



**Love winter when the  
plant says nothing.**

*Thomas Merton (1915-1968)*

**THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD**

Well, here we are at the Winter Solstice, and the Friday before Christmas. I can't remember how it started, but quite a few years ago at this time people would request that I share something I had written about this season. However this year there was an unusual request. A friend I know only by her emails asked me to choose something to write about that was important to me from my past. That was challenging because everything connected with this season is important to me. I finally did land on something that was very special. I think I first wrote about this memory 40 years ago in a manuscript I never published. An adaptation found its way into my book *A WINTER WALK*.

Most of us grow up being actors in life. That is why, I believe, we learn to value the times when we are not acting. Here is one such time I remember from 1941.

I was just a week or so from my 11th birthday and living in a small lumber town — Springfield, Oregon. My memory, which is very precious to me, is of a walk during which really not much happened. But here I am a few days from my 88th birthday and this is what comes to mind. Perhaps you can recall a similar experience in your life.

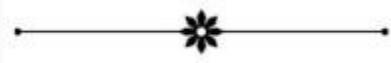


The rain had stopped early in the morning. Still in bed, I could hear the crackling of wood from the cookstove in the kitchen. Looking out the window, I saw a world that was neither bright nor dark.

My father was a lumber grader at a local mill where most of the workers had come up to Springfield from the deep South. This Saturday morning my job was to go to the grocery store and pick up the turkey, a gift from the mill owner. We never owned a car, and errands were often my task since Dad had made me a wagon. I started after breakfast – going on a walk into town.

I can see the earth, covered with brown leaves, a few still sparkling with frost. Some people have turned on their Christmas tree lights. Likely this is for the older teenaged boys who are leaving for the war. Their families want as much of Christmas as possible. Even at this early hour there is visiting going on. My cousin Darwin is leaving for the Navy next week.

As I pass his house, I notice my aunt has come out on the porch to cry. Putting down her blue handkerchief, she waves. Their tree lights are on.



From habit, I detour past my school. Pulling my wagon, I boldly enter the empty playground, where I usually feel more cautious. The school is a big, wooden, three-story building that has served many generations. It has been a good place for me. When I came to Oregon I was an alien. We were Southerners in a Western culture. This school changed that.



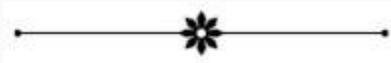
Today no one is at the school. I look through the window into my classroom. So many things happened there. But what I remember vividly now, many years later, are the little pins with flags wrapped around them. Every morning we moved them around a world map as the war progressed. It was no game. They represented the places where fathers and older brothers were stationed and fighting.



Another few blocks and I am downtown. As always my first stop is the used bookstore where I discovered most of what I knew about the world. I can't go in with the wagon so I just wave at the owner. I notice he has put a silver bell on the glass door.

On the corner of Fifth and Main is the most popular of the three bars on Main Street, THE LUMBERJACK. There is a large neon sign outside of Paul Bunyan and Babe, his big blue ox. Being early, there are only a few patrons in the bar. One man, who works with my father, nods at me as he pushes through the doors. Across the street, on the other corner, is GERLACH'S DRUG STORE. The pharmacist in his starched smock, stands sternly in the doorway. He does not seem to approve of his rowdy neighbors at THE LUMBERJACK. A high-school girl, who runs the drugstore fountain on Saturdays, waves at me. She lives near us and is famous for her cherry cokes.

One more block brings me past the bakery where I sometimes work cleaning up in the evening, while the baker spends a long “dinner hour” at THE LUMBERJACK. A woman I work with there is wrapping bread in the window and smiles as I walk by. She is always teasing me about girlfriends but means nothing by it.

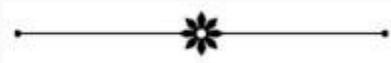


Now I am at OHLSON’S GROCERY STORE. The clerks know me there. I use my wagon to bring extra lettuce from our garden to sell to the store in the summer. The butcher selects a nice bird, wraps it, and places it in my wagon while I look around at all the people shopping. I see several kids from my class carrying their mother’s baskets. I turn toward home on a route that takes me past the town’s largest church.

The UNITED METHODIST CHURCH is the place where the glory of the Lord truly shines in our town. In appearance it is certainly a mighty fortress. There is a great square brick tower in front with faded stained-glass windows on either side. On this day there is more activity than usual. The local plywood mill has given sheets of plywood to a men’s committee who have cut out and painted nativity figures. They have followed patterns from *Popular Mechanics*



*Magazine* and are setting up the figures on the church lawn. A shepherd-boy figure near the sidewalk is taller than me. I can hear the organist practicing inside as members of the adult choir begin to file in for a rehearsal. The people who attend this church are the religious core of our town. Being from a Catholic family, and meeting for Mass in a room above the bakery when the priest is in town, I am not officially part of this community. But today there are lots of glad tidings directed at me – and the turkey.





That's it. that's my memory. Oh, I got home with the turkey. It was a morning when nothing really happened, yet it provided a sense of community that I have seldom felt since.

I did not know that everyone's world would change because of the war. It was not just the horrible casualties and the gold star flags in the windows of families who had lost someone in the fighting. After the tears and glory of the war, we were to become a very prosperous nation, which was nice, but we lost some connection with each other in the process as we moved on with the business of getting ahead.

That 1941 walk in Springfield, Oregon, becomes more present to me with each passing year. OK, now what are some of your memories of the season?

Peace and all good blessings to you and those you love!

***Brother Toby***