

# *Starlight*

*Beholding  
the Christmas Miracle  
All Year Long*

*John Shea*

*acta*  
PUBLICATIONS

For Johnny and Ann,  
Leon and Pauline,  
Margie, Dan, Bill, Harry and Gorman,  
life-giving spirits in the flesh,  
life-giving spirits out of the flesh.

**STARLIGHT**

**Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long**

by John Shea

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# Seeing Haloes (For Anne)

Even at Christmas,  
when haloes  
are pre-tested by focus groups  
for inclusion in mass market  
campaigns,  
they are hard to see.

Annie Dillard was scrutinizing  
the forest floor at Pilgrim's Creek  
when she looked up  
and saw a tree haloed in light.

She had caught the tree at prayer,  
in a moment so receptive and full  
the boundaries of bark burst  
and its inner fire  
became available for awe.

But seeing haloes  
is more than a lucky sighting.  
It entails the advent skill  
of sustaining attention,  
the simple act,  
as Dillard found out,  
of looking up.

The optometrist swings  
his goggle machine before our eyes.  
"Read line four."  
Then he flips lenses through  
the machine

until the blurred letters of line four  
snap into focus.  
But if we break our captivity  
to the imprisoning print of line four  
and look up to line one,  
the letter

**E**  
will carry us away  
with its clarity  
and bless the smallest of markings  
with surrounding light.

That is how haloes are seen,  
by looking up into largeness,  
by tucking smallness  
into the folds of infinity.

I do not know this  
by contemplating  
shimmering trees.

Rather there was woman,  
amid the crowd of Christmas,  
busy at Christmas table,  
and I looked up  
to catch a rim of radiance  
etching her face,  
to notice curves of light  
sliding along her shape.  
She out-glowed the candles.

All the noise of the room left my ears  
and silence sharpened my sight.

When this happens,  
and I recognize the visits,  
I do not get overly excited.  
I merely allow love to be renewed,  
for that is the mission of haloes,  
the reason they are given to us.

Nor do I try to freeze the frame.  
Haloes suffer time,  
even as they show us  
what is beyond time.

But when haloes fade,  
they do not abruptly vanish,  
abandoning us  
to the sorrow of lesser light.

They recede,  
as Gabriel departed Mary,  
leaving us pregnant.

## *Have a Defiant Christmas!*

In those long ago days of Christmas innocence when it always snowed gently in a starry and windless night, my parents would hustle my sisters and me into the back seat of the car and we would drive slowly, snow crunching under the frozen tires, into the neighborhoods of the rich to see the “lights.”

The “lights” were the decorations that people put up on the outside of their houses and on their winter lawns. Multicolored lights would be strung over an entire house, etching door frames and windows, wrapped round into wreaths and bows. In the frozen front yard there were statues as large as small children. They were usually a mix of *The Night Before Christmas* and the Crib—reindeer and wise men, sleighs and shepherds, elves and Mary, angels and carolers, Santa Claus and Baby Jesus. Occasionally, the stiff, on-guard soldiers from the *Nutcracker Suite* would make an appearance. All were lit up so that night passengers in slow-moving cars could gawk through frosted windows and say, “Look at that one!”

But it was not these elaborate scenes that first brought the truth of Christmas home to me. It was my own home, seen in a new way, that welcomed me to Christmas.

### **Light in the Midst of Darkness**

One Christmas when we returned from our trip to see the “lights,” I pushed out of the back seat, straightened up, and saw our house, as if for the first time. We lived in a two flat. My grandparents lived on the first floor and since they usually went to bed around nine (a custom I have only recently begun to envy), their flat was dark. Our flat on the second floor was also dark—except for the Christmas tree.



*Christmas defies  
the darkness, refusing  
to allow the outer  
world to dictate the  
terms of existence.*



The tree was strung with lights, and their soft glow could be seen through the upper window. The outer darkness was all around, yet the tree shone in the darkness. There was no razzle-dazzle, no blinking on and off, no glitz. Just a steady shining, a simple juxtaposition of light and darkness. Its beauty drew me.

I ran up the stairs. My parents had already unlocked the door and turned on the house lights. I sat in a chair and stayed with the tree. The attraction of the tree continued for a while and then began to recede. Soon the practical took over. I noticed some tinsel that needed to be smoothed and re-hung. As I tinkered with it, whatever was left of the tree's radiance dimmed. Then, abruptly, the revelation ceased. It became merely a pine tree shedding needles on the rug.

It was only when I was older that I knew in a murky mental way what my child's heart had intuited. Christmas tries to point to an inner light, a tree of lights inside the house of our being, and invites people to come close and ponder its beauty. We notice this light because it is contrasted with an outer darkness. And it defies the darkness, refusing to allow the outer world to dictate the terms of existence. In more theological language, people have an inner reality that transcends the outer world and is capable of shining forth even in the darkest of situations. "What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (Jn. 1:4-5).

Of course, our awareness of this truth is fleeting. We return to ordinary consciousness. We smooth the tinsel and vacuum the needles.



## Greenness in the Midst of Barrenness

The Cherokees have a short creation story that encourages the same Christmas insight. The story is called, “Why Some Trees Are Evergreen”:

*When the plants and the trees were first made the Great Mystery gave a gift to each species. But first he set up a contest to determine which gift would be most useful to whom.*

*“I want you to stay awake and keep watch over the earth for seven nights,” the Great Mystery told them.*

*The young trees and plants were so excited to be trusted with such an important job that the first night they would have found it difficult not to stay awake. However, the second night was not so easy, and just before dawn a few fell asleep. On the third night the trees and the plants whispered among themselves in the wind trying to keep from dropping off, but it was too much work for some of them. Even more fell asleep on the fourth night.*

*By the time the seventh night came, the only trees and plants still awake were the cedar, the pine, the spruce, the fir, the holly and the laurel.*

*“What wonderful endurance you have!” exclaimed the Great Mystery. “You shall be given the gift of remaining green forever. You will be the guardians of the forest. Even in the seeming dead of winter your brother and sister creatures will find life protected in your branches.”*

*Ever since then all the other trees and plants lose their leaves and sleep all winter, while the evergreens stay awake.*

This tale does not use the symbols of light and darkness. It talks about greenness in the midst of barrenness and associates this greenness with the ability to stay awake. “Staying awake” is standard code in spiritual

literature. It means remaining aware of our life giving connection to divine reality even when inner and outer forces militate against it. Just as the light in the darkness reminds us of this truth, so does the green-leafed tree in the leafless forest.

## Love in the Midst of Rejection

The major Christian symbols of Christmas also use contrast to emphasize the invulnerability of our inner transcendent relationship to God. “She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn” (Lk. 2:7). In one densely symbolic sentence, Luke brings out the contrast of love in the midst of rejection. Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes, a symbol that he is a loved child. He is laid in a manger, a feeding trough, a symbol that he is meant to be food for the world. These two symbols



*No matter how  
severe the outer  
world is...it cannot  
snuff out the light,  
with the greenness,  
or destroy the love.*



combine to point to the reality of self-giving love, the essence of God and the identity and mission of all those connected to God.

