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# The gift of Christmas presence: Mindfulness exercises for the 12 Days of Christmas

Jennifer Halling | Dec. 20, 2010 Eco Catholic

Christmas is a time when we ritually remember that we are the recipients of God?s abundant love, and in our rituals, we attempt to reflect God?s abundance: More gifts! More lights! A bigger tree! Richer food! Ironically, it is that very seeking after abundance that leaves us feeling empty, exhausted, and overwhelmed. Consider the following words by Archbishop Oscar Romero:

"No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God ? for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God. Emmanuel. God with us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God."

Christmas may seem like an odd time to contemplate poverty of spirit, but didn?t Jesus say, ?Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for they shall see God?? And what is Christmas all about, if not seeing God?s presence in the world as reflected in the person of Christ?
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The phrase ?poor in Spirit? is puzzling, but a key to understanding it can be found in the Rule of Taizé, which says, ?The spirit of poverty is to live in the gladness of today.? Thus the spirit of poverty is not about how much we have but how we respond to whatever is present to us, right now, today, because tomorrow it may be gone. For that matter, our life as a physical being may be gone.

**Coming to Our Senses**

The Jewish teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, ?Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living.? I really don?t understand why we, who are spiritual beings, need to spend time in a physical body. However, the mystic Meister Eckhart shed some light on this question when he commented, ?If the soul could have known God without the world, the world would never have been created.?

Thus, as beings inhabiting a physical body, the way for us to be poor in spirit and cognizant of the presence of God is to come to our senses ?literally! We have become so accustomed to living with the sense of sight,

hearing, smell, taste, and touch that we take them for granted and forget that they are portals to living in a poverty of spirit, genuinely celebrating God?s presence, and in turn being present to others.

Jesus, as we know, was a very tactile person. He used spit and mud to heal the blind, he changed water into wine, he doodled in the earth, he enjoyed a good meal, and he showed his disciples how to remember him by washing their feet and breaking bread with them. Not surprisingly, then, Jesus was also a master of living in a poverty of spirit, in the gladness of today, with an abiding sense of the presence of God. People were drawn to him because he lived deeply and well, because he took the time to see them, touch them, and address their needs, and because he responded to whatever the moment presented, whether that included feeding 5000 a crowd of people with a few fish and a loaf of bread, healing on the Sabbath, or not ritually washing before eating. Which, of course, infuriated the Sadducees and Pharisees and ultimately led to his death, because apparently living in a poverty of spirit?and living as if you know you are beloved of God?is very threatening to some people.

We are already quite adept at engaging our senses at Christmastime, what with all the colorful lights, ceaseless Christmas music, aromas of pine trees and cookies baking, and heaps of presents to wrap and unwrap. Again, however, we are operating out of a model of abundance?more is better?when what really sharpens our senses and helps us be present to the Divine Mystery is celebrating well but simply.

We all know this. We know that we savor a single square of fine chocolate more than a whole bar of the cheap stuff. We know that having a few good-quality items of clothing in our wardrobe is more satisfying than having a closet full of stuff we never wear. We know that we long for respite from the endless loop of Christmas carols that got old the week after Halloween. So why do we continue to participate in the ?senseless? hullabaloo surrounding Christmas? I suspect it is because we don?t have the courage to stand up to the present-day Sadducees and Pharisees in our workplaces and families who accuse us of being Scrooge-like if we don?t want to overindulge at the staff Christmas party or continue to buy presents for all our third cousins (and their children).

And yet, we would do our family, friends, and colleagues a great service by gently modeling a more satisfying and sacred way of celebrating. For example, when I worked at Shantivanam, we as a staff celebrated Christmas with a glass of wine, a hearty bowl of soup, a loaf of crusty bread, and a slice of cheesecake. My instinct would have been to have a much more elaborate meal, but I now recall those gatherings with great warmth and fondness, whereas I can barely remember the overstuffed staff holiday parties I attended during the years I worked at a corporation.

