

RUNE OF HOSPITALITY

I saw a stranger yestereen;
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place;
And in the blessed name of the Triune
He blessed myself and my house,
My cattle and my dear ones.

And the lark said in her song
Often, often, often
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise,
Often, often, often
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.

(An Old Irish Rune)

December 17, 1998

Dear Friends:

In the early days of Andre House in Phoenix, a friend gave us a framed copy of the Rune of Hospitality. We hung it just inside the front door, to remind ourselves whom we were greeting. On the last day of August, this year, when I began a new job, at the St. Anthony Foundation in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood, I discovered a duplicate of the verse in a room there. It seemed a good omen. And, for numerous reasons, it seems a fitting quote to share with you this Christmas.

I noticed "the Christ in the stranger's guise" again, for the umpteenth time, two nights ago. Some colleagues and I formed a singing group to entertain the folks we serve. (I am into my 5th decade as a keyboard accompanist!) Tuesday evening we were performing for the guests at Marian Residence, our women's emergency shelter. We had finished our program and then invited requests for carols. One of the older women raised her hand, and, in a halting voice, asked us to sing "Silent Night". Halfway through the 2nd verse, I looked up and was drawn to the same woman. Hers is a face that shows the ravages of age, illness and a very hard life. But at that moment it was also the face of an angel: serene, tranquil, and tearful, yet full of "heavenly peace". (Thank God it was such a familiar song. I couldn't have read my music with my own eyes welling up.)

Last night we were at Seton Hall, which houses one of our drug and alcohol rehab programs. We were hosting a dessert and tree decorating party for the 30 men who live there, in early stages of recovery. Most of these guys, some quite young, have known more discouragement and degradation than any of us are ever likely to glimpse. Many of them have "done time" and been demeaned and hardened by prison. But last night they might have been children. There was a contagious simplicity and delight loudly filling the house as we strung popcorn and cranberries and sang carols. Several men told me they hadn't even been *near* a Christmas tree since they were children. When we were ready to leave there were heartfelt hugs all around. ("Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.")

This has been a year of hopes and fears. It took more than half of it to find a job. (As a friend, who works in "human resources", told me: "Fitz, *nobody* wants to hire a 55 year old man to do anything!") And even though I dug myself into a deep hole of debt, I can honestly say that I feel rich this Christmas, in ways that have nothing to do with income.

I am part of the Justice Education team at SAF, and work with groups of volunteers from businesses, schools and churches who do community service at one of our sites. Those include a dining room that serves 2,000 meals every day of the year, a free medical clinic, a social service center, a daytime hospitality center for seniors, an employment office, four drug and alcohol rehab programs - one of them a farm in Petaluma - a residence hotel for senior women, an enormous clothing and furniture program, a transitional house for women and that shelter, where a sweet old woman's rapt face on Tuesday evening made all the insanity from Washington seem irrelevant and connected me once again with a homeless baby in a stable, the original "stranger's guise".

You are in my heart these holy days, and always!

Fitz