Yet this love is surrounded by rejection. There is no room for him at the inn. This exclusion at his birth is a harbinger of his exclusion by the religious and political elite of his time. Jesus will not be accepted. He will meet with violent opposition and eventually be put to death. Yet, as the whole gospel testifies, this rejection will not undercut the truth of who he is. He is the beloved Son of God on a mission of communicating divine life to people. This truth is seen most clearly in the premier moment of violent rejection—his death on the cross. These

future events, this “life ahead of him,” are hinted at in the interconnected symbols of swaddling clothes, manger, and no room in the inn. These symbols capture the truth of a loved child who continues to extend love in a world of rejection.

## **A Defiant Christmas**

The truth of Christmas emerges in imaginative contrasts. Perhaps the best way to view these contrasts is in terms of inner and outer realities. No matter how severe the outer world is—darkness, barrenness, rejection—it cannot snuff out the light, wither the greenness, or destroy the love. Although we do not always reflect on it, there is an edge to Christmas, an in-your-face attitude. Chesterton put it simply and well: “A religion that defies the world should have a feast that defies the weather.”

If I ever return to the custom of sending Christmas cards, the cover will be a picture of a light shining in the darkness or an evergreen in the midst of a barren forest or a laughing child in a ramshackle stable. Inside, the greeting will be straightforward: “Have a defiant Christmas!”

Of course, I really do not want people to have a defiant Christmas. I want them to have a harmonious Christmas. I want the inner and outer world to be in sync. Light inside and out, greenness inside and out, love inside and out. In other words, I wish people the full peace of Christmas—good enough health, good enough finances, good enough relationships, and a good enough, stable, non-violent society and world. As the lapel button from the sixties put it, “Parousia Now!” Idealistic as it is, that’s what I want.

But that is not what we always get. Christmas arrives to find our health precarious; our careers, jobs or vocations under stress; our finances dipping badly; our relationships in need of repair; our society and world slightly insane. How can we celebrate Christmas in situations like these? Isn’t the only realistic response anxiety and gloom?

But when the outer world is darkness, barrenness and rejection, Christmas is a lesson in bringing forth and responding to the inner world of light, greenness and love. Since this inner world is rooted in a transcendent love, it is more powerful than all the attacks that emerge out of both our finitude and sinfulness. "I have said this that you might have peace in me. In the world you have tribulations, but cheer up, I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33). Christmas cheer, when it is modeled on this passage from the Gospel of John, engenders in us a gentle defiance toward the tribulations of the world. Gentle defiance is not on the standard list of Christian virtues, but it is the Christmas gift that we all need to unwrap during one December or another.

The Christmas card for a defiant Christmas has already been written. Fra Giovanni penned it in 1513:

*I salute you!*

*There is nothing I can give you that you have not;  
but there is much that, while I cannot give,  
you can take.*

*No heaven can come to us  
unless our hearts find rest in it today.  
Take Heaven.*

*No peace lies in the future  
that is not hidden in this present instant.  
Take Peace,*

*The gloom of the world is but a shadow;  
behind it, yet within our reach,  
is joy.*

*Take Joy.*

*And so at this Christmas time, I greet you,  
with the prayer that for you,  
now and forever,  
the day breaks  
and the shadows flee away.*



## Preface

# *Starlight*

A hundred years ago when I was seventeen years old, I was a counsellor at a camp in the North Woods of Wisconsin.

I was assigned to take about fifteen eleven-year-olds on an overnight. We started out in late afternoon, canoed for about four hours, and arrived at Spider Island, not named for its hospitality. We set up camp, ate, and walked around the two-block-long island. (City kids have their own way of measuring.) Then we built a campfire and I told ghost stories about spiders. It took awhile, but the campers eventually fell asleep. The storytelling counsellor soon followed.

Can darkness wake you up?

However it happened, a few kids were suddenly awake and panicking. "I can't see. I can't see." I woke up, and I couldn't see either. The fire had completely gone out, and if there was a sky with a moon and stars it could not be seen. Neither could my hand in front of my face.

Soon everybody was awake and getting scared. Darkness, real darkness, pitch blackness has a way of getting inside you and stirring up fright. I was beginning to regret those ghost-spider stories. Where were the matches? No one could see to get them. Someone suggested going down to the water. There might be more light there. The only problem was: Where was the water? I told everybody to stay where they were. For once I was obeyed. I talked about basketball, baseball, swimming; I mocked the food and the other counsellors; I tried everything to keep them talking. However, all they were good for was a sentence or two, then their minds turned back to the overwhelming fact that they were engulfed in darkness. I could hear some stifled whimpering. We were a people sitting in darkness.

Suddenly the stars came out. Winds, high in the sky, must have blown



*The way to  
Christmas revelation  
is illumined by  
starlight.*



the clouds away. We could see the water, the trees, our gear, and one another. By starlight we saw what was all around us, and we calmed down. The kids laughed and talked. I let some of them go down to the water. Others went back to sleep. I went down to the canoe where I had left the flashlight. You can not trust clouds. If they'll do it once, they'll do it twice. I looked into the sky of stars and then at the water and the island. Starlight had turned a terrible darkness into a beautiful earth. Nevertheless, I took the flashlight back to the campsite.

This is a summer tale that evokes an image associated with Christmas and winter. "Light shining in the darkness" is a symbol rooted in both Christian faith and seasonal change. On the one hand, it plays upon scriptural references connected with the birth of Christ. Zechariah's song at the birth of his son John contains the prediction that light will be given to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (Lk. 1:79); Simeon says that the child Jesus is a "light for the revelation of the gentiles," implying they are currently in darkness (Lk. 2:32); John stresses the tension between the light and the darkness, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn. 1:5). However, in popular imagination, the light shining in the darkness is the star that leads the Magi to the Christ child. The way to the Christmas revelation is illumined by starlight.

