

"It's a Wrap"

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When I was growing up, we had a particular New Year's Day ritual. All the Christmas decorations were taken down and put away, to the last scrap. The tree ornaments were wrapped and boxed and replaced in the storeroom under the stairs. We always had a real tree, and it was put outside on a snow bank until it could go to the dump, ragged bits of tinsel clinging to its branches. All the new presents, which we left under the tree after we opened them, were put away to mingle with the familiar old stuff. The holiday cards were all filed to review for next year's card mailing. All the lights came down, and the faux stained glass panels on the big windows around the front door. Only a poinsettia or two remained, tucked among the other house plants. By the end of New Year's Day, the house seemed very light, and colder, and somewhat empty. The Christmas decorations went up in stages over several weeks, and suddenly they were all gone at once. All the anticipation and happy suspense we had about gifts and parties and cards and visits was done with. The holidays were over and the New Year had begun. In another day or two, we were back to school and work, often with New Year's resolutions bringing new diets and disciplines. The beginning of January always seemed rather bleak to me.

Christmas was a big deal in my family, which made it even more jarring for me when my mom was so prompt about clearing it away. Almost every year I agitated to leave the decorations up longer, say until Twelfth Night. I thought it made the transition easier if we

waited until we were tired of the lights and bright colors and took them down when a change was welcome. But my mom never yielded, and no one else shared my views.

We all know that the holidays can be a difficult time for some of us. This is a common phenomenon which has been somewhat exaggerated—it is not true, for example, that there are more suicides at the holidays, although this is a common belief. But many people experience holiday blues and stress. Those without families, or who are still grieving for loved ones, can feel especially lonely with all the cultural images and memories of happy families celebrating a traditional Christmas. People with financial problems feel the pressure to hold festivities and buy gifts which they can't afford, especially if they have children. People who are unemployed or dealing with illness or loss find the incessant cheeriness around them incongruous and jarring. And even those of us with much to be thankful for can still be overwhelmed with all the bustle of decorating, hosting, gift-buying and volunteering.

But there really is a particular poignancy to this time of year which our celebrations unconsciously challenge. It's no accident that themes of light, rebirth, abundance, generosity, new beginnings, and uninhibited merriment are found in so many cultures through most of history at the time of the Winter Solstice. Even as we prepare our Christmas celebrations, we feel the year winding to a close. Nature herself is putting the final seal on another cycle of birth, growth, fruition and death. The brilliant colors of autumn have long faded. The leaves haven't merely fallen; they are dreary brown, sodden, already returning to loam as the first snow covers them. Seeds lie in the cold ground and only a few of them will survive to sprout in the spring. Animals are facing the cold and starvation of winter. Most of us are protected from the harshest conditions of the season,

but like Frances in today's story, we don't have to look far to find the poor and homeless who feel winter's bite hard and close.

As the year comes to an end, we can't escape reflections on how the past twelve months have gone. Somehow we've never accomplished as much as we hoped, and what we have done often hasn't lived up to our dreams. Here it is, another year gone by, we think, and what do we actually have to show for it? As the unreformed Scrooge says to his nephew in the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, "what is Christmas to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer."

Even when we have achievements and milestones to celebrate, we often feel a sense of let-down. The harder we work and strive toward a goal, the more likely we are to feel somewhat at a loss when we've reached it. I have now written and published three novels, but not once have I felt the sense of elation that some writers talk about feeling when their books are released. It always seemed to me that I was so busy querying reviewers and making announcements and filling orders, and getting all the editions of the book out into all the markets and channels, and doing all the follow-up, I barely even noticed that I'd finished the book at all. All I could think about was starting the next one, and then I had to resist feeling discouraged when sales were slow, reviewers weren't interested and it seemed like no one wanted to read the stories I had worked so hard to create and polish.

So much of life is like this. We get our degree and then have to find a job, and interviewers don't seem very impressed by what we did in school. We have a new baby and find that we never see our friends, and we're up all night after working all day. We buy that dream house, and have to adjust our finances and lifestyle for the bigger mortgage and

longer commute. All true transformations have this mixture of joy and sorrow, because real change always means letting things go. We bring something new and wonderful into our life, and have to abandon or rearrange old things to make room. We come to the end of a big effort, reach a goal, and we have to cut our losses, evaluate our successes and failures, clear out everything that accumulated while we worked and get ready to start all over again. Sometimes it's hard to resist asking, "is that all there is?"

The turning of the year is tinged with this mood whether we had a relatively uneventful twelve months, a year of achievements or one we'd prefer not to remember. All of us go through some of each as we pass through life. And this, I think, is why so many of us struggle with conflicted feelings at this time of year—if not before Christmas, certainly afterwards, as the decorations start to look tired, the guests go home, the holiday food is eaten, and the old year draws inevitably to a close. The media are filled with retrospectives and "best of" lists, and we're pushed into reflecting back on the passing year whether we want to or not.

The best remedy for this is throwing ourselves unconditionally and unashamedly into a sense of gratitude. Some time ago, I started doing gratitude meditations on a regular basis. I very quickly accrued a list of things to be grateful for that was so long, I had to divide it up into categories, or I'd have been meditating for hours. It's not that my life has been easy by any means. I've had a lot of experiences which I could nurse resentment over, and some people would say that such resentment would be more than justified. But it's also pointless. We can choose how we think about our experiences, good and bad. It's most constructive to divide life up into things to be grateful for and things that teach us information or lessons, painful as they may be. The longer we focus on gratitude, the better

we realize how much more of life is made up of blessings than of hurts. Pain makes a strong impression on us because its function is to teach us to avoid damaging ourselves. But it has a way of commanding far more of our attention than it deserves. It was only when I started those gratitude meditations that it finally hit me just how much I'd done, how lucky I'd been, and how many of the things I daydreamed about as a child had actually manifested. Whoa, I finally thought, I've written and published three books! I bought a house! I went to Harvard! I've met famous people! I'm incredibly healthy! I'm the minister of a church! What a wonderful life I've had! I had to consciously choose to look at all the good things and count them up, making them more important than the painful or disappointing lows, before I could truly see them.

So as the pendulum continues its slow swing to its lowest point, at the Solstice, and as the year 2013 ticks to a close, let's remember to practice gratitude for everything we have and everything we've done. Because we do have so much, and we accomplish so much, and as I've found, we take so little time to savor our triumphs and appreciate our blessings. If we've had to let things go over the past year, we can remember that everything we release leaves a space which something new is waiting to fill. After Winter comes the Spring, with all its potential, all its unknowns and all its promise. We're standing on a threshold, partying and feasting to work up our courage to step through. The Light is about to be reborn, and 2014 is about to begin. Just as Dickens urges us at the end of *A Christmas Carol*, let's carry that spirit with us past the season and on through the whole coming year.