



# Journal

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**STARCROSS  
COMMUNITY**

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## THOUGHTS AT A WINTER HEARTH

The last red and yellow leaves are falling from the trees at Starcross.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, an unidentified sister who used the pen name “Leoline” was a member of the Shaker community at Harvard, Massachusetts. Many came to the Harvard Shakers looking for a refuge from the troubles of the world, especially around the Civil War. In a poem called *Life's Leaves* Leoline put this verse:

*From fruited trees —  
Crimson and brown they flood in autumn  
The passing breeze —  
Falling and rising, and falling again —  
Remaining so —  
Sleeping in quiet and rest all winter  
Beneath the snow,  
Teaching us how in our changing ways  
At last there are quiet and peaceful days.*



Birds, birds, birds. Thin streaks of color against a grey-white winter landscape. Flying from unknown places using our fountain as a watering hole. A diverse community of December visitors gathers on the stone basin. Some will linger here until the snow melts at their

principal home. Others are on their way to some warmer place. This is the mating place for some. They will leave in the spring with the next generation. And, there are those who share this land with us year-round; quail, bluebirds, finches, ravens.

It is the newcomers who especially catch my eye. Flocks of yellow-breasted dancers. Red-throated singers. The masqued and stately coexist with the shy and tiny. Occasionally, just for a second, a line of Cedar Waxwings appear and disappear so fast I wonder if I really saw them. On occasion, if I happen to look up at the right time, I may see a lone eagle, or hawk, taking in the scene below.

Sister Julie is fond of pointing out that the birds we love to see flying around are the direct descendants of gigantic meat-eating dinosaurs. In distant ages will many of the destructive elements of our own time have also evolved into welcome harbingers of joy, beauty, and grace?



To my mother, the crimson Northern Cardinal was the symbol of Christmas. A speck of red in the bare winter landscape of her youth. Just before she lost her sight, she crafted me a needle-point of a Cardinal as a Christmas gift. I have never seen this bird at my California home. But if I should, I would be tempted to believe it was bringing the spirit of the one who taught me to be mindful of the sacred nourishment available at this time of year.



In the Union Prayerbook of Reformed Judaism there is a lovely and wise thought about those who were once essential to our being:

*They still live on earth in the acts of goodness they performed, and in the hearts of those who cherish their memory. May the beauty of their life abide among us a loving benediction.*

At times I experience those who are no longer alive as powerfully as those with whom I now laugh and cry, sing and celebrate. When only the fire lights the room, and I am surrounded by those I love, I am mindful of many others in the shadows, once more laughing,



reaching — loving benedictions. It is my hope that, after my “last” Christmas, I will somehow continue be part of the surroundings to some who lovingly gather in this season.

I have had 78 winters and feel like one of those nested Russian Dolls. The wondering child, the awkward and insecure youth, the foolish and arrogant professional, the clumsy father, the fighter, the monk, the brother. Hopefully there is this year a place for all of me, and what I have lived at other Christmastimes, in the shadows of the room.

Other times and faces live again. My laconic father suggesting words for a letter to Santa, bringing in a bare deciduous tree from the woods and smiling as lights and tinsel reflected in my eyes and dreams. Out of the Great Depression and into World War II. Churchill standing, with FDR, beside the White House tree and calling on all parents to make Christmas 1941 “an island of happiness in a world of stress.” My parents took that as a religious and patriotic duty, that year and as long as they lived. My father died on Christmas Eve 1963. My mother died on Christmas Eve 1986.

The world moves on and changes rapidly. The child becomes the father, the mother. The children in my life have brightened the winter days, but they have grown up so fast. Some had short lives. Yet, I see all of them, and all ages of them when we gather by the hearth. Christmas is one way of making sense of everything. Linking what has been with what will be. I inherited from my parents the task to help craft some of those links. The young people in my life will do the same in years to come. I think it will seem natural to them.



Now, what have I to say to you my patient friends? I think it is very likely your experiences parallel my own. Sitting before the hearth, as memories drift

by, I am really reflecting on the condition of being human, which is common to us all. For some, an issue might take a lifetime; for others a brief time. We each live our lives on our own street. But in doing so we can connect with others who are living on their streets.

What can I say to you in these challenging times when so many parts of our worlds seem to be coming apart at the seams? In this season I simply want you to know how much I appreciate the way you have lived your life and have shared it.

Each of us, in her or his own way and place, cares for the wounded and the sick. The spiritually troubled. The lost. We lend a hand when it makes a difference. We all have rich moments of childhood which continue to nourish those around us. And, each of us, yes each one of us, has the courage to find the quiet eye of the storm — and move into the heart of God, or whatever term we are using at the moment. We are a company of wayfarers. Our vocabularies may change but not the journey.

So to all of you, and those you love, in Leoline's words, may this be a time

*Teaching us how in our changing ways  
At last there are quiet and peaceful days.*

Your brother,

*Toby*



*Brother Toby snapped this picture of the December Moon on his way to the Chapel. Sister Julie and Sister Marti took the other pictures as they were on the way to the barn after the busy days of the olive harvest and pressing.*