On the other hand, Christmas is celebrated on December 25, a day associated with the pagan feast of the winter solstice. On the darkest day of the year we celebrate the unconquerable sun, who is God's Son. There has often been competition between the birthday of the sun and the birthday of the Son:



*They call (this day) “the birthday of the unconquered (sun).” But is the sun so unconquered as our Lord who underwent death and overcame it? Or they say it is “the birthday of the sun.” But is our Lord not the Sun of righteousness of whom the prophet Malachi said: “For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”<sup>1</sup>*

More creative Christian thinking blended together the sacredness of the season with the sacredness of the religious feast. The revelation in nature (the sun) and the revelation of history (the son) complement one another:

*The people are quite right, in a way, when they call this birthday of the Lord “the new sun.” ...We gladly accept the name, because at the coming of the savior not only is humankind saved but the very light of the sun is renewed.<sup>2</sup>*

Chesterton suggested that this merger of pagan and Christian concerns was perfectly natural, because a religion that defies the world gravitates to a ritual that defies the weather.<sup>3</sup>

Light shining in the darkness is a stimulating symbol that can be developed in different directions. It is a compact image that unfolds in the imagination of the one who welcomes it. Stories and ideas cluster around it and work together to focus consciousness in a particular way. In more imaginative language, starlight is starburst, a bright center with streaks of light spiking off in every direction. We can stand in the brilliant center and follow a streak to its furthest tip, where it meets and merges with the darkness. Then we can return to the center and follow another streak. Playing with images is not unlike throwing a battered hat to an improvisation artist and watching her create one character after another, all wearing the same tipped and twisted hat in slightly different ways.

How have people developed the Christmas image of starlight, of light shining in the darkness?

## **Darkness as Evil and Sin**

For many people darkness connotes evil and sin. We are like the campers. We sense it as an immediate threat, and we become panicky and withdrawn. Our knee-jerk reaction is to reach for light—a match, a flashlight, a wall switch. Darkness is more than a simple state of affairs. As the Scriptures often assert, it is a power and it seems to seek power over us. Therefore, we perceive light as a counterpower, a power to resist. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn. 1:5). Shakespeare knew the legend of this power:

*Some say, that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Savior's birth is celebrated,  
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:  
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm;  
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.<sup>4</sup>*

When the image is developed in this way, what is at stake is human hope. Are the forces of evil more powerful than the forces of good? The Christmas answer is that “the bird of dawning singeth all night long.”

When people buy into the power of evil, they enter into the darkness and hide from the light. Darkness is no longer just an outside force but the inner reality of violent people. The prime target of this violence becomes anyone who manifests light. How will the light of the world respond in the hour of darkness?

*It was precisely from the kernel of the Kingdom-proclamation, from the message of God's love of enemies, that Jesus responded to rejection and to the alliance of his enemies against him. These did not succeed in freeing themselves from their own desires, but they did manage to draw the sinless one who offered no resistance on this level into their own dark world. He whom they wanted to get rid of entered fully into their own world, and there in the darkness, in that godless place, in the realm of hardened hearts, he obeyed, and through his obedience and his interceding love opened anew the way to the Father out of the night of impenitence.<sup>5</sup>*

The revelation of Christ lights a way out of the darkness, the godless place, the realm of hardened hearts, and the night of impenitence. Today we may not fear the external force of evil as strongly as we fear the hardness and cruelty of our own hearts. The light shines there also, and the darkness will not overcome it.

This indomitable aspect of light is manifested when light is most threatened. When the forces of darkness come out of hiding, so does the light. The image is not "light shining at noon" but light in the darkness. This contrast can take our mind down an interesting path. Perhaps our hope does not spring from outside estimates but from an inside intuition. If there is so much outside darkness, where does the light come from? In a letter written from prison on Christmas Eve, Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested that prisoners, people in darkness,



*Today we may not  
fear the external force  
of evil as strongly as  
we fear the hardness  
and cruelty of our  
own hearts.*



were in the best position to understand Christmas. Vaclav Havel, former president of Czechoslovakia and a political prisoner for many years, elaborates on this evocative suggestion. In an interview he was asked the question, “Do you see a grain of hope anywhere in the 1980s?” He responds not by analyzing the world but by exploring his soul:

*I should probably say first that the kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.... I think the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urges us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from "elsewhere." ...I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental...though I can't, unlike Christians for instance, say anything concrete about the transcendental.<sup>6</sup>*

Havel is correct on two counts. Hope does well up from “elsewhere” and “transcends the world that is immediately experienced,” and Christians do have something concrete to say about this transcendental source. This light in the darkness emerges from the union of the divine and the human, from the interpenetration of the infinite and the finite. Christmas is the celebration of this union and, therefore, a feast of hope.

## Darkness as the Far Border

Darkness can also have a neutral meaning. It is merely the far border where sight fails, the opaque fringe of consciousness. If we light a Chanukah or Christmas candle, we immediately notice one thing. The flame does not expunge the darkness. It burns in the darkness. The haloes of light carve *out of* blackness a circle of brightness. Without the contrasting darkness, we could not see. Night is an essential part of starlight. As such, it symbolizes that our seeing is also a not seeing. Divine revelation includes divine concealment. Human perception includes human blindness. Light shining in the darkness is a realistic assessment of our earthbound capacities.

God may live in unapproachable light, but the incarnate Son of God, the Word Made Flesh, and his incarnate followers struggle in starlight, the mix of light and darkness. In some unpredictable future or another dimension of existence where time and history find completion, the duality of light and darkness may give way. Our vision will be clear and, as the classic hope states it, beatific. But this is either eschaton or heaven, the end of this world or life in the next world. However, Christmas is about *now*, about the time being, as W.H. Auden said. And now, consciousness, even enlightened consciousness, is light in the darkness.

Evelyn Underhill explores our starlight condition through an alternate yet related image of light in the forest:

*If we stand in a deep forest and look up through the branches to the sunshine seen in a broken pattern between the countless leaves, it is possible to say and to feel that the foliage hides the sky. Yet perhaps the living screen lets through as much of that pure radiance as the little dwellers in the forest can bear. We, immersed in the forest, are entranced by these shining glimpses between the leaves; with their assurance of the steady presence “yonder” of an infinite light-flooded*

*world. Without this breaking in, this fragmentary revelation, we should have no direct apprehension of the transcendent energy and glory overarching us, by which the forest lives. Yet a deeper insight can learn to find that sunshine, that same unearthly radiance—seen by us in these dazzling and broken yet “religious” glimpses—as the essential life of each one of those leaves. We can come to realize that all-pervading energy, poured in its abounding richness through space—penetrating all things yet steadfastly continuing in itself, in the dual character of a given Presence and self-imparting Power. And with the deepening of our contemplation, with an ever more complete and sympathetic entrance into the mysterious process, the cyclic births and deaths of the many-graded forest life, there comes to us a more profound sense of the “otherness” of those secret forces in which that life is bathed and by which it is continuously created and maintained.<sup>7</sup>*

What is instructive about Underhill’s reflection is that the essentially fragmentary revelation can bring, with deepening contemplation, greater sight. We can learn to enter into “the mysterious process...of those secret forces in which life is bathed and by which it is continuously created and maintained.” Although our sight is limited, we can push back the edges of darkness and see more and more. If we are attentive, our eyes will adjust to the light that is provided. The truth is we can see what we need to see by starlight.

