

DECEMBER REFLECTIONS - I



For many years our brother Toby has written reflections at this time of year. Occasionally they have become a regular part of people's annual celebrations. We are collecting four of these here in answer to requests from friends. These were published in several newspapers and journals. The first one is excerpted from the recent collection STEEPED IN THE WORLD OF TEA (2004).

TINA'S TEA

With all the busyness surrounding secular and religious activities, it is easy to miss the point of what is for many the most sacred and enchanting evening of the year. Years ago some exasperated angel pushed our family at Starcross to have a Christmas Eve tea. Whatever is undone at that point is to remain undone. Lists are thrown away. Christmas begins.

We gather around the hearth at two in the afternoon, which is midnight in Bethlehem. Like any family we share songs and memories. At some point sister Julie brings out a prized little tea set. It had belonged to Tina, our adopted daughter who died from AIDS just before she was three. That was 13 years ago.

One Christmas Eve Tina was very ill. Julie and sister Marti had rushed her from our farm to the hospital, a trip of about two hours. I stayed with the other children. Late in the afternoon Marti called me. It looked very bad. Tina might not last the night.

In the evening, the children and I took lanterns and walked under the stars to our little chapel. Marti and Julie were reciting the same prayers and singing the same songs as we were in the chapel. I was feeling considerable tension between my personal grief, this might be Tina's last night of life, and celebrating with the children the birth of new life. But we made it and the children went to bed with peace and expectations of the morning. At the hospital Tina was in a deep sleep.

Marti, Julie and I were on the phone when our old clock tolled midnight. We read together a favorite passage from the Bible's Book of Wisdom. *When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word...* We prayed for Tina and all families keeping watch over their children that night.

Julie had in her backpack a small bottle of Grand Marnier for an eggnog that never got made. There were no glasses. But, for some reason, Tina's favorite toy tea set had come with her to the hospital. Solemnly standing on either side of Tina, Julie and Marti poured the liqueur into the tiny cups and drank a toast.

Tina recovered the next day. Our family was reunited for a few more precious months. We have been drinking out of Tina's tea set every Christmas Eve since then. We have no doubt that Tina and a few celestial friends are always lifting a tiny cup with us.

THE "11:48"

(1999)

Some important things did not come with us into the twenty-first century, such as the sound of trains at Christmas. I don't mean silver streaks with names like "Eurostar." I mean big, black, powerful steam trains that were referred to by the time they arrived at a station. Trains with eight wheels over six feet high and whistle sounds which reached to the heavens and echoed against the mountains. Sounds that pierced the lonely night. Such a train was the "11:48." It came down from the dark and cold Cascade mountains into western Oregon, its freight cars capped with snow. The first stop was the station at Springfield, the little lumber town where I was raised.

I remember clearly the day before Christmas in 1941, when I was 10 years old. We had been at war for 17 days. I didn't know what that meant but I could feel my world changing. Already the blue stars were appearing in some of the windows on my street - one for each son or daughter in the armed services.

My dad was out with the other fathers at night preparing a defense against unknown threats. My mother, like all other mothers, attempted to keep things normal. But Christmas and war don't coexist easily. Silent Night. Fearful Night.

The nightly blackouts had begun. A neighborhood warden would quietly tap on your front door and whisper that a bit of light could be seen from the kitchen window and someone would whisper back a thanks and run to adjust the thick drapes. There was enough quiet on those nights but, for me, it was a dread-filled quiet. It occurred to me that Christmas, as I had known it, was possibly being cancelled that year. Certainly the school play was cancelled — and the Midnight Mass.

I lay in my bed on that Christmas Eve, sad for the loss of a magical and wonderful moment. Then I heard it. The first deep whistle of the "11:48." For as long as I could remember I had heard that sound as I walked into Midnight Mass. Our church did not ring the bell at night

for fear of disturbing the neighbors, most of whom had enough trouble understanding Catholics as it was. For me the mighty whistle of the "11:48", growing in strength and frequency as it came into the station, was the beginning of the Christmas Mass. And, here it was again. War could not stop it. Somewhere out there was something more powerful than tragedy. Christmas was on that train. Perhaps I even thought God was on that train; the God whose presence I never questioned in hard times.

As I have aged there have been a lot of hard times for me at Christmas. I think the roughest have been when a child or a parent was very ill and the question was always there, "is this our last Christmas together?" There has also been the Christmas after we parted. These are not easy, as most people know from experience.

So it is that there is sometimes pain as I sit in silence with those I love beside the hearth, or rock with a sleeping child, on a Christmas Eve. At those times I am waiting for it. And, it comes — the sound of the "11:48."

