

Opening Words by Nancy Wood

You shall ask
What good are dead leaves?
And I will tell you
They nourish the sore earth.
You shall ask
Why the leaves are so green and I will tell you
Because they are rich with life
You shall ask
Why must summer end
And I shall tell you
So that the leaves can die.

Reading: "A Special Gift" as told by Bob Willis

It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas - oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it - overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma - the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.

Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church, mostly black. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them."

Mike loved kids - all kids - and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods

store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition - one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on. The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents.

As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.

Meditation By Wei Ying Wu

The moon is full, the autumn nights grow longer,
In the north forests startled crows cry out.
Still high overhead, the star river stretches,
The Dipper's handle set to southwest.
The cold cricket grieves deep in the chambers,
Of the notes of sweet birds, none remain.
The one evening gusts of autumn come,
One who sleeps alone thinks fondly on thick quilts.
Past loves are a thousand miles farther each day,
Blocked from my drifting and my sinking.
Man's life is not as the grass and trees;
Still the season's changes can stir the heart.

Sermon: "Just a reminder" - Rev. Alison Hyder

Christmas time is here, by golly,
Disapproval would be folly,
Deck the hall with hunks of holly,
Fill the cup and don't say "when."
Kill the turkeys. Ducks and chickens,
Mix the punch, drag out the Dickens,
Even though the prospect sickens,
Brother, here we go again. (Tom Lehrer, "Christmas Carol")

Yes, once again it is time to celebrate the winter festival of ThanksHanaChristKwanza Year. It's a magical season that prolongs us on a tide of anxious anticipation from Thanksgiving all the way through New Year's Eve. Indeed, it is a time so full of pressure and obligation, that our friendly merchants, taking pity on us, have decided to give us more time by introducing Christmas earlier, starting shortly after Halloween. Aren't you all simply bursting with Joy and Goodwill?

I know I am. Every news story reflects the generosity and selflessness of the human soul, of people willing to put their own egos aside for the good of the community and the health of our planet. And I for one am so excited by the new 2012 Ford that gets a full 28 miles per gallon! It's practically revolutionary! I'm sure all the environmentalists are jumping up and down in thanks. Sea Lions are flapping their flippers in joy. And somewhere an earthquake is about to shake loose with pleasure.

It's very hard for me to get enthusiastic over the holiday season. Although I will admit to enjoying the knowing irony of the Target Christmas commercials with their loony shopping lady, I have a very hard time buying into the consumer economy. I like giving gifts, and it's a lot easier for me to justify spending money on other people, but my parents have made it clear that they don't want any more stuff to squeeze into their small apartment. There are no children in our family. Everyone's all grown up.

It's tempting just to opt out of Christmas. For a lot of people, holidays bring family conflicts and wounds to stir up bad memories. There are very few ideal families. But the pressure to create the perfect holiday, straight out of Currier and Ives, is immense. Parents try to compensate for their weaknesses, for disappointments or absence - even for violence or addictions - by loading Christmas with impossible meaning, hoping that one day of joy can heal the family scars. All too often it backfires due to the weight of expectation.

Stress breeds stress. It ratchets up the emotions until they can no longer be bottled inside, and erupt, often in unintended and inappropriate ways, in arguments, accidents, or drinking. Ministers are taught that the best leaders cultivate something called "the non-anxious presence" that can be attendant to crises, and a witness to the moment, without getting pulled into the dire and uncontrolled emotions of arguments, conflicts, and passions. It's a bad leader that increases the crisis by adding to the drama. Instead, we're advised to maintain our perspective and the stability of the group by being a calm presence.

Of course, that is not the same thing as being disengaged or absent. Remaining unfazed is not the same thing as ignoring a situation. When your child breaks her arm it doesn't help to wring your hands or faint, but you can't just pretend it didn't happen. Parents learn to set their panic aside, to quell their nausea, and get her to a hospital. It's not about you - it's about the child and her fears, pain, and needs. That's just why a good leader puts her or his own emotions and insecurities aside for the sake of the larger organization. We can panic when we get home.

