

Meditation 12/18/13 by Betsy Swift

Sometime in the weeks after Halloween but before Thanksgiving (way closer to Halloween, if memory serves) I was walking through Lowe's just to buy a light bulb or something, when I overheard the beginning measures of one of my favorite Christmas carols - dum dad a dum, dum dad a dum - my reaction was alarm - my heart cried out "O don't spoil it!" and so I mark that as the unofficial start of the Advent season for me this year. So when Michael asked me to give a meditation on Advent and silence for our Wednesday night service I was already thinking about it.

It seems as though our consumer culture has co-opted our preparation for Christmas, \ that it stands in true contrast to the ways the traditions of the church have stood in awe of this dark time of the year, in awe of the straining of the human heart toward wholeness. One is tempted to say disparagingly, \ that's how it is "in our crazy culture," but that is a temptation to believe we can exist someplace else, instead of doing Advent, preparing for Christmas, in our world, in our world as it is.

There is a verse from the Old Testament book of Wisdom that is used in the liturgy this week before Christmas, and for a few days it has been stuck in my heart. It reads:

"For while all things were in quiet silence and the night was in the midst of her course, your almighty word leapt down from heaven from Your royal throne..." Wisdom 18:14-15.

Family gatherings and other parties, music, the liturgical retelling of the story \ and the cultural telling of the many ways we keep Christmas ((like gift-giving and a heightened awareness of people in need, the urge to give to a wider circle than our own kids and kin, the festooning of our homes with greenery and lights)) these customs all provide ways to soften and open the heart - and if we pay attention, \ if we steal moments of silence in the midst of it all, \ those practices will work a certain magic, despite all of our hurry and rush.

I think times of silence are waiting for us all the time but that, \ like that other ephemeral ideal "Balance" - "Silence" is something that we long for but despair of finding until we let go of the idea of it - no one day ever seems to have the right balance of \ rest and activity, \ alone time and social interaction, \ work and play - But letting go of the quest to have every day work out just right, I have noticed that with just a little commitment to the goal, I can have a balanced week, or at least a balanced fortnight, most of the time.

Silence, too, is present within us and around us if we notice it. It is a worthy goal to have a whole day set aside for quiet reflection, attention to the heart instead of the periphery. A calm focus can then spread by capillary action into the rest of our life. And why not periodically, several days at a time for a retreat, a time of recollection of our scattered parts toward the center, perhaps at pivotal points in the journey? But daydreaming about those plans for some future time of peace and quiet is one more part of the racket in my mind that diverts my attention from the deep still pool at the center of everything - \ my life, your life, our common hubbub and clatter, the rushing around that intensifies so ironically right now when silence could lead us to the core of the mystery that is supposedly the reason for the season.--- It's right here --- like the ruby slippers that Dorothy traipsed all over Oz wearing - she wanted to go home, and she had the ability all the time but overlooked it. \ Like her, we have the ability to choose to notice

silence : – the golden presence – the mystery that beckons. \ It is as simple as attending to the swell of the heart when we hear a certain tune or the tear that wells up when we are moved by the need of another human being or the generosity of someone else in reaching out to fill that need. The longing for connection that our family of origin has the power to unmask in us – and choosing – choosing in that moment to stay with it – stay with whatever it is that pierces my heart – not to push it down, not to save it for later when I have more time, but to let it be – to experience in the now what it is to be human – because if God the divine mystery is so much of a piece with this flesh and this life as it is - \ then isn't it right there that we experience God? \ The silence of the heart is always here, available at the cost of a pause or a breath.

My Dad had a profound experience that he shared with me one year, that I realize now, was surely an opening up to one of those moments that makes the depth of things available to our conscious mind, \ because he was a pretty analytical guy, even cynical at times, but on this occasion he was actually gushing, beaming, having difficulty explaining why, but he just knew this made-for-TV movie he had just seen had told a very important truth about Christmas, one that was often missed, and that he was sure in that moment was “what it's all about!”

The movie is called “The Gathering,” and if it's on this year it will surely be on Lifetime, which is the best outlet currently for the schmaltzy, tear-jerky, relatively low-budget holiday movie of the type they've been running non-stop since Thanksgiving.

The tale is about a father who is estranged from his kids, and his wife - he has made his work and the pursuit of fortune his main focus - then he gets a diagnosis that rocks his world and makes him see the mess he has made of his life. It shares some themes with Dickens' A Christmas Carol. Instead of Marley's Ghost he has the doctor giving the wake-up call, and in place of Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim we learn how his wife and kids have been neglected in his wrong-headed search for success and wealth. So, the various sons and daughters arrive home from their various lives, all with some degree of trepidation, Father, too, has his issues and both desires and fears the reunion with his daughters and sons. Reconciliation happens, not without pain, a deepening of life occurs, and an appreciation of the meaning of life comes over everyone in the story, and of course, hopefully, the viewers too. \ Pretty standard holiday-story formula.

So how does my scientific, hard-nose Dad have a religious experience watching a made-for TV Christmas movie? \ Huh. \ At that point in my life, probably 30 years ago this was, I was all into the theology and the mystical meaning of incarnation but I did not have enough life experience for that to be well grounded. What I did have was the experience of going home for Christmas \ being something I both looked forward to and dreaded at the same time, \ how going home is freighted with stuff that's going on beneath the surface of the lives we have constructed and the self that we present to the everyday world. Our family-of-origin is never the everyday world – if there's one place you can't pretend to be somebody else & get away with it, it's at home! So I think I got what he was so moved by, and understood maybe for the first time in my life that in these very real, very intimate, often painful, flesh-and-blood relationships is where God breaks into our lives and transforms them from the inside out. And we had a conversation then about Christmas in our culture being such a family time, and how right that can be, how the season invites wonder, and awe – not of some cold theological precision, but of

presence, the presence of the very life force we call god breaking through in our human form, our human mess, our human families and world.

I think that kind of a moment only comes to a skeptical, unemotional Dad or to a young, sanctimonious daughter if their habitual reactions are suspended and the silence of the heart is allowed to stand.

This might happen in a fleeting graced moment, as I think it did that day my Dad and I shared about that movie. Or it can be cultivated and invited to become a way of life. There is a discipline, a practice, to not so much create silence but to notice it, to attend to it, participate in it and allow it to penetrate our consciousness.

Notice the silence of the people we have lost, how we miss them, and let that be.

Choose silence over harsh or simply unnecessary words.

Practice the silence of stopping in our tracks to notice and savor the beauty of our surroundings, other people, and our own lives.

What is it about the memories this season evokes, the desires it fans into flame, the Lifetime movies it has inspired that brings us to tears, at times to our knees, and at best impels us toward the other in gestures of generosity and real openness to the humanity and commonality of the other? The answer may not be one that we can ever verbalize, but instead would recognize in the glimpses of light we get in a moment of quiet.

Again a verse from the book of Wisdom that is used in the Advent liturgies this week:

“... while all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, Your almighty Word leapt down from heaven...”