

The wonder of this time

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In the wonder of this time, in the anticipation of this time, it's about the arrival and it's about the journey.

We've just heard the treasured story, transmitted through centuries: the story of Mary and Joseph and their journey, the story of the arrival of a baby, whose journey has just begun.

The wonder of the season is here: we've turned the corner. The days grow longer, a child is born, and a star shines our way on.

There's a childlike wonder that hangs in the air. You remember it well: Advent is a time of juicy anticipation. A time of singing Christmas carols, dreaming of presents under the tree. For adults, Advent is a time of reflection, waiting, and listening through the darkness to hear a renewed sense of our longings, our callings.

As a kid, I could barely contain myself during Advent. Rather than live it as a season of waiting, I lived it as a season of winding. As Advent progressed, I became more and more tightly wound, hardly able to take in the sensitivities of the season. Everything seemed silly, especially the words. And most especially the words of Christmas carols. Take, for example, "Hark the herald angles sing." So British! I had no idea the word **herald** is an adjective modifying the noun **angels**. Nor did I have a clue that **hark** urges us to listen. I kind of thought "Hark" might be a nickname, like we were addressing two people to let them know that angels were up to something: "Hark! Harold! The angles sing."

Such silliness, especially since I had an uncle named Harold. Why were people singing about my uncle, and what exactly was Uncle Harold's involvement with angels?

To sing the song, I approximated the sounds, using words that seemed to make sense.

I sang it this way:

“Hark the Uncle Harold sings”

[I dropped the angels altogether. They were messing with my narrative.]

“Glory to the new born king”

[I left this alone. It made sense to picture Uncle Harold as a king.]

“Peace on earth and thirsty mile”

[In my head, thirsty and mile went together, because a mile is a looong way, especially if you’re looking for peace on earth.]

“God and swimmers wreck and sigh”

[The idea of swimmers fits with the thirsty mile. Wreck and sigh, because if you get in a wreck, you sigh.]

I also have vivid memories of antics with my sister, Natalie, as we ran in frenzied circles to cry out the day’s number in the countdown. “Five more days ‘til Christmas, five more days ‘til Christmas!” The closer we got to Christmas, the sillier and louder our chant. Typically, we would go unchecked until we heard a very gentle admonition from my mom, “Girls.” How you had the patience, Mom, I don’t know!

But my Mom knew that there was something lovely about all the giddy anticipation. And there is something transformative about the way children come up with imaginative versions of Christmas carols, capturing the endless wonder of the season, even if the words are wrong. Where does that go when we grow up? Can childlike wonder become adultlike wonder?

I was listening to my one of my favorite podcasts yesterday, “This American Life.” The episode, titled “Say Yes to Christmas,” is a conversation among adults remembering the Christmases of their childhoods. One person remembered childhood Christmas as a time when anything could happen. He went on to lament that, as adults, we try to replicate that sense of wide-open possibility by doing the same thing year after year after year until Christmas becomes utterly predictable – which is quite the opposite of “anything could happen.”

But don’t despair. The raw wonder we might have lost can be transformed into a deeper sense of the season, not just repeated but also lived.

Raw wonder can be transformed into a deeper sense of the season, not just repeated, but thoroughly lived.

A childhood Christmas is born, and an adult Christmas continues the journey.

As adults, we can choose to continue the journey while also embracing the opportunity for renewal. We give birth to Christmas every year, through an Advent that grows full in the belly, pregnant with the wonder of the season. Through our waiting, Advent gets bigger and bigger until, after all the waiting and watching, after all the anticipation, the Christ child arrives, and we have a chance to start over.

Today a child is born!

Here’s what I want to tell you: the child who is born is YOU. This is YOUR day of renewal. You are shining light into your own imagination to see what could be next.

The child who is born is YOU. That’s how special you are, beloved of God, that’s how special you are.

This is the coming of the new year. Advent marked the start of the next 12 months. Wiped clean during winter, this is renewal we all look forward to: children... teenagers... young adults... middle-aged adults... elders... all of us.

Tonight, new life bursts forth. Tonight, renewal emerges. Tonight, light blossoms!

Haven't we been waiting, watching? We've been on our journeys, holding ourselves open for this night, this Spirit-filled night when we pause our travels to see the wonder.

David Whyte is a poet-philosopher who works to help us understand how language, in its infinite expansiveness, can express our realities, even as our realities shift as we move from childhood through adulthood.

He says, "We have this fixed idea of youthfulness from our teens or our 20s. But actually, there's a form of youthfulness you're supposed to inhabit when you're in your 70s or your 80s or your 90s. It's this sense of imminent surprise, of imminent revelation, except the revelation and the discovery is more magnified. It has more to do with your mortality and what you're going to pass on and leave behind you, the shape of your own absence.... ... [childhood is] like a deep memory and at the same time a giving away. Innocence is, in a way, the ability to be found by the world. It's not a state of naïveté. It's the ability to be found by the world you're now inhabiting. Part of what we find is, we're just supposed to give ourselves away, actually."

I agree with what Whyte says, that "giving ourselves away" can be a frightening part of deepening into our real spiritual selves. Growing older in our sense of Advent, Christmas, and the potential for renewal can mean finding ways to give ourselves away, and thus finding profound meaning in our lives.

But, Whyte says, "It's astonishing how much time human beings spend away from that frontier, abstracting themselves out of their bodies, out of their direct experience, and out of a deeper, broader, and wider possible future that's waiting

for them... ...Half of what's about to occur is unknown both inside you and outside you."

To me, what Whyte is saying is that the key to being human is to be in conversation with life: in conversation with its adultlike seriousness and in conversation with its childlike silliness.

I will close with a poem by David Whyte. In it, he invites us, in his words, "to come out of abstraction and back into the world again," to allow the conversations between our realities.

For us tonight, this poem invites us to celebrate the birth of a child, both inside and outside; to celebrate our serious silliness; to celebrate the warmth of community; and to renew our faith in the ways God cradles us in wide open embrace.

The poem is called “Everything is Waiting for You.”

Your great mistake — Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. Your great mistake is to act the drama
as if you were alone. As if life
were a progressive and cunning crime
with no witness to the tiny hidden
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding
out your solo voice. You must note
the way the soap dish enables you,
or the window latch grants you courage.
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity. Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.
The stairs are your mentor of things
to come, the doors have always been there
to frighten you and invite you,
and the tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.
The tiny speaker in the phone
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the
conversation. The kettle is singing
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots
have left their arrogant aloofness and
seen the good in you at last. All the birds
and creatures of the world are unutterably
themselves. Everything, everything, everything is waiting for you.