

A Season of Memory

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Ancient tradition in old Europe held that winter begins the first of November and continues to the first of February, thus making the celebration of the solstice truly a mid-winter festival. It has always seemed to me that there is some real wisdom in that ancient folk tradition. In my experience, the world changes dramatically around the beginning of November. Then it is that the red and gold and orange glory of autumn is transmuted into the dun tints of winter. Then it is that the trees stand unveiled as they stretch bare, importunate limbs into a grey and somber sky. Then it is that the waning of the light, the shortness of the days, the lengthening of night is too obvious to be missed. Then it is that we exchange light jackets for heavy coats, and begin to hunker down for the interval of cold and dark, and long for some means by which to lighten the burden of the season and brighten our inner horizons.

Ancient European traditions also held that on All-Hallows Eve, the night which saw the transition from autumn to winter, the wall between the worlds grew thin and porous, and then it was that ghosts of the past found entrance into the realm of the present and walked the dark, cold paths of our winter world. This was, for our European ancestors, a haunted season--not necessarily a fearful time, but a time when the line between past and present blurred and the distinction between "once was" and "now is" grew indistinct and unclear.

Common wisdom around here has it that I dislike this winter season, but if the truth be told, I am a child of this haunted and transitional time. As you may know, I was born on November first, and in some ways, my life from the beginning has been lived on the periphery, on the border between various worlds, on the boundary between what was and is and might be. And, true to my nature, I have always found this season, this early winter, the time when my personal ghosts walk the shadowed landscapes of my mind. This is for me a season of reflection, a time when I am haunted by friendly specters of my own past, who invite me to discover again who I am, whence I have come and whither I am tending. This morning, I would like to introduce you to several of those ghosts of seasons past, as an invitation to you to take a moment in the business of the holiday season to commune with your own haunting spirits who may carry messages for you, messages important to your own spiritual well-being.

This year, in the early winter, I have found myself visited by the specter of a man to whom I am bound in the most intimate of ways, but whom I scarcely knew. My father was born on Christmas Day in 1906. He was the third of ten children, and the oldest son. I was the youngest of his four children. When my mother died, nine months after I was

born, my father sent his eldest son to live with his grandparents; he sent his daughters to live with his eldest sister; and I was sent to live with his second sister. After that, I rarely saw my father. Perhaps we children served to remind him of things he chose not to remember, or perhaps his subsequent wives were not eager to be reminded of the two women who had been part of his earlier life and who had died. Whatever the reason, he was like a distant uncle whom I encountered on occasion. He did not attend my high school graduation; nor was he present for my wedding. When I became a parent, I took my family to visit him a few times. He never visited us; I never received a note or letter or phone call from him. And he died without our ever truly encountering each other.

But unaccountably, this year, in this haunted season of memory, he has been visiting me. I look into the mirror and I see his face--the drooping eyelids, the sadness in the eyes, the occasional smile are his. Sometimes, I glance at my hands and they are his hands--the stocky fingers, the veins and wrinkles and spots are his. And I smile and say to myself, I am a composite of his genes and my mother's genes and since I have no memory of my mother's appearance, of course what I see in the mirror as I age is my father. But there is more than this. Sometimes, as I hear my own voice, or recognize in my response to the world a sardonic kind of humor, or catch an inflection or tone of voice or turn of phrase, it is as if I am hearing an echo of some half-remembered moment, some distant encounter, and I recognize my father's presence. He walks with me in this haunted season, and reminds me that in my life, the lives of countless others, known and unknown, remembered and unremembered, are caught up and find expression. Their choices and their gifts and their failings form my heritage. My father walks with me in this haunted season, bidding me to remember that I am the culmination of ages of hope and fear and quiet dreaming and that none ever lives for self alone, that always the thrust of the ages works itself out in our lives.

Another spirit who has visited me this season of diminished light is the uncle who took over when my father divided his children among his in-laws and siblings. My Uncle Jim was married to my father's sister. His birthday was December 21--the day of the solstice, the time of mid-winter by the old reckoning. He was a spare man, with sandy hair and weak eyes; a man with few skills and little education. He worked hard all his life, at difficult and marginal jobs, to support his family--his wife, his son, and me. Often he was the butt of cruel and unfeeling jokes; often he was dismissed as a cypher by the world at large and even by some of his family. And he died early, in part because he was too poor and too unsophisticated to command the kind of medical attention most of us take for granted.