This is what the feast of Christmas encourages us to do. It wants us to behold ourselves, the earth, and the underlying and supportive presence of the divine until more and more of the real enters into our minds and hearts. When this happens, we often use the traditional language of miracle. Miracles are just people and events that trigger our love and so allow us to see the world properly. Where there is love, there is sight:

*Father Vaillant began pacing restlessly up and down as he spoke, and the Bishop watched him. It was just this in his friend that was dear to him: "Where there is great love there are always miracles," he said at length. "One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love.... The miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always."*<sup>8</sup>

Light shining in the darkness has the progressive meaning of making "our perceptions finer" so that we can see and hear "what is about us always." Our consciousness is enlarged; shrouded areas are illumined. The miracle may occur at Christmas, but the "finer perceptions" linger all year long.

## **Darkness as Preparation**

Mystics often employ the image of a light shining in the darkness, but they develop it in a very different way. Darkness is the positive preparation for the advent of light. Light does not push back the darkness; the darkness is the previous spiritual state that produces light. A text from the wisdom literature is often cited as carrying this esoteric insight: "When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run half of her swift course, the all-powerful Word leapt down from his throne" (Wis. 18:14).<sup>9</sup> Although this text originally refers to the power of divine judgment at the time of the Exodus, mystics have seen in it the preconditions of enlightenment. When we have turned away from the noise of the senses and are as still as night, then light suddenly shines forth. A monk of the Eastern church develops this approach:

*In Russia, the custom exists of fasting [on the Christmas vigil] until the first star appears. This brings to mind both the star which led the magi to Bethlehem and Christ who is the true light. May this day also be a day of fast in our souls: let us abstain from all bad or useless thoughts and speech, and await in silence and composure the savior who is coming to us. Darkness falls. Soon the first star will rise and mark the start of a new day and of the great feast of Christmas. With the rising of this star, may the light of our Lord rise for us so that, in the words of the apostle Peter, “Ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.”<sup>10</sup>*

Night is about disengaging from distractions, about fasting in mind and heart, so that when the light appears we will see it.

Once this meaning is formulated—darkness as the emptying of the soul that is the precondition to receiving the birth of Christ—it is used to interpret the spiritual situation of the shepherds. They are “keeping watch by night over their flocks.” In other words, they are awake and vigilant. Night is a time of attentiveness and singlemindedness. As they wait in darkness as watchmen who wait for the light, an angel of the Lord may appear with good news and the glory of Lord may shine round about them. If this happens, we will understand the mystical import of one of the most famous Christmas carols:

*Silent night, holy night,  
All is calm, all is bright,  
Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child,  
Holy infant so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace,  
Sleep in heavenly peace.*



The silent, holy and calm night becomes bright, and with the brightness comes the revelatory symbols of virgin-mother and child and the assurance of heavenly peace.

In this understanding of “light shining in the darkness,” darkness is a self-imposed strategy. We deliberately starve our senses, our contact with the outside world, so that the inner world can emerge without competition. This is what Lame Deer, a Sioux medicine man, contended: “What you see with your eyes shut is what counts.”<sup>11</sup> There is a “third eye” or “inner eye,” a spiritual way of seeing. The time-honored mystical way of opening this eye is to close the physical eyes. Angelus Silesius, the mystical poet, wrote that at the birth of Christ, “night brought forth the day.” In another short poem, he sums up this mystical approach to darkness:

*Note, in the silent night, God as a man is born  
To compensate thereby for what Adam had done.  
If your soul be still as night to the created,  
God becomes man in you, retrieves what's violated.*<sup>12</sup>



## Previews

These starlight themes—a transcendent presence that provokes us into hope, our always-limited but ever-refining consciousness, and the cultivation of spiritual sight—occur again and again in the following chapters. The chapters are not neatly divided units, nor is there a single sustained argument that proceeds from chapter to chapter. They are freewheeling explorations of the spiritual life through the images, stories and ideas associated with Christmas. This loose method seems appropriate both to the actual rhythms of the spiritual life and the uncontrollable flow of Christmas.



*The spirit of  
Christmas does not  
submit to control.*

*It is a sled  
gathering speed  
down a steep hill.*



here, a quandary there, and a “Don’t you think there is something to this” question everywhere. The reflections are not a coordinated picture of the spiritual life; they are splashes of paint on a canvas. They are at that stage before the mind imposes a grand, overarching scheme. Undoubtedly, this is because I have not thought them through all the way. But it is also because in the spiritual life the mind is often the last to know.

There is a similar freewheeling character to the feast of Christmas. It usually asserts itself when we attempt to organize Christmas. All of us at one time or another have tried to plot the flow of Christmas, gotten everything perfectly in place—and then come down with the flu. The message, which we never quite get, is that the spirit of Christmas does not submit to control. It is a sled gathering speed down a steep hill. Enjoy the ride, but do not oversteer it. The feast gives itself to those willing to indulge in a four-hour

All neat organizations of the spiritual life are hindsight creations. After events, activities and people have provoked our spirits to journey to another place, we look back and sort out the chaos into some form of orderly progression. We may even dare to talk about providence: “At the time I didn’t think so, but now I see it was all for the good”. But we should notice that providential interpretations are usually backward looks from a safe place. When events, activities and people are actually happening, the spiritual life has the “feel” of an insight here, a quandary there, and a sense of being on the verge of something everywhere. That is how it is with these chapters. There is an insight

meal, to luxuriate into a labyrinthine story, to rummage through an attic of ideas, to turn an image like a diamond and marvel at each slant of light. Christmas is best when we relax and let it happen beyond our expectations. The reflections in these chapters try to let things happen. They bring together Bible, tradition, experience, culture, reason and imagination, but not in a systematic way. Each element makes a surprise appearance, says more than was in the script, and then wanders off stage. Undoubtedly, this is because the author's mind is, as Buddhist thought picturesquely puts it, a "drunken monkey." But it is also because Christmas is a mighty mess of Bible, tradition, experience, culture, reason and imagination, and it is more fun to contribute to the mess than to try to straighten it out.

Chapter 1, "The Soul and the Season," explores the reality of soul in terms of the double consciousness of God and the world. These are the two eyes of the soul, the right eye gazing on God and the left eye on creation. The Christmas season tries to focus these two eyes. Through images, stories, customs and ideas we gradually refine our understandings of ourselves, our world, and the divine source.

Chapter 2, "Strange Stories, Spiritual Sight, and Blurred Guides," begins with a strange Christmas story and suggests that its strangeness is the key to its power. The many strange stories that surround Christmas try to jolt us out of ordinary physical consciousness and encourage us to see from a spiritual viewpoint. They move us along an outer and inner path of spiritual realization. However, the stories need interpreters, guides who will show us the reason for the strangeness and suggest the hidden meaning of the tale. An apology is made for blurred guides.

Chapter 3, "Waking Up on Christmas Morning," begins with another strange story, a mythic tale of Adam and Eve, filled with evocative symbols and biblical associations. Adam and Eve are on a journey of awakening. We accompany them, making our own their pleasures and dissatisfactions, their searches and discoveries. Eventually, they find a child wrapped in

swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. But who is really found depends on who is looking.

