

## ***“Echoes of the Heart”***

*Reflections on Life and Community Living*

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**The ambiguity of the holiday season.** As Christmas and the holiday season break upon us, it is the best of times and the worst of times. Or, perhaps more truthfully, it is the most joyous of times and the saddest of times.

Certainly, special gatherings of family and friends are what the season is about. And that’s the point, because not all families are in a celebrative spirit. For many, it’s the economy; for others, it’s the numbing loss of a cherished loved one. For still others, the shadow of illness and personal stress hovers too close.

Truth be told, there’s scant desire for celebrating when the heart aches, the check book is empty, and the only words that keep running through the mind are, *how long, Lord, how long?*

Nonetheless, the holy days come and they invite us to a glimpse of the spiritual high ground. They invite us to envision a wholeness and a oneness that are about more than human achievement. They invite us to look at God with a whole new innocence and eagerness.

‘Tis the season to be jolly, to be sure. But, ah, the ambiguity of the season. And because of the multiple meanings of these days, it’s a time for sensitivity and compassion.

It’s the time of year when the varied constellations of families go the extra mile to put their best foot forward. It’s a time of remembered brokenness, a time when regret pierces the human heart in search of a new hope and a new day.

**What holiday sadness can teach us.** Perhaps all of us should live our lives based on how we want to feel on Christmas Eve (or some comparable holy night for people of other faith traditions). Perhaps we should make decisions today—this moment—that give us the best chance of unambiguous joy on this most sacred of nights.

Always, there is much to benefit from allowing the voice from the *imagined future* (what we want our future to look like) have sway with us today. In other words, rather than responding to the *immediate gratification* impulses of the moment (which is the *way* of our consumer-driven culture), why not let the future have a voice.

The future speaks when what we do and say today (in the present) enable us to become the person we want to be (*in the imagined future*) five, ten, twenty, or whatever number of years from now. Seeing ourselves through the eyes of others (children, grandchildren, friends)—from a vantage point in the distant future—teaches us much about who we are.

What holiday sadness reminds us is that we don’t want to be sad. We don’t want regret and disappointment forever dampening our spirit and ruining the moment. We want to

lead lives—today—that will make us proud and content to be the person we become tomorrow.

**On the other side of our imperfect lives.** In the historical religions of our culture, the *suffering servant* (seen in Isaiah 53 and in Jesus of Nazareth) opens the door to deeper meaning and joy. Out of the estrangement of Exile, Israel is humbled and ultimately restored. Out of the darkness of Calvary, fresh light is born that reassures and renews.

It is never easy. And always there is a cost. But the truth of our lives is that we all have our kinks and blemishes. The key is to keep moving in pursuit of the spiritual high ground and to keep living towards expectation. At the end of the day, the aim of our lives is not perfection. Stones are perfect; robots imitate perfection.

The joy of life comes through the struggle and the tears. It comes on the shoulders of our suffering and sorrow. As our religious holy days unfold before us during this holiday season, if we resolve to push on (keeping the faith), meanings and truths will rise up and give way to a cheerfulness within—on the other side of our imperfect lives, on the other side of regret and disappointment.

For all those whom we hallow in sacred memory, for the deeply distressed in our midst, and for ourselves, let the life that God gives be celebrated. Come, O Holy One, come!