

I let Christmas in early this year. Before December 1st. Even before – *and this is just embarrassing* – even before Thanksgiving.



It was an accident, and I'm not proud, but it happened. Against every principle I hold dear – every proclamation I have heretofore made on the subject – I let my guard down for a split second, and Christmas waltzed right in. And I let it.

The truth is, I guess I was asking for it. On some subliminal, subconscious, sub-something level, I wanted – needed? – Christmas. Otherwise, why would I have turned my radio dial to 98.7 The River on Tuesday, November 18th? I almost never listen to The River, anyway, but in *mid-November*?

I knew what I was getting myself into. I must have. I've been complaining for as long as I can remember – in this very column, no less – that this radio station starts firing off Christmas tunes so early that you're ready for earplugs by the time December 25th rolls around. My ire springs not from some curmudgeonly distaste for Christmas, but just the opposite. I have a deep and abiding love for the season, and I just want to protect it from overexposure.

So, anyway... I'm driving to the Y on Tuesday, November 18th, having just dropped my daughter at school. NPR is rehashing California's Prop 8 controversy, the AM guys are talking bailouts, and I'm thinking some music is in order. As if guided by an invisible hand, I skip my radio up to 98.7 – which, again, I rarely listen to – and I'm stopped by a lilting Jamaican voice singing a familiar calypso tune:

*Long time ago in Bethlehem, so the Holy Bible say... Mary's boy child Jesus Christ was born on Christmas day.*

And then something completely unexpected happens, right there in the car, on the way to the Y, on a normal Tuesday, at 8:30 in the morning. I begin to cry. I cry and I cry and I cry... all the way to the Y.

As my regular readers know, I do most of my heavy thinking on the treadmill and the stairmaster. (I can't stay on either for very long, which explains a lot.) That morning, I pondered my weird, weepy behavior in the car. One thing I knew for sure – those tears had not been tears of anger or disgust over a sneak attack by a premature Christmas carol. To the contrary, they had been tears of flat-out *joy*. And there was something else there, too. Could it have been relief?

We've all had a rough year, haven't we? There's the economy: No need to elaborate on that. And there was that divisive election, too: Even if you're thrilled with the outcome, chances are, you didn't come through it unscathed. Chances are you argued with a friend, hurt someone's feelings, got your feelings hurt, de-humanized someone with whom you disagreed, failed to love your neighbor... especially if that neighbor had a certain campaign sign in his yard. Like I said, a rough year.

So back to the tears. They came unbidden, and they came hard, and they felt *so good*. Part of it was relief, I'm sure. (Despite this grim Grinch of a year, Christmas was coming to Whoville,

again, with all its requisite peace and good will!) Part of it was nostalgia for the song, too, a sweet tune I've known and loved forever. But the main thing was this, I think: the innocent simplicity of the lyrics just

*got to me.*

There were no euphemisms, no PC-isms, no secularisms... just an unabashed, straightforward telling of the Christmas story – the one we all used to learn as children, before everybody got so crazy-sensitive about such things. It was unvarnished, unapologetic, and actually rather shocking to my ears on a normal Tuesday, at 8:30 in the morning, on the way to the Y.

*Long time ago in Bethlehem, so the Holy Bible say... Mary's boy child Jesus Christ was born on Christmas day.*

Now, you and I could quibble ad nauseam about the "truth" of the Christmas story. You could argue that it's "just another myth," and I could argue back that there's "evidence of its historicity." In the end, we'll both believe what we want to believe, so why bother? For what it's worth, I concur with C.S. Lewis (yes, him again), who knew plenty about mythology before he ever became a convinced Christian. It was Lewis' erudite contention that the ancient myths contained glimmers and shadows of God's truth – vague forecasts of His ultimate plan – and that only in the Gospel did those stories of myth become fully embodied in history... or, the word became flesh, so to speak.

Whether or not you agree with Lewis (and me) on that point, his ideas about truth in myth are both fascinating and useful. Lewis places great significance on the "romantic longing" he says is common to human beings... the yearning we all have, though some more than others, to connect with the transcendent... that indefinable, ethereal *something* that seems so near and yet so far away. Both warmly familiar and maddeningly elusive, like some spectacular butterfly we glimpse on rare occasion, from the corner of our eye, it flits and floats on the periphery of our vision, captivating us with its bright promise, only to evaporate from sight when we try view it head on. And we are left with that ineffable longing. The stories we tell about the butterfly – the myths we perpetuate – help satisfy that longing, but they are mere sketches of the real thing. Like food and water for the spirit, they sustain us, pointing us, however imperfectly, toward the truth.

So where am I going with this? Back to my freaky – and at that moment in the car, somewhat inconvenient – tears of joy. Incidentally, "joy" is the term Lewis uses to describe that aforementioned longing, a common yearning which he argues – rather convincingly, for my money – must have a corresponding object. Think about it: For every human urge, there is an object to satisfy it – hunger has food, thirst has water, lust has, well... you know. Why, then, are so many folks today hell-bent on insisting that our urge to know God is somehow different? That it's "all in our head?" Doesn't it, in fact, make more sense to assume that our brains conjure up this longing because a corresponding object exists? I'm just sayin'...

All of the above may seem like pure hooey to you. I'm no scholar, and I'm certainly no theologian. To crib from a little movie I like called *Rambling Rose*, "I'm only a human girl person;" I'm just doing the best I can to make sense of the world as I experience it. You're free to hit "eject" at any time. (Or, in publishing parlance, turn the page.)

Having given you that out, here's what I think: When I heard the Christmas story, sung in plain English, by a Jamaican crooner, to a calypso melody, on Tuesday morning, November 18th... I believe I was, quite simply, overcome by joy. A sense of divine longing. An "intimation of immortality," as Wordsworth might have put it. A glimpse of the butterfly.

What about you? Have you let Christmas in, yet? Do you like yours straight up, like I took

mine that Tuesday morning, or do you need a less direct, more contemporary kick-start to your season? Maybe, for you, it's always that moment when the Grinch's heart bursts its tiny frame... or when the citizens of Bedford Falls empty their pockets for George Bailey's savings and loan... or when Ebenezer Scrooge shows up at Bob Cratchett's with that monster turkey in tow? Maybe it's the sound of the Salvation Army bell, the twinkle of lights through a window...?

Whatever your answer, on this much I hope we can all agree: At some point, the spirit we call "Christmas" entered human history and began changing the world, one heart at a time. It's still changing hearts today.