Chapter 4, “Giving Birth to Christ,” begins with a story about the struggle of light to come into the world. The question is how we coincide with our spiritual center so that our actions, no matter how great or how small, bring love into the world. The answer is hidden in the Christmas story of Mary and Gabriel, the virgin and the angel. Their conversation is a Lamaze class for believers. It shows us how to give birth to Christ.

Chapter 5, “The Magi Ride Again,” traces the Magi story throughout Christian history. The original tale is only twelve verses in the Gospel of Matthew, but Christian imagination has turned it into volumes. The Magi have become the symbolic bearers of many spiritual insights. Poets, storytellers, and spiritual writers have explored the potential in the unobtrusive comment, “They went home by another route” (Mt. 2:12). We can go home that way too, if we follow them.

Chapter 6, “The Close and Holy Darkness,” deals with the shadow side of Christmas. Christmas rhetoric has said that the child is born to die, and at Christmas our eyes mist with memories of the dead. But perhaps it is not as we think it is. Perhaps what is lost in one way is present in another. Perhaps Christmas night is not an abyss of blackness but a close and holy darkness. Love may reach farther than we know.

Chapter 7, “The Man Who Was a Lamp,” is a long poem about that strong Advent figure, John the Baptist. He has a reputation for being able to introduce us to Christ. He can show us the way to the cave of Christmas. He is not as adventuresome as the Magi or as dutiful as the shepherds. But the Johannine Jesus called him a “lamp shining brightly.” High praise from the Light of the World.



There are many thanks to be given to many people for this book. Special thanks go to Rita Troccoli and Wayne Prist for reading these words in their jumbled state and helping me turn them right side up. Hopefully, the results are clear and substantive explorations of the spiritual life through the images, stories and ideas of Christmas. May the words prove to be starlight, light shining in the darkness.

Just in case, do not leave your flashlight in the canoe.



## Chapter 1

# *The Soul and the Season*

“I’m not going to make it. I’m not going to make it.”

It was in the parking lot of the Jewel Food Store three days before Christmas. A woman was hoisting bags of groceries out of a cart and into the trunk of her car. She was muttering over and over to herself, “I’m not going to make it. I’m not going to make it.”

As I passed her, I smiled and piped up, my voice as thick as a glass of spiked egg nog, “You’re going to make it. You’re going to make it.”

I was proud of my double assurance of success countering her double prediction of defeat. It was a voice from the other side of the aisle, a secular response as sacred as the antiphons of a chapful of monks.

Her head came out of the open trunk. She stared at me with a “What the hell do you know, fella” look and said in a voice as adamant as a stamped foot, “I’m not going to make it.”

Chastened, I trudged into the store. The “Under Ten” check-out line had twenty people in it. I wondered if I was going to make it.

The “it” in question can be many things. “It” can be getting everything done, surviving the season, avoiding a breakdown, or the modest ambition of not yelling at fellow motorists, salespeople, and—most impossible of all—your own children. On a deeper but not always appreciated level, “it” can refer to “getting into” the Christmas spirit. “I’m not going to make it” means Christmas is going to happen but it is not going to happen to me. The prescribed feelings of peace, love and joy (“How dare they dictate to me that I have to be joyous?”) are going to clash with my actual feelings of fragmentation, irritation and depression. My soul and the season are out of sync.

The interaction of soul and season is what this book is all about. Soul



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is one of many perspectives on the human person. Different traditions of inquiry approach the human person in different ways. Biological traditions focus on genetic conditioning; psychological traditions remind us of mental and emotional factors; sociological traditions insist on the formative power of cultural factors. Religious traditions, while denying none of the above factors, stress that the uniqueness of the person lies in the soul. Therefore, although religious feasts may delight or discipline the body, soothe or stir the mind, fire or quiet the emotions, reconcile or disrupt relationships, and stabilize or subvert the social order, they are ultimately seductions of the soul. They attempt to bring the reality of soul into consciousness, stimulate its relationship to its source, and encourage it into creative expression. Needless to say, this is an ideal script. In actuality, there are resistances in the person and distortions in the feast. But the ambition remains, and the more we know about soul and season the greater the possibility will be that the two will interact creatively and, in the metaphoric language of Christmas, Christ will be born.

## **The Eyes of the Soul**

“Soul” is a word that reminds us we are border walkers. We live on the boundary of the physical and the spiritual. There is “something in us that points beyond physical life, however complete that physical life may be, and suggests—perhaps in most of us very faintly and occasionally, but in some



with a decisive authority—that somehow we are borderland creatures.”<sup>1</sup> Another way of saying this is that the soul has two faces. One face looks to God and the other looks at the world.<sup>2</sup> The *Theologica Germanica*, a spiritual treatise written around 1350 by an anonymous author, opts for one face with two eyes: “Now the created soul of man has two eyes. One (the right) represents the power to peer into the eternal. The other (the left) gazes into time and the created world.”<sup>3</sup> In this image, the spiritual life is learning to see with both eyes of the soul.

The usual analysis is that the right eye, the eye that peers into the eternal, is the weakest and most unfocused. Despite many warnings, it continues to fantasize God as one object among many. This confusion blocks the soul from communion with the true transcendent. This is the point of a classic teaching from the *Upanishads*:

*“So tell me,” said the father, “have you ever asked for that knowledge whereby you can hear what cannot be heard, see what cannot be seen, and know what cannot be known?”*

*“Please sir, instruct me.”*

*“So be it, my son. Put this salt in the water and come back tomorrow.”*

*Svetaketu did so and returned the next morning. His father said, “Please return to me the salt you placed in the water yesterday.”*

*Svetaketu looked but could not find it: “But sir, all the salt has dissolved.”*

*“How does the water at the top taste?”*

*“Like salt.”*

*“And at the middle?”*

*“Like salt.”*

*“And at the bottom?”*

*“Like salt.”*

*“My son, the salt remains in the water even though you do not see it; and though you do not see that Pure Being he is fully present in you and everywhere else. That one alone is the essence of all, the soul of the world, the eternal truth, the Supreme Self; and, O Svetaketu, you are That! You are That!”<sup>4</sup>*

Once we begin to notice the world of spirit and to know that we have a partial home there, more complex instructions are given. How are we to relate to Spirit?

