

“Whadju get for Christmas?” the young one asked, sitting a pile of crumpled-up wrapping paper. “Whadju get? Are you excited? Tell me all about it.”

And the older, wiser one responded, “I got more wisdom and that's about it.” The older, wiser one did not seem happy about it. The young one noticed and the elder asked why this was the case. The older, wiser one responded once again, saying, “I'm a little blue because I asked Santa Claus for a shiny, new guitar and I didn't get it!”

Sometimes, we don't get just what we've asked for. Sometimes, we get exactly what we need.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Welcome, dreamers and seekers of spirit, so bold or so bashful in the quest. Welcome, wanderers and worshipers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the darkness and the light. Keep wide mine arms of spirit and keep hopeful this good heart to the open and to the broken ones, blissfully imperfect just like me, blessed and beloved, caring and compassionate, held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds. To all souls, I say, “Good morning. It is so good to be together.” Today is Sunday, December 26<sup>th</sup>. It is the first day after Christmas and the title of this morning's reflection is Christmas Presence—p-r-e-s-e-n-c-e. It is a reflection on memory, on alchemy and on grace, the sacred gifts we receive without requesting or even deserving them.

The way you alchemize a soulless world into a sacred world is by treating everyone as if they are sacred until the sacred in them remembers.

So very often, we forget about the sacred that dwells within us. Or better said, the sacred within us wanders from memory. We wander from the sacred journey and we wind up in what feels like “normal life” but it's not. It's less than that. Normal life is filled with sacred experience. It's just that we don't notice much of the time. It's common. This kind of forgetting is the nature of the human experience. It's part of our living...and it is not simply human. It's all of God's creature—large and small. Dogs are distracted by squirrels. Cats are distracted by traveling light. [A laser point is best. It is irresistible to them. They just can't help themselves. They give chase. It's involuntary. They cannot do otherwise...and they never catch anything. That's impossible. The light forever evades their grasp. Some things cannot be caught but the thrill of pursuit is hard to resist.

The same thing happens on the religious level all around the work. The indigenous throughout the Americas, the aborigines around the world, the Jewish people of the Old Testament, Bernstein and Sondheim enthusiasts of the West sides of towns, Tony and Maria, Romeo and Juliet... We wander for love, for purpose, for deepest meaning and for beauty. We drive ourselves hard. We're on the road like

Springsteen and Kerouac. We set sail like the fables pirates and the adventurers of old—Blackbeard and Odysseus—we chase the horizon of the sea. We go on vision quests and walkabouts. We go on journeys in the desert for whatever freedom we might find there...trusting in hope that there's a time and place for us, if only we could find it; hoping that in truth, there is a plan and space for us...room enough at the inn [] for everyone.

We decide upon the journey without hesitate. We only hesitate in the preparation phase. We may worry if we are ready or if we've been sufficiently careful with our plans, but we decide upon the journey, the quest, the pilgrimage instantly. It occurs to us that—on a spiritual level—that we are already on the road, already in transition, already journeying. Making the journey real—and not just spiritual—comes a bit later. Making it practical...making it physical and possible come after the fact...when we are aware of our experience, when we have the presence of mind to know what we're doing. It's not always the case. In fact, it's rarely the case precisely because of our forgetting. It is the nature of life experience to be distracted.

Once, I asked a Muslim man once why it was that he prayed so often, five times a day—at dawn, at dusk, midday and at the stations in between. He said that it was because the soul is so good at forgetting. And once, I asked a Christian man, "How often do you pray?"

And he said, "As often as I resist my disbelief."

"What does that mean?" I asked of him.

And he said, quoting what Scripture that he knew, quoting the Scripture that was real to him...the Scripture that came out from him, he said,

Hold my knees to the ground.

Lord, help my faith

My disbelief is killing me

I surely need your grace."

I did not recognize the passage from the Bible. It was new to me. So, I asked if it was Proverbs or from Psalm the Book of Job.

And he said that it was from the Book of the Country Blues and that made me laugh. He was quoting a song of spirit that he wrote himself called Pilgrim's Reach. He played it for himself to bring him comfort. "How often do I pray?" he said, repeating the question that I had raised. "As often as I know that I'm forgetting."

"How does the song begin?" I asked.

