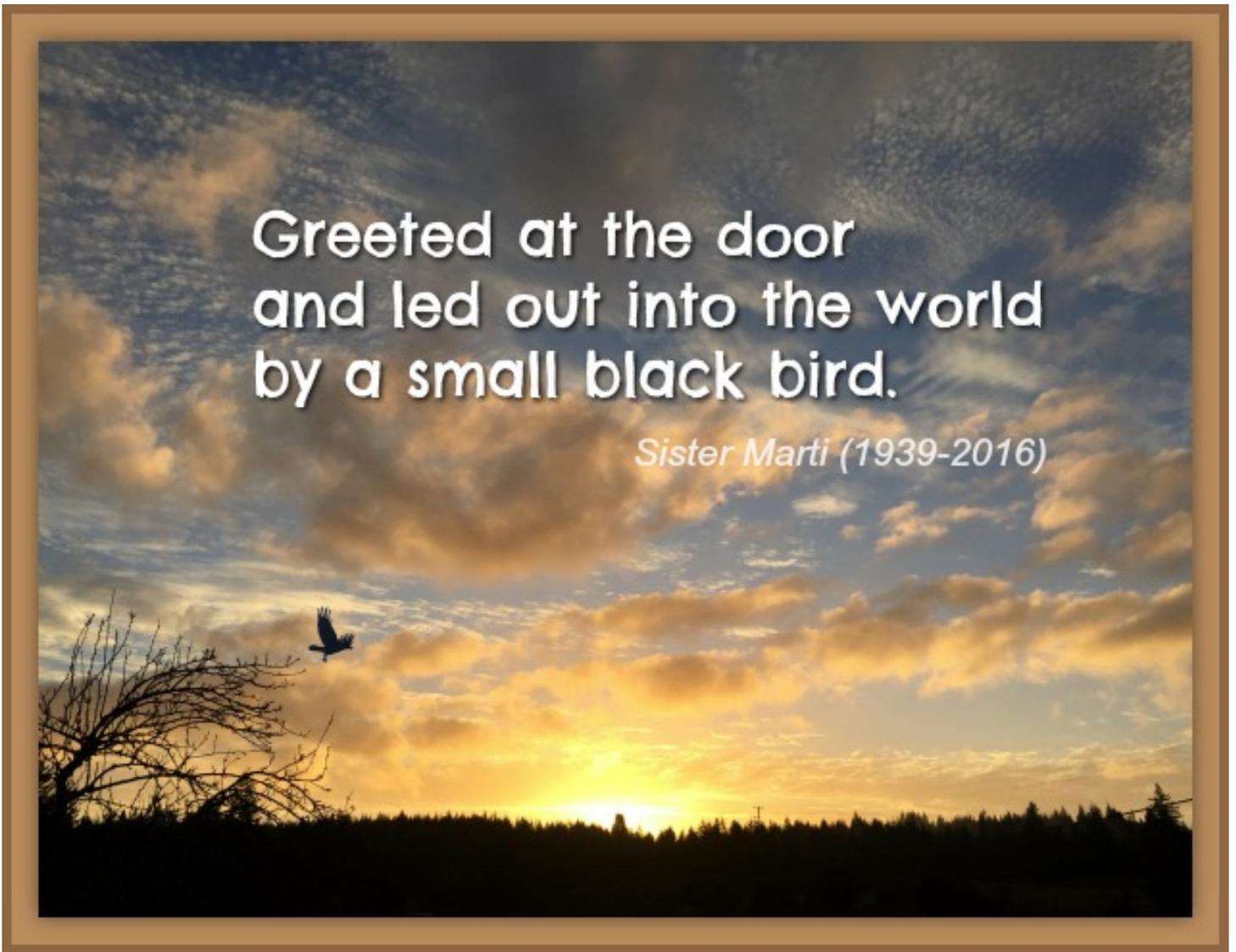




Greeted at the door
and led out into the world
by a small black bird.

Sister Marti (1939-2016)



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CANDLEMAS?

At one time this was one of the most important days in the calendar. Why? Because it is the halfway point between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox. In very ancient times, perhaps even before written history, it was known as The Feast of Lights. Then in the fifth century a Pope named Sergius I, whom few if any people remember, decided to “adopt” The Feast of Lights into the Christian calendar and changed the name to “Candlemas.”

Why the name? Well, Sergius took a number of popular pagan rituals



and dumped them all into this day. One of them was Christianizing the myth concerning Proserpina being abducted into the underworld by Pluto. Her mother, the goddess Ceres, accompanied by a number of followers bearing candles, brought light into the underworld and rescued Proserpina. Sergius thought he could tweak this a bit and see it as Christianity bringing light into the darkness of the pagan world. He retained the ancient ritual of everyone carrying candles. Some time

today the present Pope will go into a special chapel at the Vatican to bless a huge numbers of candles. Similar blessings will take place in Roman Catholic communities around the world. And then there will be a procession, with each person carrying a candle and singing an ancient chant.