*The Zen Master gave the woman a sieve and a cup and they went to the nearby seashore where they stood on a rock with the waves breaking round them.*

*“Show me how you will fill the sieve with water,” he said.*

*The woman bent down, held the sieve in one hand, and scooped the water into it with a cup. It barely appeared at the bottom of the sieve and then was gone.*

*“It is just like that with spiritual practice,” the Master said, “while one stands on the rock of I-ness and tries to ladle the divine realization into it. That’s not the way to fill the sieve with water or the self with divine life.”*

*He took the sieve from her hand and threw it far out into the sea, where it floated momentarily and then sank.*

*“Now it is full of water,” he said, “and it will remain so. That’s the way to fill it with water, and it’s the way to do spiritual practice. It’s not ladling little cupfuls of divine life into the individuality but throwing the individuality far out into the sea of divine life.”<sup>5</sup>*

With teachings like these the right eye opens and the person’s relationship with the divine deepens.

A standard criticism of spirituality is that it has focused too exclusively on the right eye. In fact, some spiritual advice seems to pit the right eye and left eye against one another:

*But these two eyes, which are part of man's soul, cannot carry out their functions simultaneously. If the soul is looking into eternity through the right eye, the left eye must cease all its undertakings and act as if it were dead. If the left eye were to concentrate on things of this outer world (that is to say, be absorbed by time and created beings), it would hinder the musing of the right eye.<sup>6</sup>*

Although closing the left eye is proposed as a temporary strategy, it has often become a permanent blindness. This has developed into the caricature of the spiritual person as “otherworldly” and the spiritual journey as the strictly inner activity of solitudinous people. A continual caution of traditional spirituality was to not let the soul get lost in the world of “created things” and lose sight of its relationship to God. But the soul can also get lost in God and lose sight of its relationship to “created things.” Lost in God may have a more rapturous ring than lost in “created things,” but it is still lost.

Today there is a massive attempt to redress this imbalance. The perspective of Gandhi is honored:

*I claim that human mind or human society is not divided into watertight compartments called social, political and religious. All act and react upon one another... I do not believe that the spiritual law works on a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and the political fields.<sup>7</sup>*

People are talking about and writing spiritualities of gender, body, mind, marriage, work, the economy, politics, leisure, social action, recovery from addiction, etc. In other words, the created world is being scrutinized with the left eye of the soul.

Although what the left eye sees in any given situation depends on the situation, there are some general patterns of perception. The left eye of the soul recognizes the multiplicity and variety of the world, but it also spies an underlying unity. It celebrates diversity, but it does not get lost in it. This is one of the points of a training session between Merlin and the young Arthur. Merlin takes Arthur into the forest, turns him into a hawk (they could do that in those days), and sends him sailing into the sky. From the earth Merlin shouts to Arthur, “What do you see?”

Arthur responds, “I see rivers and trees.”

“No,” an irritated Merlin responds and repeats his question, “What do you see?”

“I see cattle and sheep and...”

“No,” Merlin interrupts and asks a third time, “What do you see?”

“I see villages and...”

“Come down,” orders Merlin. Arthur, the hawk, returns to earth and becomes Arthur, the young boy. Merlin tells him, “Some day you will know what you saw.” The day Arthur knows what he saw was the day after his dream of Camelot died. He saw no boundaries. When he was in the sky and looking at the earth, everything was distinct yet also part of a unity. In the universe there may be many lines, but the lines can be viewed as either divisions or meeting places. Both divisions and meeting places are created by the mind.<sup>8</sup>

The flight of Arthur is available for people today without the magic of Merlin. Georgia O’Keeffe, the influential American painter, once suggested that everybody take a ride in an airplane. She thought the perspective from the airplane would change the way people see things. What is seen from

airplane altitude is the connectedness of what appears from the ground level to be separated. Alfred North Whitehead used the same image in another context but for a similar purpose: “The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational generalization.”<sup>9</sup> When the plane ride is successful, “some synoptic vision has been gained.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, things are seen in their interconnectedness.

Fred Hoyle, the astronomer, went Arthur, O’Keeffe and Whitehead one better. In 1948 he predicted, “Once a photograph of the earth, taken from the outside, is available—once the sheer isolation of the earth becomes plain, a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose.” We have gone up from an airplane ride to a spaceship ride. Although what is seen at each height is the same and so there is a continuity of vision, the perspective also changes and with it our consciousness of who we are on this earth. Beatrice Bruteau suggests that the picture of the earth from space generates the idea that “we human beings—better, perhaps, we living beings—constitute one family on a tiny fragile planet in limitless space.”<sup>11</sup> These stories and ideas of “seeing from height” are exercises to train the left eye to see the unity of the diverse world.

As we play with the image of height and sight, we are gradually moving the left eye, which views creation, into line with the right eye, which views “our Father in heaven,” the High God. The ultimate goal of the spiritual life is to coordinate both eyes into a single vision. This single vision, the working together of the two eyes of the soul, is often called the eye of God. The mystical injunction is to see with the eye of God. Chaim Potok tells us what we can expect:

*My father, of blessed memory, once said to me, on the verse in Genesis: “And He saw all that He did and behold it was good” —*

*my father once said that the seeing of God is not like the seeing of man. Man sees only between the blinks of his eyes. He does not know what the world is like during the blinks. He sees the world in pieces, in fragments. But the Master of the Universe sees the world whole, unbroken. That world is good. Our seeing is broken, Asher Lev. Can we make it like the seeing of God? Is that possible?<sup>12</sup>*

Spiritual exercises want to bring us to such wide-awake, open-eyed clarity that we will see the universe whole, see it *during* the blinks. “Is that possible?” is the question that entices all spiritual seekers.

Therefore, the spiritual life is, at root, a matter of seeing. It is not about sectioning out and cordoning off a part of life and then calling it spiritual and separating it from everything else that is called secular. The spiritual life is all of life seen from a certain perspective. It is waking, sleeping, dreaming, eating, drinking, working, loving, relaxing, recreating, walking, sitting, standing and breathing understood and engaged in from the single vision of the two eyes of the soul, the eye of God. However, certain events, people and activities illumine the eyes of the soul in a special way. These events, people and activities become the immediate concerns of the spiritual life; and most likely it is these happenings that we relate when we tell the story of our journey of enlightenment. However, it must be remembered that spirit suffuses everything; and so the spiritual life is simply life, whenever and wherever, seen from the vantage point of spirit.

Although the goal of the spiritual life can be stated simply—the realization of our union with God and creation—the journey to this goal is exceeding complex. There are breakthroughs, tests, false identifications, detours, peace, frenzy, roadblocks, breakdowns and sudden bursts of joy, fear, adventures and boredom. I was told of a religious pilgrimage where the people process toward their goal by taking one step backward for every two steps forward. This forward-backward movement is the

humble, mundane way we tread the spiritual path. It is reflected in the myriad questions we mumble and puzzle along the way. Some of these questions are sincere; some are dodges; some are stalls; some are pleas for pity; some are breakthroughs to a new level. Why should I go on this journey at all? Why not eat, drink, be merry, and be done with it? Can I become aware of soul or do I have to take someone's word? I see now and then—how do I keep seeing? How do I open myself to divine influences? What are the most appropriate forms of prayer for my style of life? How should Scripture be used? What does surrender to God mean? How does the soul relate to the mind, will and body? How do I learn to live out of the soul? Christ fell three times, how come I have fallen 4,612 times? How are the right eye and the left eye coordinated? How can the spiritual life affect my work, my love life, and my leisure? How come the more I take the spiritual life seriously, the stranger I get and the more I don't fit in? Some days the question is, "Is the land flowing with milk and honey in this direction?" Other days the question is, "Were there no graves in Egypt, that you brought us out into this desert to die?"

