

If you are not a better person tomorrow than you are today, what need have you for a tomorrow?

*Rabbi Nachman of Breslov
(1772-1810)*

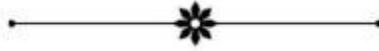


TOO MANY CUMBRANCES?

Is your “to do list” becoming like Marley’s chain in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*? Are you struggling with organizing some festive event when you would rather be sitting in a park or in the woods remembering simple, lovely moments from Christmas past? Then it is time for me to remind you, and myself, of my Quaker friend in Ohio. There really was such a person who had a grandmother named Lucy, who was raised in the traditionalist Wilburite portion of the Society of Friends.

My friend had a very secularist attitude and celebrated Christmas in the typical frenzied way that most of us go about it. One year every room in his house was being decorated, Christmas cards were being sent out, there was a children’s school play, etc., etc. His grandmother Lucy, who always celebrated a very quiet and plain Christmas, noticed all this and said to him,

Perhaps thee has too many cumbrances.



We will be entering the third week of Advent, and it really is time to put away the “to do list.” Just close your eyes and think of the really enjoyable moments you have experienced in the past at this time of year. Now lean the arc of the season in that direction!

When I tried this, two things came strongly into my mind. I've always loved gathering around the hearth and singing carols. We haven't had a chance to sing together at our house yet but in the days to come the house will be filled with music! Another thing I think almost all of us would want more of is just finding moments of peace. Finding a place to sit down and observe what's going on around us. Seeing the squirrels harvesting nuts. Watching the children playing, the old folk smiling, the young lovers tentatively seeking out each other's hands. With each thing we see, we are reminded of joyful little moments of the past. This is really how we ought to be preparing for Christmas!



Simplicity is the cornerstone of Quaker living. As Robert Lawrence Smith, the former headmaster of Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. wrote in *A QUAKER BOOK OF WISDOM*: “All you need for living are a few possessions, simplicity of spirit, and readiness to answer to the divine spark in every person.”

Does that quote seem familiar? Is that not similar to what a Buddhist friend would say?

As I wrote in my book *A Winter Walk*, this is the time of year when many Buddhists celebrate the Buddha's birthday. It is really a celebration of the time when the privileged 29-year-old Prince Siddhartha reached enlightenment. This was about 600 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

It's a fairly simple story. For eight days young Siddhartha confronted his inner demons: greed, self-doubt, anger, restlessness, hatred, violence, etc. He sat under a type of fig tree and was determined to sit there until he learned how to be liberated from these things. He clearly understood that we all suffer because of craving what we want and running from fear. In the process we ignore our own noble nature. At some point he was enlightened. On



the journey of life we must be careful to respect certain guideposts. Greatly oversimplified, as I understand it, the instructions for living go something like this. We must try to be free of delusion, prejudice and superstition. We must turn from any false values and hypocrisies even though they pervade in our society. Our conduct must always be peaceful and compassionate. Our speech must not harm and must be kindly. Our work must have no bad consequences. We must make a constant effort to avoid narrow mindedness and overcome harmful desires. We must develop and cherish awareness of the small acts of ordinary daily life. We must regularly enter into the nothingness of meditation.

Buddhists would probably find the above description greatly lacking in subtlety, but I think it all points toward simplicity in life. During this commemoration of when Siddhartha became the enlightened Buddha, it seems a good time to focus on the priorities in our lives and to be mindful of our actions and non-actions. Certainly it is a very good time to go beyond our “to do list.”

How to do this? Many Buddhist families put up little fig trees with colored lights. A friend explained to me that the lights are always multicolored, demonstrating that there are many paths to spiritual liberation — enlightenment.



Hopefully we will all be able to free ourselves from the “to do list.” However there may be a surprise or two awaiting us. This is the season of the year when the celestial Rolodex* is working overtime. There you are at long last sitting on a bench breathing in and breathing out — the sweetness of peace! But in some other part of the universe there is a frantic search for someone to be a temporary angelic messenger. I can't think of a Christmas season here that didn't contain at least one of these surprises.

What is an example? A few days ago our Sister Julie, who has just been elected to the local school board, was sitting with



some children in the school. All were chattering happily when she became aware of a six-year-old boy standing directly in front of her. She knew him from our food pantry and she knew his family of 6 was in difficult straits financially. When Julie focused on the boy he said, "Thank you for giving us a Christmas tree."

Julie acknowledge his thanks and entered into some friendly banter with him. The problem, which she did not share with the boy, was that we had not agreed to provide his family with a Christmas tree! Many years ago, before this young fellow was born, we did grow and sell Christmas trees. Somehow Julie knew that we were being called upon to provide one for that family and that it was important. The celestial Rolodex had clicked away and come up with our name.

It was threatening to rain but Julie took off with a bow saw into the woods behind our Chapel. And lo and behold, there was a beautiful white fir growing too close to another tree. She cut it, knowing that it's roots would merge with those of the tree next to it. Then, without revealing the circumstances, she managed to get the tree to the family.

Was this just another "to do thing"? No, it was a task filled with peace and happiness.



So let us all be on the lookout, because the celestial Rolodex is spinning again!

Brother Toby

* For those, like my assistant, who were born into the digital age — a Rolodex is a desktop card index, shaped like a rotating spindle, used for recording contact information.