

CHRISTMAS 2011

Dear Each and Every One of You,

You have been my dear readers, many of you for most of the three years I've been writing these monthly articles. You've encouraged me and stuck with me, even when you might have disagreed or when my articles run long. I want you to know how much I appreciate you.

I got up early this morning, and after opening the blinds I just stood and took in the beauty of a room decorated for Christmas. Terry attached a motion-sensor to the lamp so that whenever anyone comes into the room it turns the light on. The downside of that brilliant idea is that watching TV we're so still that after a bit the lamp goes off, leaving us in the dark until we move, like last night when I scratched my nose. Terry added the Christmas tree to the motion sensor so my walking over to open the blind caused the room to come alive with brilliant Christmas spirit.

Last year Terry and I set out all the tubs of decorations and had the kids go through them, after which we got rid of most of the rest so we could start from scratch. We even got a new tree, which is as tall but not as wide at the bottom. But instead of having to put the color-coded branches in one at a time this one is already together and strung with clear lights, and has branches laden with snow. It looks like it's sitting in the middle of the forest on a cold winter's day.

What I saw, as I stood there, surprised me. Our living room is quite small, and we don't have a lot in the way of tables and shelves, so while the decorations are minimal the room is alive with Christmas. Not counting the tree there are seven decorations, all but one from the past and filled with memories. A wrought-iron shaped angel that holds a candle. A banner over the couch that I made many years ago after seeing one in a magazine, though the magazine angel was very folk-artsy and I made mine more regal. Under the tree with the presents sits a small wooden manger with real hay and a china baby Jesus.

There is our Christmas-tree-topper angel. It won't fit on top of this tree, so it sits as a decoration instead. We bought it many years ago when the kids were young, only to get it home and discover that, being clear, it was invisible on the tree. So

we bought gold leaf and painstakingly covered it with real gold. Now it's a beautiful treasure, and unique.

We have two nativity sets. Many years ago Terry and I were walking through a local mall and came across a woman set up and taking orders for handmade ceramic nativity sets, complete with the Bethlehem street and palm trees. But all her figures were painted white, and upon asking she said yes, for an extra twenty-five dollars she'd paint them lifelike. We picked it up that November. That has been one of our treasured Christmas decorations ever since, though it has suffered some casualties over the years. But the glue doesn't show, and a little gray paint over the broken donkey's ear isn't noticeable.

The other nativity set is our only new addition this year, other than three ornaments for the tree. It's one I've wanted ever since our children were small. It's Playmobil, for children, complete with two white doves and a little mouse. This year we started a tradition. (Is that an oxymoron?) Every Christmas our grandkids can come and set up the Playmobil nativity set and play with it to their heart's content. And, off the record, Jessie and I have already enjoyed arranging it. The wise men with one camel were a separate set, and we also picked up a set of two desert bandits with their camels so that way our three wise men each have their own camel and "guards" for the gifts they're bringing to the newborn King, in case they get attacked on their pilgrimage across the desert.

Lastly, there is the carousel that turns and plays Christmas songs while the various brightly-painted animals move up and down. It's not really our taste but it's there for the grandkids, we inherited it from Terry's mother.

I stood there this morning looking around and absorbing the pleasure of Christmas. Memories play a big part in the season, but we have to stop all the busyness and remember, or what's the point of the memories? Each memory is unique to us, a part of what makes us who we are, of where we've come from. Growing up in Thailand my Christmas memories may be a little different but they're still "Christmas" to me. Our Christmas trees were made of Australian Pine branches tied together in a bundle. One Christmas my dad was up in a tree at the beach in the misting rain cutting branches to make our tree when the governor drove by, wondering what on earth was going on with those crazy foreigners! An Australian pine, instead of being the traditional cone shape, has long needles that hang off the many branches, causing it to look more like a decorated weeping willow.

As a child some of our Christmas gifts were brought from the States during furlough and distributed over the four years before we came back, but I think most of them came from Penang, Malaysia, where we went fairly often for supplies, vacation, or to renew our visa. Being a British colony it had wonderful things that we equated with America, not realizing until much later that they were actually British. Like the card games Authors and Happy Families, the board game Coppit, the Enid Blyton children's books, Lyles Golden Syrup, Rowntree Fruit Gums, and Cadbury.

There was a wonderful toy store on Bishop Street, and the first thing we did after checking into the Peking Hotel was to make a trip there so we spend our allowance (and hence be entertained in the hotel room). So when we asked for things for Christmas they mostly came from that store. Stocking treats also came from Penang, but not just the traditional apples and candy. Treats that would offend kids in America were coveted there. Over the years growing up I've received in my stocking a bottle of Salad Dressing, a jar of dill pickles, and a round, blue tin of Kraft American cheese. I made my cheese last until I had to scrape the mold off of it to eat it.

I could see the ocean in the distance from my bedroom window, and there were Christmases where we went to the beach. One missionary family had recently arrived back from furlough and brought something new in the way of Christmas trees—a silver tree with a light on a stand that rotated colors onto the reflective tree. I thought that was the ultimate!

Because of the toy store on Bishop Street my Christmas toys were like most others in America, a Mary Poppins doll with a parasol, the pink and white teddy bear I wanted so desperately, Colorforms, paperdolls, and games.

I stood this morning and thought about my memories with Terry and our children. The year Chris got a kid-sized battery-powered motorcycle, and not realizing it moved he twisted the handle, driving straight into the Christmas tree. Or the year he was hanging an ornament behind the tree when the base of the tree broke and the whole thing fell over. But good came out of it, we bought a wonderful tree that we used up until this one we bought last year.

Our one tradition with our kids, if we have any, is that every year the kids get maple-sugar candy in their stocking. Strange, unless you know the background. A favorite book when they were small was *The Biggest Bear* by Lynd Ward. The bear

loved maple-sugar candy, and our kids wanted to know what that was, as anything that has the word "candy" in it and is passionately loved by a bear HAS to be good! That year started it, and each year that's what they wanted. (Cracker Barrel is the only place nowadays we know where to find it.)

Life is organic, constantly changing and rearranging, never the same year after year. We have constants that run through the holiday, but even those have to be adapted year by year according to the family status or finances or health. Without Terry's parents in our Christmas now we have a new appreciation for his brother's part in the holiday. Life is dynamic, like a river, never the same minute to minute, sometimes tossing and churning, sometimes calm, and most often laughing its way along, carried joyfully towards the sea. To try to hold it still is to stop living, to be always frustrated over not being able to grasp it and hold on. Life isn't MEANT to stop, to be set on the altar and worshipped as the "right" way that must always look and feel a certain way. There is only one continuous thread that runs through, year after year, joyfully and wondrously alive, and that is Jesus. Enjoy every aspect of the season, but enjoy it with Jesus. He keeps it fresh and new, bringing the season alive in our hearts.

My challenge to you this year is to let go and allow this Christmas to be what it's meant to be **THIS** year, not last year or what it might be next year. Live it joyfully every moment, and then move on. Because there's no sadness over it being over, the best is yet to come! A new year full of potential, full of Jesus, full of life.

Go out and live it!