He was just about to say. He said, "The words that started me off were few. I was reflecting on the life of Christ. I get a little bitter about what happened to the man. I get bitter about the ones who didn't stop those terrible things from happening...and I wonder, if I had been there... Well, I might have been just like them, afraid to act. And I wonder what that means but I don't like to think like that. I resist it. So, I wrote the first verse to help me remember. I wrote..."

I believe that I've gone the wrong way, my friend

Walking away from Cavalry right back into sin

Them old demons? No, they don't like me at all

They like to tear my heart to hell every time I fall

Why do I choose to suffer when I can live with God?  
Oh, dark valley, welcome me no more  
I pray to heaven, 'Have mercy on me?'

He wrote an ode to his own forgetting and I found myself in it. I learned his song measure for measure and I played it to the morning. I sent its wild note over water and sound—over the Atlantic in late spring and early summer and over Silver Lake in early autumn and late winter. This is one of my practices of remembering,

I had a friend named Mary when I lived in California. Mary is a good name for this season. She was creative and I think that's holy. I think it's the nature of the divine—not to be commercially successful, but to be creative. One need not be a painter or a musician to be creative. One can find creative ways of putting on a pair of old socks. We can't all be Georgia O'Keefe or Leonardo Da Vinci.

Mary was a playwright and she was good at that. So good that she was contacted by The Exploritorium. The Exploritorium a beautiful museum in San Francisco. It's on the wharf. It's near Embarcadero. They were hosting an exhibit on memory and the brain. They asked her to write a short play to introduce this body of information, to invite the public into this idea. They wanted to make the triumphs and failures of brain functioning fun for their audience. It was a challenge and my friend Mary was up to the task. She took it on.

Mary rose to the occasion. She came up with a great idea. She created a play that took place in a hospital...in the memory unit. The main character, the husband, had mysteriously collapsed. He was home alone at the time. No one knew why it had happened. And the husband, he did not even know himself. Or if he did once know, he had already forgotten. He had forgotten everything, in fact, including his name.

After being discovered by a caring neighbor, the husband was whisked off to the hospital where he underwent a series of tests administered by excellent physicians. The tests were designed to determine what had happened. The first-wave results were inconclusive. They didn't reveal anything. Everything they tested seemed to be in order.

Fortunately, the doctors were able to rule out a few things. The husband did not appear to be at risk of anything getting any worse. He was stable but his prognosis was unclear.

So, when his wife arrived, she was understandably upset. Before the doctors could prepare her, she ran into the hospitable room, the hospital room to be with her beloved. She burst threw the door and her husband was startled but soon after he laid eyes on her, a knowing and loving smile came across his face. It was a feeling that was so deep that it was impossible to explain. She recognized that smile and returned it to him. They fell into each other's arms. The husband was happy to receive her affection and he held her familiarly.

The wife was also relieved. She was desperately afraid that his collapse and memory lost would mean that she, too, had been forgotten. And she confessed her fears of this through grateful tears and lightness as the husband listened patiently and lovingly to every word. He listened but offered no response. She asked if he understood what she was saying and he said he did, "Yes, I understand

you perfectly. It's just..."

He stopped right there, mid-sentence. "It's just what?" she asked. "Tell me more about what you're feeling. Tell me what's wrong?"

And he said, shockingly, "Have we met sometime before?"

And her heart fell out of her chest. A sinking feeling came over her and she fell right out time as if into an ocean of her own tears. "You smiled when I walked in. I thought you remembered who I was. You looked so happy to see me. I guess...I don't quite...understand. I don't understand just yet."

She struggled to slow her tears. And the husband reached out to dry her them, the same way that he always had before and then, he said, "I'm sorry this is happening. I'm sorry that I don't remember you. All I know is that when you walked in the door, I had a wonderful experience. As if for the first time, I saw the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life. If it is not too painful, would you stay with me a while?"

And the wife said that she would and she stayed and they talked and they laughed for hours...until the husband finally drifted off to sleep.

The wife went home. She was sleepless that night. Something within her just would not let rest. Spirit had whispered something deep into her heart. She could only listen...even as she resisted...as she tried so hard not to hear. She just laid there. Resting and restless. Breathing and breathlessly for many hours...hurting soul-level deep for the loss of something she could not name, something that she could not identify, something her soul could not remember. She tried to slow down time...or to go back in time to when things felt safer...even though she knew that sometimes, there's no such thing as safety. Life and love are risky. It's hard to remember that.