Although our society works itself into a frenzy preparing for a big blowout celebration on Christmas Day, the church in its wisdom has given us twelve whole days between December 25 and January 6, the Feast of Epiphany, to contemplate the awesome implications of the birth of Jesus. This year, I suggest that we take those twelve days to engage our senses through the practice of mindfulness and thus enter into the poverty of spirit that allows us to truly experience God?s presence. As the teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn says, ?The bell of mindfulness tolls in each moment, inviting us to come to our senses, reminding us that we can wake up to our lives, now, while we have them to live.?

I invite you to practice one of the following mini-mindfulness meditations each day between Christmas and Epiphany. You may want to try them all or choose a few that work well for you. The aim is to slowly and deliberately awaken our senses, focusing on how God is present to us through our sight, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and moving, and thus becoming fully embodied as a living prayer.

**The First Day of Christmas: Drinking Coffee or Tea**

Most of us drink coffee or tea every day without giving it a second thought. Today, we will take a different approach. First, choose a mug or cup, pausing to notice its color, texture, and the way it fits in your hand. Notice

the aroma of the coffee grounds or tea, and be attentive to the whistling of the kettle or dripping of the coffee maker. Feel the steam warm your face as you fill the cup, and notice the swirling of the sugar, honey, or cream as you stir them in. Feel the way the cup warms your hand and the way your mouth anticipates that first sip. Be aware of the taste of the liquid and the way it feels in your mouth. Feel the warmth in your throat and chest as you swallow. As thoughts arise, acknowledge them and gently turn your attention back to the act of drinking, for that is all this moment needs to hold.

**The Second Day of Christmas: Washing Dishes**

After yesterday?s tea or coffee ritual, you likely have some dishes to wash! How fortunate, because washing dishes by hand is a marvelous way to awaken the senses. First, notice the sound of the water as you turn on the tap and feel how the temperature changes as you fill the sink. Enjoy the scent of the dish soap or essential oil you add to the water. Feel the steam rising on your face and the soothing, slippery sensation of the hot suds. As you handle each dish, cup, pot, or utensil, think about where it came from and all the people who have used it over the years. Be aware of the shape and texture of each item and the muscles you must use to scrub away stuck-on food. Take your time as you rinse each dish, for the dish and the soap and the water is all this moment needs to hold.

**The Third Day of Christmas: Enjoying Silence**

Recently I read a simple instruction by a meditation teacher that I found particularly helpful: Enjoy the silence. This bit of wisdom reminds me of my father, who sometimes turned off his hearing aid when he found our noisy world too tiresome. Today, I suggest you find a place where you can completely ?disconnect? from phones, computers, televisions, radios, and conversation, perhaps in an empty church or chapel. Settle yourself comfortably and then ring a bell or strike a singing bowl, listening to the tones as they fade away, leading you into silence. Be aware of your breath flowing in and out of your body. As thoughts arise, acknowledge them and then set them aside as you pray, ?For You, O God, my soul in stillness waits; surely my hope is in You.? You might wish to silently pray the rosary or engage in another meditative practice such as knitting, but above all, enjoy the silence, for that is all this moment needs to hold. After 20 to 30 minutes, ring your bell or singing bowl again, noticing how your sense of hearing is more acute now that you have become accustomed to ?sound? of silence.

**The Fourth Day of Christmas: Shall We Dance?**

The Bible says that King David danced before God, but today we seldom think of dance as prayer. Today, pick out a song that makes you want to get up and dance, and get up and dance! If you are self-conscious, you might want to do this meditation solo behind closed doors, or if you are lucky enough to have an uninhibited toddler or a sweetheart in your life, invite them to join you. As you move to the music, be aware of your body?s flexibility, the marvel of joints that bend and hips that swivel, the rhythm of your breath, the warmth that you generate, and the joy your body feels to be in motion. Like a Sufi dancer twirling into ecstatic communion with God, give yourself completely to the dance, for that is all that this moment needs to hold.

*Part Two:**The gift of Christmas presence: Mindfulness exercises for the 12 Days of Christmas**[1]*

[These Christmas mindfulness exercises were written by Jennifer Halling, who for many years was on the staff of Shantivanam, the prayer community in northeastern Kansas founded by Fr. Ed Hays. She works now as a copy editor and certified funeral celebrant in Lawrence, Kan.]

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