

Christmas in a Narrow Place

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

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The sky outside the picture window was a deep, slate gray. Although the clock said it was mid-morning, the world seemed shrouded in an eternal twilight. Out of the gray sky fell a cold, unremitting rain, which spattered with force against the window and ran in rivulets down the glass. The ground outside had been turned into a sodden, muddy morass by the downpour which had begun before the reluctant dawn. Occasional gusts of wind threw the rain with increased force against the building, sounding as if some vagrant child had thrown a handful of pebbles at the window.

Inside the building, an old man sat enthroned in a high-backed wheel-chair--one almost as old-fashioned as he--with a straight back and a straight seat and large, spoked wheels. The occupant of the chair sat slumped against the restraining strap which ran across his chest and prevented his falling from the chair. His right arm rested on the tray which was fastened to the front of the chair, while his left arm lay uselessly in his lap. His faded, gray eyes looked out from behind bushy white eye-brows, staring at the sodden world beyond the window, but apparently seeing nothing. The stubble of a white beard dusted his motionless jaw. Motionless, he seemed utterly oblivious of the world in which he was placed--rather like a sculpture in some bizarre museum.

The community of the nursing home went about its routine for all the world as if he were not there, sitting before a window, looking out on a cold, dreary, rain-drenched world. Occasionally a member of the staff would pop into the room, en route to some other place, in the midst of some other errand, just to make sure the old man was in no great distress--though how they would have known if he were in distress is difficult to understand.

For long months he had been here--either in his bed, or sitting in front of the window, watching the seasons change without seeming to see anything. No one of the staff could remember ever hearing him speak, or respond in any significant manner. He allowed them to feed him and bathe him and care for him without protest, but he seemed unable to co-operate in any manner. Day in and day out, he stayed where they placed him, without murmur or complaint.

The staff used words like "stroke" or "partial paralysis" or "senility" when they discussed the old man. And though they never said as much, they were simply waiting for him to die. The old man, too, was waiting to die, but for him it was a far more deliberate matter. The time had come--who could say how long ago--when the old man discovered that most of what he was hearing was curiously irrelevant and meaningless. The time had come--who could say how long ago--when he discovered that his words fell on deaf ears,

were curiously unattended to by those around him. It was as if he were caught out of time. His experiences, his concerns, his understandings had somehow ceased to mesh with those around him. And so, the time had come--who could say how long ago--when the old man had decided to withdraw from a strangely inhospitable world. Not even visits from his family could lure him back to an engagement with the world. He stopped listening; he stopped speaking; he withdrew within himself. After a time, he discovered that he could block even the internal dialogue of his own mind. It had been a very long time since a thought, a question, a desire had been able to force itself into his conscious mind.

It was not surprising that after a while, the staff of the nursing home came to regard him more as a piece of the furniture than as a human being. They moved him into place in the morning, and moved him to another place in the afternoon and they put him away for the night. It was not surprising that the staff of the nursing home felt no need to dissemble or hid their feelings in his presence. Indeed, he was something like a listening post; having the semblance of a human being, his unseeing, unhearing presence encouraged people to say things in his vicinity they might not say to co-workers or friends or family. And so it was that on this gray and dismal morning, May Bowers, one of the aides, standing behind his chair staring out at the unremitting rain was moved to speak.

"What miserable weather," she said to herself, or to the old man, or to no one at all. "It sure don't look like Christmas dies it, Mr. Crider? Whatever happened to all the snow and the winter wonderland and sleigh-bells ringing, and all that stuff? Whatever happened to 'Ho,ho,ho' and 'peace, goodwill?'"

There was, of course, no response from the old man, who sat motionless, staring out the rain-spotted window.

"I guess it's appropriate, somehow," May continued. "This sure ain't a merry Christmas for me. The kids are all grown and gone. One of 'em's in Germany with the army. The other two are on the west coast--couldn't afford to come home for the holidays. My husband and I separated last March. That's when I took this job. It don't pay enough that I can go visit anyone. So, I'm all alone for Christmas. First time in my life I've been alone for Christmas. That's why I volunteered to work today. No point in my sitting at home alone, feeling sorry for myself. The other gals all have families to take care of Christmas day. I got no one. Might as well be working. Keep my mind off things for a while. I'll go home this evening and fix myself some chicken and maybe call the kids in California. It sure ain't the way Christmas is supposed to be, is it, Mr. Crider?"

There was no response at all from the old man, who sat motionless, staring out the rain-streaked glass.

"What lousy weather for Christmas Day." murmured May, as she straightened a few things in the room. Pausing at the door, she looked once more at the old man. "Have a merry Christmas, Mr. Crider," she said, as she returned to her routine duties.

It is hard to say what it was that triggered the reaction in the old man's mind. Perhaps it was the music playing "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." Perhaps it was so simple a thing as the dusty sprig of plastic holly and mistletoe hanging from the curtain rod. Perhaps it was something--a word, a non-verbal feeling--communicated by the aid. Something touched the old man; something stirred his dormant mind, awakened his slumbering soul.