It seems to me that we can all try to face the holidays with the same kind of caring dispassion. A lot of us are trying to live on less money and fewer expectations. Some are jobless, and some have seen their retirement incomes decrease in dramatic and scary ways. The news on TV is, let's face it, kind of dismal. We have some hard choices ahead if we are going to make any impact on the environmental landscape, and help turn the country in more intentionally healthy, compassionate channels. We have to be aware of the sources and conditions of our water and food, how things were grown and who was harmed to produce them. What are the real costs of our carrots, our cars, our cable connections?

As Unitarian Universalists, we try to honor the interdependent web of existence, of which we are all a part. But the same principle that makes me concerned - and frankly, depressed -for our planet, is manifest in human society. People's livelihoods depend on me, on the network of goods and services that keep people employed and economies healthy. The government doesn't just gobble up our taxes, it employs people who provide important services and systems, infrastructures that keep us safe and stable. Illegal migrant workers pick the crops we eat. Chinese goods create some sort of American jobs, however low-paid. We can't just boycott the world.

So this whole non-anxious thing is a real discipline for me. It's not easy. But it does lead me to make more reasoned and purposeful choices. And studies have shown that when beings (human or otherwise) are able to make choices and control their environments we feel less at the mercy of unknown outside forces, and therefore less anxious and upset. Everybody needs to feel some degree of autonomy. So, paradoxically, the more conscious and deliberate I feel about my decisions, the more my stress goes down.

Jangly commercials and sentimental Christmas images are designed to keep us from thinking. They raise the stakes with false promises of happiness and love. All those bells and bunting, the Christmas carols and lights increase our anxiety. They tell us that time is short, and we have lots to do and buy and prepare. Save those little faces from disappointment and sadness! Get these jackets and those toys and the latest X-Box and Ipad 2. Just do it. Now. Christmas depends on it. Shop at midnight, on as little sleep as possible. Just think of the savings!

But we don't have to opt out of the holidays altogether. My life is so busy that it's good to have dates that are dedicated to family and friends. Scheduled events are a great help. It's fun to sing carols and decorate the tree and smell the cookies warm out of the oven. I'll give gifts, and I don't mind getting a few either. Still, my favorite Christmas memories aren't of presents but of events, like walking home from church one dark, snowy night. The streets of Towson were quiet, the snow filling the streets and lawns and shining under the streetlamps as it crunched underfoot. Our tree always went up Christmas Eve, to the sound of *The Messiah*. And my parents used to let me sleep under the Christmas tree at night, after the presents were opened and gone. Then it was New Year's day, and everything came down again. That was tradition too. It's these memories that remain for me and that make me who I am.

Maybe we all have some events, a family tradition or a sudden moment of generosity or fun that exemplifies the holidays for us. The last Hanukkah at your grandmother's house, or the ashtray you made in art class. Going to pick out the tree. Baking pies in a cozy kitchen. Car rides to the relative's house. It may be all in our minds, formulated out of loneliness and longing. That's a part of us too. Because above all else, this is the time of expectation, when love and hope can change the world. That is why the stories are so important. The generations all gathered in one visible family tree, with memories of years gone by, of disastrous dinners and wartime separations. Friends, remembering snowball fights, late nights in the dorm, and the blossoming of romance. Your favorite cat, or the loss of innocence. The story of a baby warmed by the sweet breath of cows, his parents sprawled and happy in the stable hay. A star that seemed to take up the whole sky. Lasting lights of faith and courage.

When else do we seem to stop and listen for these timeless tales? For if nothing else, this holiday time prepares us to slow down in pace with the world, as winter forces us to take our time. Technology pushes us to go faster and harder, to ignore nature and our body's needs, but our stubborn friend Winter will have other ideas. Snowstorms. Power outages. Icy walks that threaten our plans and our pride. The frigid air that keeps us together. It's all coming, so why not slow down gradually

throughout the holiday season? Let's focus on each other and the things we really value. Whatever we believe about omens or Gods or reindeer that fly, it's all just a means to an end: there is no present like the time to reflect on our choices and to plan how to live up to our highest ideals.

