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There is a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what was planted (Ecclesiastes 3:2).

"OK, boys, it's time to help Grandma make dirt!"

I was in the living room with my grandsons Paden and Landon, ages 4 and 2. They pulled up their little chairs that Grandpa made to the kids' table, and I got out the bright boxes with the Christmas amaryllis bulbs and retrieved a measuring cup and forks from the kitchen. Then, we poured water over the enclosed dirt disk in the pot. Within seconds, it began expanding as they poked it with the forks to fluff it up. Landy sloshed water across the table, which I wiped up while he did his mischievous sideways grin. He is, after all, our little barefoot mess-maker, which he thinks is his job.

Next, the boys dropped the dead-looking bulb roots-first into the pot. By then, Landy was bored and ran off to pester the cat. Padey, our little helper who never stops humming, helped me finish up, and we patted and smoothed the dirt with our forks. The traditional planting of the Thanksgiving amaryllis was now done for another year.

It was dark out, and with the outside lights on you could see gigantic lacey flakes of snow falling like a veil. Padey exclaimed, "Isn't it beautiful?"

I said, "Yes, it's magical."

He asked, "What does magical mean?"

I said it means that which is shining, wonderful and secret. He got that and hopped up and down on the sofa like a leap frog, repeating his new word, "magical, magical!" over and over.

Then, we colored Christmas pictures of Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street to send to their cousin Duncan who was 6 and at home with the flu and greatly missed.

Later that night, when the tuckered-out sweethearts and baby sister Emma had gone home to bed and my husband Jerry and I sat by the twinkle lights on the Christmas tree, I said, "Just think, something magical is happening right now, this very minute and we can't see it." I was referring to the dried up amaryllis bulb of

course, and the fact that it was now mysteriously energized with new life through being lovingly planted and watered. Stirring deeply within, it will culminate in gorgeous, towering red flowers for Christmas.

It is always a marvel to watch it transform during Advent — a sacred holiday symbol of little shavers, dreams and prayers sprouting like the rod of Jesse, the growth so real you can measure it with a ruler, which I always do.

There have been a few years when the flowers forgot to bloom and all we got was a wobbly stalk. That's OK though, because philosophically, the important thing is to keep planting, to keep making memories and not give up. That is not always easy to do, in world filled with stress, turmoil and tragedy when life brings death, emptiness and what can feel like a withering of the soul.

When the magnificent flowers begin to fade around New Year's, I feel sad to see the decline, so I get a knife and cut the stalk down. One year, however, my friend Adolfo suggested I observe the full growing cycle through to the end by allowing the plant to wither naturally. The stalk bent over, turned a sickly green, and dried petals fell in profusion. The plant was returning to its essence until finally nothing remained but the lifeless bulb. Was it back to nothing yet again? I set it in the dark garage on a shelf where I forgot about it.

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That summer, along with my Easter lily that had also died back to a stub, I planted them in the garden where they received light, warmth and water. Lo and behold, they sprouted, grew and bloomed, a resurrection out of season.

This growing cycle speaks poignantly to what it means to observe the seasons of the heart through the eyes of the soul. Dormancy, waiting, blossoming, withering, dying and beginning again is the journey of God being reborn in the crib of our hearts all our lives through.

Continually growing something miraculous from nothing is the perpetual gift of the spirit within. Some call it faith, courage or endurance, but when I observe my cherished little grandchildren watching in wonder, I know it is the joy of Advent, and I glimpse a miracle of love for this troubled world.

[Joni Woelfel writes from Spicer, Minnesota. All Soul Seeing columns are available online at NCRonline.org/blogs/soul-seeing.]

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