But my Uncle Jim had one remarkable trait. He loved children and they loved him. In a large crowd, they would gravitate toward him and he always had an eye out for them. I am told that it was he who convinced my aunt that the two of them could provide a home for her nephew. It was he who, at every turn, sought my welfare. It is true that we did not share much in common. I was a reader, fascinated with my own world of school and books. He rarely read; had left school early. I was shy and very concerned about what others thought of me; he smiled and maintained his pride and made his way through a world which showed clearly and unmistakably how little it thought of him. And yet,

among my fondest memories are the frequent occasions when he would come home late from work, and come into our bedroom and sit on the foot of the bed and talk with the two of us boys, sharing his life, his adventures in the world, for all the world as if we were adults. He knew how to respect children, and engage them and invite them into his life. And there are times, in this haunted season of the year, when I find myself smiling at an infant in a stroller, its parent oblivious of our communication; or when I bend down to talk to a small child; or when I really listen to what a youngster is saying and am surprised by innocent wisdom, that I feel my uncle standing beside me, listening and smiling. We shared no genetic heritage, he and I, but his presence and example still work their shaping and molding influence in my life. He, too, lives and moves through me and calls me to honor his life with mine and reminds me that the life that lives me is multidimensioned and more than the choices I think of as mine.

There is another presence that haunts my reflections in this season of memory. That year, winter came early and fiercely to Chicago. A student at the Theological School, I was winding down the autumn quarter and waiting impatiently for the birth of our first child. He was due on December 26th. Although Beverly had twitted the doctor, reminding him that even the department stores had promised that orders made before Thanksgiving would be delivered before Christmas, the doctor would make no promises. However, on December 12th the baby decided it was time to be born. And so, late that night I found myself alone in what was referred to as "the father's room," while elsewhere in that old pile that was the hospital, Beverly and the baby were negotiating the terms of a new life.

I stood looking out the window as the wind howled in off the lake carrying snow into the light cast by a street lamp far below me. It was as if nothing existed outside that circle of light. I watched the snow swirl in from nowhere and then disappear into the environing darkness. I wondered what was happening in that other place, where my child was struggling out of the darkness into this small circle of light we call life. I wondered how Beverly was managing the ordeal. But in those far-off, barbaric days, fathers were not welcomed at the moment of birth, and there was no one to ask. I wandered into the corridor where the lights had been dimmed, but not a soul stirred so I returned to the cold, drafty room, lighted by one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling.

I spent the night alone with my thoughts, watching the sparks of snow dance into the light and dance away into the darkness. Then, early on the morning of December 13, someone came to tell me that I was a father--of a son, she added, almost as an afterthought. Sometime later that morning, I was able to view my son, not hold him or even touch him, but view him through a glass window--a small bundle of squirming, red-haired life. I stood there watching his movements and I found myself making two silent promises to him--that so long as I lived, I would do everything in my power to shelter him from harm and support his drive to be the best it was in him to be, and in every way possible I would wrestle with this world to make it a humane environment in which all earth's children might live in peace and know fulfillment.

In this haunted season of the year, I remember that December morning, and I know that I have not always succeeded, that there have been too many harms from which I could not

shelter my son and that I have not always understood what constituted the best it was in him to be. Nor, despite all my efforts, is the world much changed in the ways I dreamed it might be changed. But a voice whispers in my ear, this season: "What is important is that we make promises to each other, that we acknowledge our responsibility for each other, that we strive for a vision of the right and the good. The results are not always what we might wish, but the promises are never wrong. In the promises we make, we define our values and discover the meaning of our existence. In the struggle to keep those promises we have made, we live for others and our lives take on a larger, deeper, richer dimension."

There is one more visitor I encounter at this season--she has been with me almost as long as I can remember, although I do not know her name or her history. I encountered her one Friday night when I was just nine years old. The family had gone downtown to do some Christmas shopping. The war had ended that summer and the town had erupted in holiday lights for the first time in years. The muted atmosphere had given way to exuberance. I was enchanted by the sights and sounds. Entering one of the department stores, my folks, with a warning not to touch anything, allowed my cousin and me to wander among the toys while they shopped elsewhere in the store.