The wife looked out of her window. The moon in the midnight sky was almost full. It was covered, tho, by a thin veil of clouds that softened its edges a bit. And she reached out with her hand and with her heart and with her soul—beyond the clouds and beyond the moon...beyond the limits of her imagination and she mustered up her courage to return to the hospital the following day.

She entered the room where her husband was staying with considerable trepidation. Memory loss is mysterious. She did not know if he would remember her, even from her visit the previous day. The wife walked in, painfully shy and shaky and insecure. She walked in quietly—so quietly that, at first, the husband didn't even notice she was there. Had things gotten worse overnight? She walked over to his bedside and gently touched his right hand. If he woke she would talk with him. If not, she would just hold his hand in silence.

He was not sleeping. Just before she touched him, he took a grateful breath as, once again, a knowing and loving smile came across his face. The wife recognized that smile and returned it and squeezed his hand. Carefully, she said, "Do you remember me?"

And his smile darkened slightly. He reached out and touched her face, the same way that he always had before and then, he said, "I'm sorry. Have we met? Somehow, I don't remember you." He hesitated a bit. Nervous. Uncomfortable. "All I know," he continued to say, "is that when you walked in the door, I saw, as if for the first time, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. If it is not too painful, would

you stay with me a while?"

And she did. They talked and they laughed for hours...just as they did each day, for the rest of my friend, Mary's play. And the curtain fell and the audience applauded. Then, a panel of real-life physicians talked to the audience about memory loss.

This is how the real of science responds to the patterns of our forgetting. The realm of spirit responds much differently.

One time over the summer, when I was playing guitar at Silver Lake, early in the morning when no one else was around, a goose out in the distance began remembering. It water-waddled out from behind an outcropping of trees and started moving towards from more than a hundred yards away. It carved a gently curving path across the surface of the water until finally came to rest about seven feet from me. Silently, the goose stayed until I finished playing my song...as if finding something in me that the goose could not find in himself. It was a sense of the soul that we needed one another to remember.

Then, strangely, a few weeks later, it happened again. I was playing guitar at Silver Lake—early in the morning and alone—and out in the distance, the soul started to remember itself again. It water-waddled out from behind an outcropping of trees and started moving towards from more than a hundred yards away. It carved the same gently curving path across the water until finally came to rest about seven feet from me. It wasn't a goose this time. It was a young fisherman with a broken ankle that was hanging out over the edge of his boat. I'm not being creative here. I am not wise enough to make this up.

The young fisherman said, "My girlfriend thinks that I shouldn't be out here on the water. She said I should be careful and that she'd be worried." No "hello, it's good to see you again." He just jumped into conversation...just like the goose had done before him but the goose did so without words...as finding something in me that he could not remember within himself. It was a sense of the soul that we needed one another to remember.

It's like that super short poem that Ric Masten wrote about the journey of the homesick snail. He wrote,

The homesick snail  
goes slithering down its silver track  
looking for the very thing  
he carries on its back

Somehow, in the life of spirit, we become home to one another. And we are home to one another in the presence of the Christmas spirit, in the presence of the love shows up out of nowhere in a confusing and joyful ways.

I like to think about those stories. I like remembering their love, their gift, their warmth and blessing, especially when Silver Lake is frozen over.

It is our nature to forget these things in the cold of winter. We are given cause to believe that warmth is rare or that love is fragile—crackable like ice—or that it melts or degrades or decays in some way and then—like a crazy miracle, like a holy birth within us, the spiritual presence of Christmas shows up out of nowhere in a confusing and joyful ways and helps us to remember who we are.

The way you alchemize a soulless world into a sacred world is by treating everyone as if they are sacred until the sacred in them remembers.

This is why we gather to celebrate in the darkest days of the year. We gather to remember ourselves into holiness. We gather to enter the wonder and the mystery of the darkness, knowing that the darkness is the mother of the coming light.

“Whadju get for Christmas? Are you excited? Tell me about it.” What Christmas presence—not p-r-e-s-e-n-t-s but p-r-e-s-e-n-c-e—what Christmas presence fills your soul with wonder and delight? In this season of new birth and the miracle of love, may we greet life’s disappointment with beauty, laughter and with joy. If it’s childish to believe that gifts like these can rise in us, just like the morning star, then let us be as children. However old of body, may we always stay young at heart. May this be what the sacred soul within us forever remembers.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.