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Advent journal: three reflections

Rich Heffern | Dec. 20, 2010 Eco Catholic

*This Advent journal comes from Joni Woelfel, who lives in Minnesota. She is author of**A Party of One: Meditations for Those Who Live Alone, The Light Within: A Woman's Book of Solace** and**Craving Hope: A Spiritual Companion on Your Weight Loss Journey.***

Our first major cold spell has hit, with temps down into the 20 below readings. Within days, the open lakes froze and now people are out in droves ice fishing with great enthusiasm. It is challenging for me to get excited about the cold but I?m trying to change my attitude. This morning, my husband Jerry and I were watching a documentary about a unique Siberian salamander that has an anti-freeze type substance in its blood. In fact, it is one of the few creatures on earth who can survive being frozen solid for as long as several years--- only to unthaw and come alive again (or resurrect, as the narrator called it) with no ill effects at all.

How astonishing! It prompted me to think of the cold times in our lives when we are chilled to the bone by hardships of many kinds. Resilience is the spiritual antifreeze running deep within the veins of despair, reminding us that no matter what happens, we will be able to survive the long winters of the heart. When you think about it, just as the salamander is created to naturally withstand the freezing seasons, we, too are spiritually designed to endure and recover from frigid times that paralyze the soul.

The remarkable Siberian salamander reminds us that this state of being is a temporary, inherent part of life --- and as my sons and husband, who love winter activities of many kinds teach me, if you bundle up properly, you?ll be fine. Spiritually, to be fine means that inner strength helps us to pick up the pieces when loss is ours. To be fine means that we have learned to integrate the bad things in life with the good through the love of God.

? Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility?and patience.
Above all, clothe yourselves with love? Colossians 3:12b,14a

We?d been finishing up our Christmas shopping, it was getting late and when we returned home I decided to sit down and go through our bills. I was puzzled to note that there were two notices from our television cable service. Upon opening the statements, I was shocked to read that they had not received our last payment, it was now delinquent and due immediately with the current bill. I take satisfaction in paying our bills on time, having good credit scores and being organized. Surely the company made a mistake, I thought. For the next several upsetting hours, I went through my check book, our printed bank statements and my receipt files. In all three places, there was no record of the missing bill or my having paid it.

Stress mushrooming, I called the company, going through an ordeal of computer recordings until I finally reached a real person. I explained the dilemma about the missing bill, agreeing to send a check right away, still not sure if I was possibly paying it twice. Feeling anxious and frustrated when I hung up, I decided to go through the waste basket---and much to my surprise, amidst all the flyers and advertisements was the missing bill. I had accidentally discarded it with all the junk mail. As I took the bill (upon which I wrote on the back: delinquent payment enclosed) down to the mail box, it was peacefully snowing and past midnight---and what I

thought was a terrible crisis was already past. For heaven?s sakes, what a temporary loss of perspective! I decided to be kind to myself and remembering the beatitudes, said encouragingly aloud to myself, ?That?s OK, everybody makes mistakes sometimes.? When is the last time you offered a word of kindness to yourself? As an Advent exercise, write out five statements you should tell yourself.

Anxiety weighs down the human heart,
But a good word cheers it up. ?Proverbs 12:25

We were babysitting our nine month old grandson, Duncan for the weekend, when suddenly we decided, ?Let?s go toy shopping!? since we did not have very many at our house. We bundled up baby and away we went, zipping to town. Our little grandson was such a good boy, enthralled by the holiday lights, music of the season and people everywhere as we settled him into the shopping cart at the department store. This was our first shopping trip with him, we had not bought baby toys for thirty years, and it was quite an adventure. We talked nostalgically about the toys we had for our sons when they were young: a little wooden carpenter bench with plastic pegs you could pound down with a plastic hammer, a busy box with a mirror and various rollers, a transparent plastic thing with wooden beads in it that you could push and an octagonal plastic ball with cut-out holes in it for inserting various geometric shapes. We remembered the toys vividly and how sometimes, we would set a baby son in a clothes basket filled with toys, where they would play for hours. It seemed like only yesterday---and impossible that thirty years had passed by so swiftly.

In the store, we noted many parents with young children running around doing errands and Christmas shopping. We felt a special sense of camaraderie, since we too had a baby on board! It was so much fun picking out a sippy cup, little t-shirts, a warm outfit, apple juice and two toys. We were amazed at how toys have changed, everything has bells, whistles, voices, singing and flashing lights! At the counter, the price was missing on a pair of socks we bought, and the clerk was going to find out what it was, but we exclaimed, ?Skip it, we?re too exhausted to wait!? Then, we laughed and left the store with baby on board, zipping back home to play some more and try out the new things as our grandson literally squealed in delight. Jerry took pictures with his cell phone to send to our kids, who texted back, ?Don?t spoil him too much!? That night, as we picked up all the strewn-about toys and put baby to bed, my husband and I talked about how much we love our family.

It?s been 2010 years since baby Jesus had new toys, lovingly hand-made by Joseph to be sure. But even then, God was sending text messages to the hearts of the people of the world, saying ?Behold, baby on board, my son has been born!? Uniting heaven and earth, Baby Jesus came to bond every man, woman and child with a camaraderie of spirit that would remind us forever that we are one in the family of God.

> *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;*
> *? and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,*
> *Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ?Isaiah 9:6*

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