

## Christmas Joy ... or Whatever

Meditation on Music Sunday, December 17, 2023

Gary Legwold

I have done enough of these meditations to skip over the part when I ask, "Why me? What do *I* need to say?" I know the creative process doesn't work that way, and what I need to say is not as interesting as what I need to hear.

And today I need to hear about joy.

For many years, I was a Christmas mope. Qualifier: I'm not talking about depression or anxiety or grief. Those I honor and would never make light of. I'm talking about being flat at Christmas, grumpy, a roll-your-eyes, let's-get-this-over-with kind of guy. My stinking thinking was this:

Christmas is the season of excess. It is a great glut, and it kicks my butt. Too many people with too much, and too many people with too little. Too many presents, too many Christmas events, too many parties, too much food, too much drink, too much lefse ... Wait. Back it up. I didn't mean that Grandma!

But as years went on, this negativity made me weary. No matter how much righteous crankiness I expressed, others still remained cheery at Christmas. Was I missing something?

Seventeen years ago I very ill, and my heart was closed. As I recovered, I did not shake my fist and cry, "Why me, God?" Surprisingly, I said, "Thank you, God." I was thankful that my heart was open again. Oh, the possibilities in an open heart! I don't know if God hands out gifts, but my new attitude of gratitude came from somewhere; it wasn't in my nature. That's what I was mostly thanking God for. I became better at holding dear what is right now and right here and not chasing what is next and out there. Willie Nelson said, "When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around."

So, Christmases are changing, and with that come wardrobe changes. I have removed my Scrooge top hat and, with the new Christmas season, I sometimes add this and that so I can put some joy in my dress with red HO-HO-HO socks or a holly bow tie. It works. This t-shirt is my 2023 addition. "Without Music, Life Would b-flat." It's clever, but it's much more. It's true.

Music has been instrumental in my change, especially carols, like the carols we're singing this morning. They are happy songs of religious joy. The joy part, of course, had been the rub for years.

I'd get invited to a holiday party and snarl. But I'd go and promise myself I would stay an hour and slip out the back. So at about 45 minutes of grin-and-bear-it and munch, munch, munch, I'm feeling like I got this. Fifteen more minutes and I'm heading home to my dark den to resume my Eugene O'Neill kind of Christmas.

Then some guy starts playing carols at the piano. Everyone but me starts singing.

I'm fuming, swimming in sarcasm. To myself I say to the pianist, "Hey Chuckles, here's a carol for you."

*It's the most miserable time of the year  
There'll be no mistletoeing, much pissing and moaning,  
Good luck with good cheer, Ho-Ho!  
It's the most miserable time of the year.*

I don't sing this, just suffer in silence ... until "Joy to the World" is played. You can't sit still to "Joy to the World"? I bellow it out, and an hour later I'm singing and beaming about a king named Wenceslas and a Feast of Stephen. Who was he? Who cares? Let's sing some more!

I don't know how music does it, takes over the room and lightens the heart at Christmas, lifts the mood, gets me to joy. I don't know how, but life would be flat without it and I'm all in. No need to figure it all out. Just sing. It's sort of like faith. I think I have more joy going all in on faith and not trying to make sense of it. Let the "O Magnum Mysterium" be. Let it be the great mystery. Just enjoy.

I close. I once had a dye injected and was allowed to watch my heart perform. Quite a performance! The power and unconditional regularity of the 100,000 beats per day I knew about. But I did not know about something that I can only describe as joy. I watched the valves of the heart with each contraction. As life-giving blood *rushed* past, the valves lifted with vigor, as cheerleaders do raising pom-poms, as Viking fans do with each "*Skol! Skol! Skol!*" It was a movement of resolve and joy. I smiled ... that was *my* heart!

This may sound farfetched, but as I watched and felt my heart, I heard music and sensed God. I'm not sure they can be separated. Kurt Vonnegut wrote, "If I should ever die, God forbid, let this be my epitaph: "The only proof he needed for the existence of God was music.'" Right before going on stage, Pavarotti would say, "Now I go to die." He knew he would not die. But perhaps this intense rapture that comes with music is less about performance and more about the rising, awesome awareness that music from the heart lifts whatever curtain there is between you and God.