Suddenly, he was no longer an old man, strapped helplessly in a wheel chair, dependent for even the simplest, most intimate things upon the care of strangers. Suddenly, he was a boy again, standing tall and strong in a field covered with cottony snow. His older brothers were with him, and together they built a strong snow fort in one corner of the field, near the path where the neighbors would come to skate on the frozen pond. The three of them rolled a large cache of snowballs, and when the Jennings boys came into sight, a snowball fight began that none of them would ever forget. Soon they were rolling and tossing in the snow, dumping hands full of snow down shirts and jackets, and enjoying the life which surged so strongly through their bodies, exploding in joy with the life that lived them.

After the romp in the snow, all seven of them spent an hour on the pond, trying out new Christmas skates. As evening descended, the three brothers returned home to receive the good-natured chiding of their mother for allowing themselves to become so cold and wet and a reminder that it was possible for boys to catch their death of cold, even on Christmas day! Even the scolding was tinged with an abiding love.

The love was tested over time. He remembered the terrible night when his oldest brother died in an automobile accident, coming home from a party. The family was wracked by sorrow and pain, but their love for each other drew them closer than ever. He remembered the Christmas when his remaining brother came home from the University to tell the family that he had discovered something about himself, that he was gay. Mother argued that it was a phase he was going through; father was too angry and shocked to say anything. John was disgusted and intrigued and confused. But when they met Bill's partner, and saw how good they were for each other, the underlying love reasserted itself, and the family made room for a new member and though things were never as they had been before, the bonds of affection were renewed and strengthened.

The images faded; another took its place. John Crider saw himself at a Christmas party with Rebecca Mills. He had known Becky since they were children. He had teased her and pulled her hair; he had put a toad in her desk at school; he had carried her school books home for her. But now, all at once, Becky Mills had become a beautiful young woman. He saw her glistening black hair, her bright brown eyes, her beautiful smile. Through all the years of their life together, that is how he always saw her. Of course, he knew that with time gray had streaked her hair and wrinkles had gathered where she smiled, and her back had become less straight, and her walk was hobbled. But none of those things had ever been able to cloak her essential beauty in his eyes. They had been married for fifty years, caring for each other through good times and bad, laughing together and weeping together. And then Becky had died. His pain had caused him to

close her image from his mind. But here was Becky, back again, as beautiful as ever, and the love they had shared was as strong as ever.

The scene changed. It was the Christmas he held his first child in his arms. The child's bright eyes were riveted upon the lighted Christmas tree. John Crider, young and vital, held the infant as if all the treasure of the universe were caught up in this one small, fragile bundle. There were no words to express his joy, his gratitude, his love. There were other Christmases and other children, and grandchildren and great grandchildren. How was it that he had never realized until this moment that every one of those infants looked like his Becky. Over the generations, she was reincarnated in every one of them. And now, a generation which never knew her, a generation which has only faded photographs to convey her image, speak of a strong family resemblance between cousins and do not know that it is Rebecca Mills Crider they are speaking of.

The old man moved back and forth in time. He was young, he was old; he was a new husband, he was a tired widower; he was a new father, a grandfather, a great-grandfather; he danced at parties and skated on the pond and built snowmen; he attended weddings and christenings and stood by fresh graves. He visited Christmas after Christmas and discovered that the good times and the bad times, the joys and the sorrows, the hopes and surprises and disappointments were all still there, but curiously transmuted. The sharp edges had been softened by time, and each seemed curiously necessary and natural and appropriate.

Reviewing his life, there was little he would change--not even Becky's death. For her to have to watch him in his present condition would have been worse than death. No, he wouldn't change the world even if he could. For the first time--in who knows how long--he felt a great peace and a quiet acceptance. He had lived life; life had lived him. It would be over soon. But it was all right; it was appropriate; it was as it should be.

When May Bowers returned to the room to help put Mr. Crider back to bed for the afternoon, it was as if nothing had happened in that room. The old man sat facing the rain streaked window. His right arm rested on the tray in front of him. His left arm was dropped uselessly in his lap. His faded, gray eyes stared straight ahead, as May and an orderly rolled his chair back from the window and lifted his frail body into the bed. The orderly wheeled the chair out of the room, as May pulled the blanket up and smoothed it over him.

"Some Christmas, huh, Mr. Crider," she mumbled like a mantra. She was startled to see what looked like a tear run from the corner of the old man's eye and course down the side of his face. She looked at him more closely. Was that a hint of a smile that seemed to be playing around his mouth? As she lifted his arm to smooth the blanket, his fingers sought her hand and squeezed it. His mouth was working; for the first time since she had cared for him, the old man seemed to be trying to say something. She leaned forward to catch the sound. The old man's mouth moved again, and a voice she had never heard whispered to her, "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas." The smile was clearly there on the wrinkled old face. May squeezed the hand. A tear ran down her cheek. She ran to find a nurse, an

administrator, someone who should know that the old man was not paralyzed, was not mute, could hear, could speak.

The old man never spoke again. But in the few weeks that were left of his life, there seemed a special bond between the lonely aide and her helpless patient, a bond built not of words, but of a formless, shapeless, shared experience. The old man died in peace. And though May never could explain quite how or why, her paralyzing despair and hopelessness and fear dissolved that Christmas, and she discovered strength and hope she did not know she had. Together, because of each other, they had found Christmas in a very narrow place.