That's plenty of Meaning for me. One advantage of being a minister is that once a week, or thereabouts, I have to reflect on life and wrest some specific theories from the jumble of daily dilemmas. *You* get to process them or not, as you wish. The holidays give everyone an equal chance to think with intention and perspective and to change our life to reflect our ideals.

That's what I like in the story about Mike. Mike loved kids, and it broke his heart to see that team without any headgear or pads. But he wasn't the one who sent the boys their equipment. Mike's wife, knowing his heart, shared in his values and gave him a gift that would spread them the widest. She helped the boys, and she let her husband know that she loved him for his sweet and generous nature. And isn't that what we all really need? We want people who will understand and witness to the best in us and acknowledge that we matter in the most positive - and tangible - ways.

"What is given to you, you are always afraid will cease to be given, but what you give you can give forever." Thus said Elizabeth Goudge, in her novel, *The Bird in the Tree*. If we focus on what we get, we'll always be worried. We'll never get enough money, or recognition, or love. But we can never empty our storehouse of sympathy, of acceptance, of thanksgiving. We'll always be able to give love and to demonstrate affection and common respect. That, we know, is the power of ILYA and other mentoring programs. We're simply telling these kids that they're not all alone, and they deserve support and friendship and care. They matter. The garbage man matters too, and the person who cuts your hair or rings up your groceries. Your mechanic and your child's teacher. Your dental hygienist and the people who inspect our food. Your partner. Yourself.

I realize that I'm not telling you anything you don't know. But sometimes we just need permission to stop for a time and regroup, so that our actions can catch up with our values. That's the purpose of our hour together on Sundays, the Jewish Sabbath, and other sacred times. We all need to stop the daily tasks and find a moment of peace where we can hear our hearts and the whisper of our hopes. Let our fears and anxieties melt and touch the soul inside us.

We don't need to opt out of the holidays. We just have to go within.

Let me end with these words by Helen Fitzgerald. ("Christmas Shopping")

Hope is the coin of my Christmas shopping.

I fondle it in my pocket, warm, comforting, familiar.

On what to spend it? For myself?

On love enduring, so steadfast that

It withers not with death or disaffection.

But for my others? Better spent for them:

On meaning for their lives.

On values, clear and beckoning.

A deepening of pain and joy to stretch their souls to grow.

But is my focus still too small?

What of those whose faces I can't see?

On freedom to choose and not just endure.

On power that enables and creates.

Yet what of nations locked in stalemate,

Insanity poised and "holy" wars
Ready to annihilate us all?
Dare I spend my hope on such a visionary dream?
A world of justice and of peace
Where other people's needs are rights
Seen by all as equal to their own.

But Christmas is of miracles.
I need not make the choice.
My tiny coin of hope can buy it all.
The revelation blinds in its simplicity.
Love, justice, joy and meaning --
The Christmas gifts wait only our enfleshment.
We can never be born enough.

Closing Words: "Praying for Stuff" Fredrick Zydek

Sometimes I forget
to consider the lilies
of the field which neither
toil nor labor for their keep.

Part of me is always searching
for stuff instead of seeking
ways to improve the merchandise
of gratitude and prayer.

Some mornings, rather than fall
to my knees to give praise,
I scan the want ads for stuff.
Cheap stuff. Stuff for nothing.

Stuff enough to crowd out
the emptiness I know it brings.

Why can I never read a book
unless I know I own it?

It's the same with art, furniture,
and the sounds of electric pianos.
I have urges that want to walk
the corridors of divine mysteries

but spend my time gathering glitter.
Once I had a dream. I stepped before
the throne of God. He asked only
one question: "Did you become

who you were supposed to be?"
"I'm not sure," I told him.
"But when I died, I had so much stuff,
it took three days to find me."