Oh yes, I still hear it. A train like that makes a sound which echos for a long time. How long? I don't know — at least for half a century.

KATHY'S CHRISTMAS STORY

(1982)

Kathleen came to us when she was six and grew up with us. She is now the mother of two children and has recently been honored by her long-time employer. Yet to me she will always be a 15-year-old on a Christmas Eve when we had our chapel in the loft of a drafty century-old barn. Kathy's story has a horrible beginning, but you must know about it.

When she was five, Kathy's parents divorced after a stormy marriage. She went to live with her father and the family of her new stepmother, which included a very disturbed teen-age uncle who sexually abused her in secret. One day near Christmas the rest of the family went shopping and she was left with the uncle. She refused to cooperate with him and he cracked, beating Kathy and throwing her around. She still refused. He tied her hands and threw her into a tub of scalding water. Her screams stopped his madness. He put her to bed and covered her up. Under the sheets Kathy's arms and legs were grotesquely swelling in protest. The family returned but delayed getting treatment, and as a result the burns were to become permanent.

There was extensive plastic surgery. The complicated instructions for after-care were beyond the family. They put Kathy in a closet where she lived for two weeks until a courageous social worker, illegally, broke down the front door and rescued her.

My first experience of Kathy was that she was angrily yelling non-stop but her little hand drew a tiny child in a big black cage.

Kathy became a bubbling and beautiful child. She was great with animals and she danced gracefully. But Kathy did not read. We took her to an army of experts without success. She was old enough for High School, but we were advised against it.

All our kids would read a spiritual text during our Sunday services. Everyone had a selection

to read on Christmas Eve. But not Kathy. I thought if I selected a small passage she could memorize it. She really liked the idea and wanted us to keep it a secret. Once when we were practicing she asked me to write it out. I humored her. Then I noticed her pulling out the paper as she went about her activities. Kathy was beginning to have a relationship with the words. She asked that we stop memorizing and start reading. Following her lead I enlarged the passage.

Something strange was happening. And what about the tension on Christmas Eve? The stakes had become higher than I intended but Kathy was calm.

Finally the Holy Night arrived. Everyone was surprised when Kathy walked up to read the text which had been assigned to me. Slowly it came through to everyone that Kathy was reading — really reading!

A lot happened after Christmas. There were new options for Kathy. High School became a reality. The children accepted it but the adults wrestled with the question of what really happen that night? Finally someone quoted G. K. Chesterton, "Blessed are those who HAVE seen and who have believed." Maybe.

Oh yes. What was Kathy's text? It was from Isaiah and began,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shown....

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DECEMBER REFLECTIONS

A LITTLE LESS GLORY PLEASE!

(From "Toby's Creche" 2001)

Look, Luke wrote an entertaining gospel. I'll give you that. It's just not reality scripture! Think of the sheep. No one thinks about the sheep! Listen to this: *In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night.* Well that part is true. Now, catch this: *The angel of the Lord (that's me by the way) appeared to them. And the glory of the Lord shown all around them.* Luke says the shepherds were *terrified*. I should think so!

Then to top it off Luke claims there appeared this *great throng of the heavenly host* singing like some giant Bach choir. In the midst of this I am supposed to have said *Be not afraid*. Who was I talking to? Think about it. A heavenly spirit manifesting itself, the glory of the Lord shining around like a firework display, accompanied by a mammoth choir at top volume. What do you think the sheep were doing all this time? Have you ever been around sheep? They would have been running all over the countryside! The shepherds would have been chasing them! No one would have made it to Bethlehem that night. Sorry Luke, it just doesn't work.

Just so you know, the actual plan was for the simple, humble, close-to-the-earth, smelly, darling shepherds to get to the crib before the mighty, wise, rich, sweet-smelling kings. That was the whole point — Jesus came as a refugee not as an aristocrat. God is to be found in humble places not palaces. You get it? So when the great celestial stage-manager would call *Cue the shepherds* what would I say: Sorry, they are out chasing their sheep? Luke was a nice fellow, he just had no experience with sheep — or angels.

What was my job that night? To get the shepherds to stop thinking about wolves, the price of wool, the cold, girl friends, a good meal. Then in that brief empty space to encourage them to accept that there might be something of great significance in the little things around them. Such as the light coming from the stable. Stable? The light over there? Well it all worked out finally. Why does it take humans so long to find God in ordinary things?

By the way, that holy night is an on-going event. So please watch the margins of your life for something divine among the fallen leaves. If you feel one of us pushing you please don't be so resistant. It can be very tiring. We are not as young as we were you know. It would really help if you took more responsibility about