being, and, in the same way, future generations would also feel themselves to be in debt to the earth and to their ancestors. These ideals didn't make China an egalitarian society nor is it today, but perhaps it is a way of thinking we should examine.

In the same way, Native American beliefs also think forward, to the generations to come, as if we have a responsibility for future generations to have, at the least, a future. We cannot eat the seed corn and expect the next generation to live. Unfortunately, faced with the idea of scarcity, we are terrified for our own children, or grandchildren, and find it much harder to think of generations in the broadest sense, in the sense of humanity itself going on. And so, grabbing what we can, giving our children and our children's children as much as we can, takes precedence over considered plans for the future of life. I understand this panic and the actions that result from that. Perhaps we all do. We have never been taught to feel ourselves as part of the earth, not something separate and above it. We repeat our seventh principle, but it is hard to feel ourselves into it.

We are immersed in the world and, as our actions affect everyone else, so do everyone else's actions affect us. There is no safety behind walls or closed doors. Alone, we only magnify our fears and feel more helpless. Isolation makes us more and more out of balance, with ourselves, with others.

The diseases (dis-eases) of our times reflect this lack of balance. Diabetes, heart ailments, reflect that it is not deprivation that kills us, but foods made artificially sweeter, saltier, fattier. We are forced into mindfulness of everything we eat, take or do, since there is no natural balance in our lives. When we can have

everything we want, we have to choose consciously what is good for us and what is not. When we are able to be physically idle as hard working people have dreamed of being for thousands of years, we have to consciously exercise, exert ourselves. It is not built into our lives. And, believe me, I am speaking as one who needs a gun to my head to choose what I know I should do and what I should not do. So I hope you understand that I'm saying these things not in the spirit of judgement but in the painful realization of the difficulties of affluence. Great food? Great soft recliners? Computers that do the tough math? What could be bad about that?

But we know what is bad about that. We know that there is a hidden price, the mother of a balloon payment, the finest of fine print in the contracts we sign everyday as we live our lives. Not only do we find ourselves with bodies that are out of balance, all this good stuff doesn't appear to do much for our inner lives either. Suicide now kills more people than car accidents in this country. Something is out of balance in our lives, physically and mentally.

We are affected by this imbalance most immediately in our own lives and in the lives of those we love, in the tragedies of illnesses both physical and mental that afflict so many. But the whole planet needs conscious living, conscious choices. We face the extinction of many species, including our own, because we

can't feel what it is to live in balance with the rest of the world. We don't need to blame ourselves or blame others, though that is what we often do. That only seems to make things worse. We all have, built into us, a variety of needs and fears and we all have, even the best of us, some tunnel vision about a way forward. How do we need to use resources? How can all of us, all 7.7 billion people, live lives that at least afford all of us enough to eat, shelter, safety and, I hope, some joy in living. How do we do this with a consciousness that we live in a finite world, with finite resources? How do we use our intelligence and our intuition to make ourselves mindful of our interdependence on each other and on the earth which is our common parent?

Perhaps, I hope, the answers to those questions are equally interdependent. In every book I read, no matter how pessimistic the subject, at the end the hope that is held out is that there will be something, something that some call spiritual, some sort of awakening that can take us into the years to come. There is exhilaration as well as fear when we think of the lives of our children and our children's children. Perhaps we need to remember that much of our security and prosperity was built on sacrifices of the generations before us. Perhaps we need to remember that the good old days weren't always so good for everybody.

Perhaps we need to trust, as U-U's have always trusted, that human beings are not perfect but within each of us lies the potential for goodness, for creativity, for compassion. We are the dominant species on this planet. What we have done we can undo. We can get up, shake off our sackcloth and ashes, and joyfully go forward to help in the great task of making this a better place for everyone.

We need to help each other to birth a world in which it is neither always Christmas nor always winter, a world in balance that can nurture lives in balance, our own especially. That quest, to me, is the richest form of spirituality. Spirituality can be a search for a life in which we are at one with the world, with others, and with ourselves. Our highest form of prayer can be a life in which we are in harmony with the world around us.

Of all the lines in the much debated Affirmation of Faith, the one I love is the next to the last one, "To grow into harmony with the D(d)ivine. Spell it with a capital D or a small d, I believe that is our task. We know the desire for the divine, for lives in harmony and we know that this growth is something we can find together. We have the principles and sources as guides. All the earth's religions remind us that life is more than material goods, more than the latest gadget, technology, toy or entertainment. What that 'more' is can be our quest together.

And now, your turn.