Do you have your finger on the DELETE button? Stay with me for a while longer. Things get more interesting — and what follows is pretty good therapy for the political woes that most of us are having!

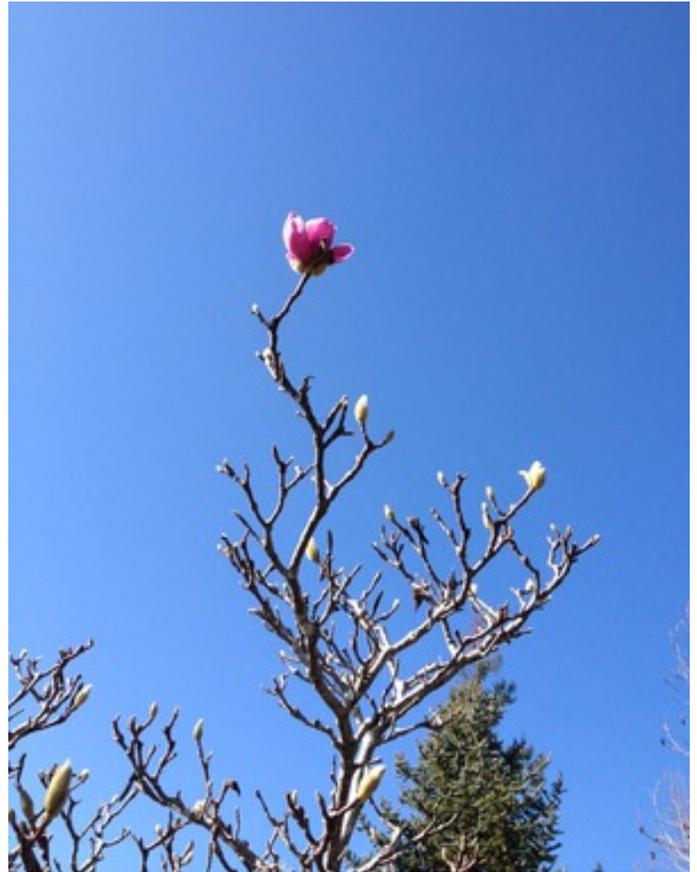


The real down to earth significance of today has very little to do with what's written above. In older times, and still in many places today, this is the day the farmer starts thinking like a farmer again. Where I live it is the beginning of the growing season. Yellow mustard flowers

cover the rows in the vineyards. Purple plum blossoms envelop valleys. It is as if there is a new beat to the heart of the land. I'm reminded of the famous haiku poem of Basho (1644–1694),

*The beginning of culture,
deep in the country —
a simple rice-planting song.*

My image is that the poet is probably resting under a tree and listening to farm women, ankle deep in water, singing as they planted the rice seedlings.



Of course things are not the same in all parts of the country. Where there is a lot of snow on the ground, people pore over seed catalogs and plan their gardens. In many places the greenhouses are full, they certainly are here, and the first seedlings have probably gone into the ground.

One thing that's fairly common all over the country is that it's time for pruning. Another thing that is experienced widely is mud! When the rains come, you can't move around the fields or in the garden without becoming at one with the muck! It is all part of the same process.



Let's move into the kitchen and back a couple of centuries. February 2nd is the day for scouring the soup pot. In times past there was always a giant iron pot on the stove. During the winter the fire never went out under that pot. What went into the pot was anything the cook could lay her hands on. This was still the practice in my family when I was young. There was always some liquid left in the pot, known as "pot likker," which provided the seasoning for whatever was produced the next day. But, according to an old folk poem,

*When pot likker's low
or ceases to stew,
the farmer doth know
that the winter is through.*

I think it ceases to stew because it's getting too warm to keep the fire going in the kitchen all day.

February 2nd was also the day when the soup pot had to be cleaned and scoured, which was not an easy job because it had to end up absolutely perfectly clean and shining. That task marked the ending of one annual season and the beginning of the next.



I think February 2nd is an ideal time to scour our spiritual practices. To look over what we have done to help the divine flame within us come forth, and to also keep us sane in bad times. Have we let things slip a bit? Is this not a good time to become more mindful of what is around us and more aware of how we fit in to the overall picture of existence?

Take a walk. Think about it. A new cycle of life is beginning around you, and within you — if you let it. Does it seem like a daunting challenge? Just take little steps. That's my sort of general advice to myself and everyone else.



I haven't said anything about the spiritual background of Groundhog Day — it started about 500 years ago when the Protestant Reformation eliminated Candelmas Day in many areas. For the rest of

the story you can visit a little fellow named Phil in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Unfortunately he only speaks German and is very sensitive about shadows.

Brother Toby

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