I came round a counter and it was then I saw her. She was an old woman--at least old to my young eyes. She was dressed in a thin overcoat, frayed at the sleeves and at the elbows. The coat had only one button and she clutched the top of her coat as if fearful of losing it. Her shoes were cracked and worn and run-down at the heel. Her stockings were laced with runs. Her gray hair struggled to escaped from a net she wore over it. Her face was weathered and wrinkled and her hands were rough and red. I watched her as she stood in utter silence before an assortment of beautifully dressed dolls. After a few moments, she reached out one rough hand to stroke the hair of one of the dolls and to finger its soft dress. She looked at the price tag. Then she opened her old black pocketbook and fished out a worn change purse. Opening the purse, she counted a few crumpled bills; she poured a few coins into the palm of her hand and counted them. She counted the tiny hoard a second time. Then, with a sigh that sounded as if all the air had gone out of her body, she returned the money to the change purse and replaced it in her pocketbook. She reached out one more time to touch the doll. Her hand lingered for a long second. Then, she turned and slowly made her way out of the store.

I don't know who she was or where she came from or anything about her. I don't believe she even knew I was there watching her. But as she left, I was filled with a sadness and a despair for which I had no words. At that moment, and in a flash, I understood things which had been a mystery to me. I understood that the world is not fair, that in this world some people are so showered with blessings that they can give their used and unwanted and cast-off excess to the poor and feel as if they have done a truly fine thing, while others--like the old woman--are forever being forced to choose between a gift freely selected and gladly given to a loved one and paying the rent or buying the groceries.

And in that moment I realized on which side of that chasm I stood. Suddenly I understood snippets of conversations I had overheard when my aunt and uncle did not

know I was listening. Suddenly I understood that my grandfather did not live in that abandoned bus body on the edge of a junkyard because he found it romantic. I remember the anger building up in me--an anger for which I had no outlet--an anger which has remained with me in one form or another ever since.

Every year in this haunted season, she is there--the old woman with the worn shoes and the ragged coat and the tired, defeated look in her eyes. Every year as I walk the decorated streets and visit the shops and malls, she walks the shadowed pathways of my mind and whispers in my inner ear, "Remember me; remember that the world is not fair or just; remember those who suffer from its inequity; remember whence you have come; remember you have an obligation to those who have no voice. Remember." Every year and again this year, she walks with me through this season, reminding me of who I am and whence I have come.

This season of the year, when the red and gold and orange glory of autumn is transmuted into the dun colors of winter, when the trees stand unveiled as they stretch bare, importunate limbs into a grey and somber sky, when the waning of the light, the shortness of the days, the lengthening of night is too obvious to be missed, when we exchange light jackets for heavy coats, and begin to hunker down for the interval of cold and dark, and long for some means by which to lighten the burden of the season and brighten our inner horizons, this season, as we wait for the turning of the year and the return of the sun, is a haunted time. Then it is that the wall between the worlds grows thin and porous. Then it is that the distinction between is and was and might be becomes blurred. Then it is that the ghosts of past and present and future walk the shadowed pathways of my mind and rise up to meet me in the quiet hours of the night.

They remind me that the life that lives me is the same life which has flowed through uncounted generations, the same life which incarnated itself in creatures strange beyond my imagining and that we are of this flowing river of life from which we emerge for a short moment of self-consciousness and to which we return. They remind me that the shape we give to our individual existence is the result of the gifts we receive from those around us and what we choose to do with those gifts. They remind me that in our choosing we select not only for this moment and for ourselves, but for all time and for generations we shall never live to see and who will not remember our ancient names. They remind me that we have our existence in a network of caring and responsibility and that none of us is truly healthy or whole so long as any of us is diminished or devalued. The ghosts of the season remind me of who I am and whence I have come and what matters in life; the ghosts of the season call me to wider awareness and deeper understanding and broader responsibility, and I am enriched by their presence.

I invite you, this season, to find a few quiet moments when you can open yourselves to the spirits which walk among us in this haunted season. Perhaps you, too, will discover that we are, each of us, the means by which the lives of uncounted generations find new expression and walk the earth again; that each of us is the gift of the past, of unnumbered pasts; that we live in a network of obligation and responsibility; and that out of the

choices we make, this year and every year, emerges the future which our spirits shall inhabit.