

Christmas Eve 2020

While waiting for new tires to be placed on my car I was googling many things, as one does while waiting outside of a garage in isolation. I happened to find a blog titled the Amsterdamian. I had to read it because just one night earlier I dreamt that I was paddle boating on the canals of Amsterdam looking for a Home Depot and ended up having lunch with Judy Garland. Some dream. A blogger named Dana who is a writer and photographer recalls one day of winter. She writes, "I keep going back and perusing the pictures I took in the few days of snow that Amsterdam had this winter. The ones I took in the evening are my favourites. This city has a special glow in the evening light and the snow only makes it more beautiful, resembling a place straight out of a fairy tale. The white of the snow contrasts with the orange glow from inside the gingerbread houses, the streets are almost empty because everyone is hiding from the storm; you hear the occasional laughter of someone throwing snowballs. Peeking through a steamy window, you look inside a café to check if there are any free spots for you to enjoy a hot chocolate. You resume walking, forget about the chocolate and take more pictures, play more with the snow, until you reach the next cozy café and you have to decide if you stop or go further. You marvel at the sight of a houseboat covered in Christmas lights and the walk goes on and, before you know it, you are soaked and have to stop and seek shelter. The hot chocolate will taste even better than usual and the sleep will be more tranquil. That's the joy and the beauty of a wintry evening in Amsterdam.

I've also spent time with Robert Frost's poem, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. Frost wrote:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

On the surface, this poem is simplicity itself. The speaker is stopping by some woods on a snowy evening. He or she takes in the lovely scene in near-silence, is tempted to stay longer, but acknowledges the pull of obligations and the considerable distance yet to be traveled before he can rest for the night. The woods are a symbol, and they are described as "lovely, dark and deep". ... The woods provide a place for shelter and serenity. It's peaceful, and the character is not anxious to leave, but he must pull himself away and go home and fulfill his promises.

Reading the blog and poem caused me to revisit my winter evenings at our house in the Adirondacks. We've spent holidays there and sometimes traveled there just to get away. Imagine rushing toward ice and snow. I loved making our way there because of what Frost described in his poem: rest, silence, shelter, peace, and serenity. I could exit our second floor and stand on the balcony. When you stand there it feels like you are part of the starry sky. I sometimes even reached for a star they seemed that close. You are engulfed, surrounded. I also liked to observe the barren trees. Like Mary Oliver once wrote in a poem, I like to not just think about the bare branches but the space between those branches.

Mary Oliver

On this Winter night let us think about having ourselves a Mindful Little Christmas. Whoever you are and whatever your story, 'mindfulness' or your capacity to be aware, right here and now means you stay with yourself and your experience as it unfolds, moment by moment with kindness, curiosity, openness and acceptance. So, instead of 'having our buttons pushed' and 'reacting' unconsciously to ongoing events, circumstances and other people, we stay open.

Perceiving with all of our senses (really looking, listening, feeling, smelling, tasting) takes our attention out of the stream of thinking (so we don't get 'lost' in the story of what 'must' be done for instance) and we see reality as it is with lots of choices. Rather than worrying about what has happened or might happen, we deal with what is happening and our 'presence' (fully here) means we respond effectively and appreciate more fully.

When we are mindful we slow down and see the bigger picture. We realize that each moment (not just the moments on 25 December) is precious and an opportunity to re-write patterns and habits that are no longer serving us. We choose to re-engage with living, savoring the ordinary stuff like good company, loving relationships, delicious food, fun, laughter, music.

Let us focus on Christmas presence, the magic of this season. During the festive season you may notice thoughts, feelings or memories interrupting you. These thoughts may be subtle and fleeting but sufficient to take the edge off your Christmas cheer. When you notice what is happening in your mind, acknowledge it, don't criticize – be kind and return your attention to writing your Christmas cards, wrapping your gifts or standing in a queue of shoppers. Pay more attention to where you are and what you are doing, even if your mind tries to offer distractions and alternative realities that appear to be more pleasant than your real experience.

So from the time you wake up on this Christmas morning, take time to fully notice the little things, the smells, textures and tastes of Christmas. Each chocolate, cuddle and gift. Take time to savour it. How do the sweets look in your hand? How do they smell? How does it feel in your

mouth? Notice the effort others have made to give you gifts. Look at the way they are wrapped. How it feels to pull off the paper. Consider that many other people you do not know have made effort to grow, make or transport parts of your present too.

Be kind and compassionate to everyone you have contact with – including yourself. And if things don't quite go as planned or you are feeling overwhelmed by the celebrations, just take your seat by the side of the road and spend a few moments focusing your attention on your breath. Simply be this winter evening.

May it be so.