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**PUTTING THE HOLIDAYS INTO PERSPECTIVE**

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With a tip of the hat to Lerner & Loewe, "What a (year) this has been. What a rare mood I am in. Why it's almost like being..." and, of course, you know the concluding words from this 1947 song from the Broadway musical *Brigadoon* - "in love."

And some year it has been, hasn't it? Maybe it's the beginning of a "sea change" in which we finally come to recognize the cumulative consequences of hundreds of millions of individuals looking for "salvation" in material things and begin a collective recognition that the best things in life flow from working from "spirit." By spirit I mean the acknowledgement that each of us is but a humble part of a much greater whole. By attending to the wellbeing of all life, we gain more than anything the material world offers and create a sustainable world for ourselves and future generations. As that great Berkeley bumper sticker teaches, "Our planet is not a legacy that we inherit from the past, it is debt that we borrow from the future."

I send you this missive as a holiday greeting. I have enormous hope for all of our futures. And, I am grateful to each of you for being a part of my life and being a part of the lives of so many others, who care for you and wish you well.

Sometimes we get so caught up in our own "stuff," that we forget how many people genuinely care for us, just the way we are. We don't need our titles, our job descriptions, our social status, our economic well being, our awards and honors, to be loved and respected. Each of us is essentially good, caring and loving. Sometimes we lose track of that fact. But it is always true. Remembering that we are loved is probably the best gift that we could give ourselves and those around us.

Here is a little story about love and our connectedness to one another.

My mother died on Valentines Day, 2007. She was buried with her parents and 10 other family members at Oakwood Cemetery in Santa Cruz. When I visited the cemetery about a year ago, my dad pointed out a sign on the cemetery grounds which indicated that a permit had been filed by the adjacent hospital for a permit to allow the creation of a large "overflow" parking lot in the center of the cemetery grounds, which had been reserved for future burials. I took down the numbers of the permit applicant and the County Planning Staff officer, intending to speak with them about the proposal the following Monday.



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I made my calls, received some rather incomplete information from the planning consultant and various offers to meet onsite to discuss the program. Then I received a call from Randy Krassow who operates Santa Cruz Memorial, (which provides mortuary and crematory services) and manages the Oakwood Cemetery.

We had a meaningful exchange of information concerning the proposal but also personally connected on a number of different levels. I decided to send him a bound copy of my hospice stories. I have been a hospice volunteer at San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospital for almost six years. I began writing about my experiences in working with the dying in 2006. What were originally conceived of as "memorials" to those that I had attended evolved into meditations on my work as a caregiver. But I also have found that the stories to be a "bridge builder" between myself and others. They say things about me, and the way I view the world, that are hard to put forth in casual conversation. A few days later I received an email from Randy:

Hey Tim, I had begun reading your essays "*Lessons for the Living*" last week and found myself constantly interrupted, so I decided to come down to my office today (Saturday) close my door and read it in some solitude....

I'm sitting in my office about 10:30 a.m. reading "*Chloe's Story*" when our receptionist knocks on my door to tell me the Sheriff's Coroner is on the phone and wants to talk to me. I pick up the phone and Naomi, the Sheriff's Deputy, tells me she's about 50 yards from my office along the San Lorenzo river where they've just discovered a body. They've found a guy (homeless parolee) dead in his tent. I immediately flashed back to the last paragraph in "*Ben's Story*"... *No one should ever die alone, without a witness, without a companion.*

I thought about how at any given time there were about 20 of us within a few feet of where this person died and none of us even knew he was living there. I thought about how those working here are surrounded by the effects of death but are not around actual death. And yet it took place a few feet away and none of us knew, and this person died alone.

But, it gets more strange. An hour or so later (I had finished your stories by then), the receptionist again knocked on my door to tell me that there was a couple sitting in our foyer for no apparent reason. I walked up to the front and found an obviously homeless young couple, backpacks and sleeping bags in tow, sitting on the overstuffed sofas in our lobby facing our very large decorated Christmas Tree. I asked them if I could help. They said they were just talking. The young man told me the Christmas tree reminded him of his mother's house and the piano in the foyer reminded him of his grandmother. They obviously had no business here other than getting out of the cold. I thought about Chloe's story, and the body that the coroner had just found below our offices.

I told them to take their time, enjoy the tree and left them in peace. A bit later, they quietly left. I'd like to think I would have done this anyway but I know that's not true. We get a fairly steady stream of homeless coming through our facilities using the bathrooms in the mausoleum as public latrines and the sinks as personal showers. We always send them off quickly with a warning and a request not to come back or the police will be called.

This time, thanks to Chloe, and the unidentified man along the river, these two homeless young people were warm for awhile and had some time around a Christmas tree.

A lesson learned.

Thank you,

Randy

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Chloe was a mentally disturbed, but beautiful woman, dying of ovarian cancer, for whom I had the honor to care while at Laguna Honda Hospice. As her death approached, Chloe bemoaned the fact that, because of her mental illness, she had lost her ability to care for her sons and had remained estranged from them for most of their lives. She had thought of herself as a terrible mother. She wanted to see her sons before she died, but she had no idea where to find them. I had sat with Chloe, at her bedside, as she tried to find her own path to peace and reconciliation in her final days of life.

Yet look what Chloe has done. She inspired me, through her compassion, honesty and courage, to write her story, to memorialize her existence, to record her profound impact on me which, through my writing, was transmitted to Randy who visited Chloe's grace on this homeless young couple sitting in a mortuary reception area in front of a Christmas Tree.

I am learning that if you look for goodness, you will always find it. Grace, giving and compassion put into action always land in the right place, a place which we may never know, at a time, perhaps far removed. This is the time of year where we should be particularly mindful of our goodness and that of others. I believe it will carry us through this hard time and others yet to come. Maybe it will help us re-set our spiritual compasses to allow us to see that our greatest reward flows from our gifts of caring for others.

A year later, much has changed. The hospital abandoned its plans for the parking lot. My father moved into Dominican Oaks, an elder facility, adjacent to the hospital and across the street from the cemetery. He had asked for and received an apartment on the second floor from which he could see my mother's grave (and his own future burial site next to her). He tells me that he is happy there and that he speaks with mother every day, upon rising, and every night, before going to bed.