It is often stated that these questions are not as esoteric as they once were, that there is a hunger among many people for the spiritual life.<sup>13</sup> At the same time it is also stated that the mainline Christian churches, the traditional home of spirituality, are ignoring the opportunity. They are preoccupied with internal organizational struggles and external social amelioration programs. No one can dispute the importance of these activities, and certainly the churches should be involved in them. But they are not substitutes for the birthright of religion:

*Because the soul is lost—or at least temporarily mislaid or bewildered—ministers have been forced, upon meeting a pastoral problem, to go upstairs to its neighbor, the next closest thing to soul: the mind. So the churches turn to academic and clinical psychology,*

*to psychodynamics and psychopathology and psychiatry, in attempts to understand the mind and its working. This has led ministers to regard troubles of the soul as mental breakdowns and cure of soul as psychotherapy. But the realm of the mind—perception, memory, mental disease—is a realm of its own, another flat belonging to another owner who can tell us very little about the person whom the minister really wants to know, the soul.<sup>14</sup>*

The soul is the natural concern of religion, but when the soul is lost the churches go elsewhere—mimicking, often quite badly, other sectors of society.

Perhaps this critique is not fully deserved. I am sure many people in ministry would claim they have always tried to approach their educational, counselling and social programs from a spiritual perspective. They know the difference between themselves and secular educators, counsellors and social activists. They have not lost or mislaid the soul but merely focused on the much-neglected left eye of the soul. Even so, some questions about the relationship of the spiritual life to church activity cause uneasiness. Does your church teach people “higher forms” of prayer—meditation and contemplation? Does your church approach liturgy as an opportunity for spiritual communion with God, other people, and the universe, or is it primarily a gathering of people with common convictions? Is every church policy grounded in spiritual perception and logic? Does your church encourage people to view their family and work life in a spiritual perspective or are these major areas left unexamined by the left eye of the soul? These questions cause uneasiness because even if we answered “yes” to all of them it might not be clear all that this “yes” entails.

It must be remembered that these hard questions are “confrontation from friends.” It is a message from people inside the Christian tradition, people who care about the churches. They want both fidelity to the



past and relevance to the present. In fact, they often suppose that fidelity to the depth of the tradition, not to its surface manifestations, will automatically be relevant to the present. These people—and they come from the right, left and middle—have internalized “something” at the heart of the faith, “something” closely tied to Jesus’ life and preaching. When they do not see this “something” in the contemporary church or see its importance jeopardized, they raise their voice. Today many ask this type of purifying question: Has the church lost the missionary thrust that characterized its origins? Have the social implications of the Gospel been overlooked? Does church organization reflect the Gospel vision of human relationships? Our friendly confrontation entails “something” I think is central to the faith: Do we live and act out of a spiritual center, which the biblical tradition called “heart,” which the postbiblical tradition called “soul,” and which contemporary theology calls the “transcendent self”?

In many cases this “confrontation from friends” has come about because of “conversations with strangers.” This is certainly the case with my question about the spiritual center. The strangers involved are a wide-ranging group of people who, in one way or another, have been deeply influenced by non-Christian spiritual traditions. Some of them are Christians who have “passed over” into another spiritual tradition and “passed back” into their own. Some of them are Christians who “passed



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over” into another spiritual tradition and stayed. Some are spiritual eclectics, appreciating the mystical element of every religion, philosophy, science and psychology. Some are doctors seeking wholistic approaches to healing. Others are explicit teachers of Buddhist and Hindu spiritualities in the context of the American culture. Still others are philosophers who are struggling to connect contemporary psychological movements with the mystical traditions of the great world religions. Dialogue with these people means confronting the spiritual head-on, not as a function of anything else but as a reality in its own right.

Lately I have been reading these “strangers.” I have begun visiting bookstores that play sitar music and burn incense, and I have developed the bad and expensive habit of buying books with the word “spirit” or “spiritual” anywhere on the cover. When the fever is really on me, I buy books with the word “spirit” anywhere in the preface. I have found this reading a fascinating experience. Much of what I read was unsubstantiated in the way I like things substantiated; or so far outside my conscious experience I couldn’t take it seriously; or not sufficiently resigned to the cynic’s slogan, “Everywhere I go I take up too much room;” or “too soft” for the world I live in and have no intentions of leaving; or systematically designed to quench desire when I am trying to hype it and redirect it; or even more fearful of suffering than I am; or “too far out” in a direction that may be legitimate but is out of the question for someone who has developed as many bad habits as I have and who long ago decided his death chant would be “MERCY!”; or too glib about how social change takes place; or too simple for someone who begins sentences with “on the other hand...”

On the other hand, I was awed by the straightforward, unapologetic affirmation of the reality and importance of spirit; by the insights into the relationship of spirit, mind, will and body; by the overwhelming emphasis given to consciousness; by the person-centered approaches to action; by

the fierce metaphysical fight against ego-centricity; by the refusal to back down on the indispensability of personal meditation; by the attempt to explore freedom in terms of the inner person rather than the outer restraints; and by the recurring stress on compassion and love. In short, it did what conversations with strangers are supposed to do. It clarified and expanded my vision.

Most of all it forced me to reread my own tradition. I do not think I would have read the *Theologica Germanica* if I had not read Ram Dass, or the *Sermons of Meister Eckhart* if I had not read Stephen Levine, or de Caussade's *Abandonment to Divine Providence* if I had not read Eknath Easwaran. Most of all it has been the insightful and visionary work of Beatrice Bruteau that has helped me reappraise certain parts of the New Testament and the doctrines of soul, incarnation and Trinity. There is no strict logical connection among these people. The perspective of one does not immediately lead to the perspective of the other. Yet it seemed that interest in and appreciation of my own tradition emerged out of contact with the spiritual concerns and insights of people who were nurtured in other spiritual traditions. David Toolan's remark may be too strong, but it certainly points in the right direction: "If you want to get to the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition...then I argue that it may pay to be more than a little Buddhist."<sup>15</sup> Conversations with strangers may be the way we come to ourselves.

In particular, I reappraised the crucial relationship between experience and consciousness. I had always thought that experience was the primary category of the Christian, Catholic faith I was nurtured in. An oversimple yet workable theory of Scripture and tradition is that Scripture is the record of the founding experience of Christianity and tradition is the story of how that founding experience fared as it moved to different places and through different times. Schillebeeckx has it right:

*What was experience for others yesterday is tradition for us today, and what is experience for us today will in turn be tradition for others tomorrow. However, what was once experience can only be handed down in renewed experiences, at least as a living tradition.... This means that Christianity is not a message but an experience of faith that becomes a message, and as an explicit message it seeks to offer a new possibility of life experience to others who hear it from within their own experience of life.<sup>16</sup>*

The writings of Scripture, liturgical forms, postscriptural dogma, theology, ethics, and spirituality—the whole plural and productive development of the Christian tradition—are founded on a primal experience of God in Jesus Christ and renewed through analogous experiences.

My conversation with strangers encouraged me to pursue this emphasis on experience in terms of the spiritual structure of consciousness. It is not enough to formally state, “At root Christian faith is experiential.” Nor is it enough to proclaim the many enshrined expressions of that experience—“The Word became flesh;” “Christ is risen;” “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself;” “Jesus is Lord;” “The Kingdom of God is at hand;” etc.—and then move on to grand theological speculation. Nor is it enough to spin out the ethical and social implications of these expressions. We must delve into the interior of these expressions and map the terrain of consciousness they reflect. Of course there are many different expressions and, therefore, there will be many different maps. But the strangers insist that the number of maps is not the problem. The problem is a failure of nerve, a failure to read the maps for what they are: ancient instructions to the secrets of the spirit.

## The Lens of the Season

Spirituality may be the genuine concern of many people today. But why try to explore it through the feast of Christmas? If we want to pursue the spiritual life through the Christian tradition, why not study the great mystics—Paul, John, Dionysius, Augustine, Simeon, Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Tauler, Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, etc.? Or if we wish our spirituality shaped by the originating events of Christian faith, why not the passion, death and resurrection? Scholars agree that these experience galvanized the Christian movement. Or if we want to ground our spirit formation in the life of Jesus, why not the Sermon on the Mount or the parables? But Christmas? A feast based on the prologues of only two of the four Gospels? A feast the tradition has made to carry more weight than it can bear? A feast so chameleon that it is reshaped by the customs of every culture of the world? A feast so adaptable to nonreligious instincts that it has been nicknamed “Dollarmas”? Christmas does not seem the most likely candidate for a Christian appreciation of spiritual life.

### 1. So, why Christmas?

Because I cannot shake it. Over the years I have had, as I think most adult Christians have, some Christmases Dickens would not dare write about. Christmas has been just one more day—and not a very good one at that, and I knew where to lay the blame. Christmas was a spiritual flop because my Advent preparation was so shoddy. There was no increase in prayer and fasting. In fact, there was less of both. However, there was an increase in everything else. During December I have usually been overworked, overworried and overserved. And I knew that as the birth of Christ drew near I would not witness it. I was living the folktale of Befana:

*Befana, the Housewife, scrubbing her pane,  
Saw three old sages ride down the lane,  
Saw three grey travellers pass her door—  
Gaspar, Balthazar, Melchior.*

*“Where journey you, sirs?” she asked of them.  
Balthazar answered, “To Bethlehem,  
For we have news of a marvelous thing.  
Born in a stable is Christ the King.”*

*“Give Him my welcome!”  
Then Gaspar smiled,  
“Come with us, mistress, to greet the Child.”*

*“Oh, happily, happily would I fare,  
Were my dusting through and I’d polished the stair.”*

*Old Melchior leaned on his saddle horn.  
“Then send but a gift to the small Newborn.”*

*“Oh, gladly, gladly I’d send Him one,  
Were the hearthstone swept and my weaving done.*

*As soon as ever I’ve baked my bread,  
I’ll fetch Him a pillow for His head,  
And a coverlet too,” Befana said.*

*“When the rooms are aired and the linen dry,  
I’ll look at the Babe.”*

*But the Three rode by.*

*She worked for a day and a night and a day,  
Then, gifts in her hands, took up her way.  
But she never found where the Christ Child lay.*

*And still she wanders at Christmastide,  
Houseless, whose house was all her pride.*

*Whose heart was tardy, whose gifts were late;  
Wanders, and knocks at every gate.  
Crying, "Good people, the bells begin!  
Put off your toiling and let love in."<sup>17</sup>*

I knew the lesson of Befana and vowed to "put off my toiling and let love in." But every year I hear the words of the woman in the parking lot in my own mouth, "I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to make it."

Yet, despite my checkered history with Christmas, there is always something in me that is eager. Every year, even though I suspect it will not be fulfilled, a promise stirs inside me. There is undoubtedly a theological interpretation of this heightened expectancy, but I have traced it back to my childhood. Christmas was the context of my first conscious taste of transcendence, and the memory always makes me hungry for more:

*What boy pulled his stocking cap over his ears  
(the unmessable crew cut beneath)  
and found the pre-dawn Christmas snow  
waiting for him?*

*The street lights were city stars*

*guiding the magi through the supernatural night.  
The boy's holy ambition was to walk the snow  
without leaving tracks,  
to know everything it was  
yet leave it unmarked.  
He failed wonderfully  
across Romaine's white lawn.  
Two blocks away  
the bright Gothic God  
invited him into the magic darkness  
where ears were bells  
and nose was pine and incense  
and eyes were poinsettias and golden chalices.  
As was his host's custom  
he surprised him,  
like a gift under the tree,  
and took him up past the stained-glass saints  
to the vaulted, wood-carved heaven.  
He told the boy he would not fall  
then dropped him into Christmas.*

*What man now strikes the flinty past  
to fire the coldness of his soul?<sup>18</sup>*

This is not a lament for lost innocence or a futile attempt to go “home again.” It is the intuition that this “Christmas space” of such abundant childhood treasures also holds adult delights. Christmas is not for children but for the ever-rejuvenating child in each of us. I cannot shake Christmas because I will not admit that growing old and growing weary are the same thing. We can grow old and not only not lose wonder but increase it.



Thomas Hardy wrote a better poem about this undying attraction of Christmas, "The Oxen":

*Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.  
"Now they are all on their knees,"  
An elder said as we sat in a flock  
By the embers in hearthside ease.*

*We pictured the meek mild creatures where  
They dwelt in the strawy pen,  
Nor did it occur to one of us there  
To doubt they were kneeling then.*

*So fair a fancy few would weave  
In these years! Yet, I feel,  
If someone said on Christmas Eve,  
"Come; see the oxen kneel,*

*"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb  
Our childhood used to know,"  
I should go with him in the gloom,  
Hoping it might be so.<sup>19</sup>*

If someone says that the child of promise has been born, we will go with them through the gloom, even though it is "a fancy few would weave in these years." We are not meant for gloom, and when there is news that the world is more, wondrously more, than our poor minds are able to hold, we cannot resist the invitation. "What do we have to lose?" our ever-hedging hearts say. But as we walk through the gloom, we know what we want to lose.