



"Despite everything,
I believe that
people are really
good at heart."
Anne Frank

December, 2014

Friends:

In front of me, on my desk, are a stack of notes bearing quotes I've accumulated in the last twelve months. In spite of that prolonged preparation for this year's Christmas letter, I've struggled for many days, trying to pick the one that best matches my mood during these shorter days and longer nights. Finally, riding home on the bus last night, after our annual Solstice gathering outside City Hall (to honor the memory of those who have died on the streets this year) it dawned on me that the words I wanted weren't in that stack. Like that young Dutch Jewish girl, whose face and most famous diary entry are at the top of the page, I am, again, caught in the ambivalence of clinging to what is LIGHT, when around me is an awful lot of DARKNESS. It's a familiar Advent experience for all of us persons of conscience and faith: acknowledging so much indifference, cold-heartedness and outright evil, but not getting overwhelmed by it (and risking becoming what we hate!)

And may I say, with gratitude, that the main reason I am even *capable of trying* to live as one of the 'children of the light', is my good fortune to be a middle class American, surrounded by so many people who are really "good at heart". If I were desperately poor and homeless, like the 2,800 folks to whom we serve lunch every day at St. Anthony's, or the father of an unarmed teen shot dead by either a racist cop or by another kid whose gang turf I'd mistakenly violated, I'm not sure I'd be capable of any balance. Maybe I should stop watching the news. I can only guess what my neighbors think when they overhear me shouting obscenities at the TV. (A couple of recent outbursts. Learning - from the Senate report - that at the same time services for homeless veterans were being cut, our elected leaders found 80 million of our tax dollars to secure the services of a consulting firm to teach CIA personnel how to more effectively torture prisoners! And how about this one? The Governor of Indiana, rejecting food stamp funding for his own constituents - sending Hoosiers' own tax funds back to the Feds! - because he thought that having to find food on their own would "ennoble" them. Hey, Gov, I'll meet you in Indianapolis and show you some homeless folks searching for food in other people's garbage. I'm dying for you to enlighten me as to how that makes them superior persons!)

In a different light (literally and figuratively), here are some of the people and events that have brightened my soul in 2014.

On St. Francis Day (October 4th) we opened our new St. Anthony's Dining Room. It's a beautiful new space, with a kitchen to match. (For 60 years all those meals were prepared in a converted WWII U.S. Navy ship kitchen.) At the opening ceremonies our Executive Director said that the building (which includes 90 apartments of affordable housing for seniors) represents our "flag stuck in the

ground", declaring that there is still at least one neighborhood in this rapidly gentrifying city where poor people are still welcome.

On April 17th I passed the 25 year milestone living clean and sober. I am still a recovering alcoholic - inspired and encouraged by the courage and determination of so many friends and family who also continue to strive for serenity.

Every Thursday I have the privilege of helping my sister play "nanny" for her two granddaughters, Rowan and Teagan. They are 6 and 3, and full of awe and wonder and delight, and their sheer goodness *does* rub off on me. I'm always more light-hearted on the train coming back to the city after spending the day with them.

The deaths of various men and women (think Pete Seeger, Maya Angelou and so many others) have reminded us how much good can overflow from one person's life. (Can you imagine how much more fun heaven must be with both Robin Williams and Elaine Stritch as part of the mix?)

I continue to marvel at, and be inspired by, friends who are dealing with Cancer, Alzheimer's, Dementia, Depression and other assaults. (And did I mention the people who provide care for them? Talk about heroic beacons of light!)

Life continues to introduce me to sweet, tender, sensitive and loving people, like the folks I stood alongside last night at the memorial service - priests, nuns, rabbis, teachers, former colleagues and wonderful parents and fellow dreamers. A week ago I was on a bus on Market Street. It was the night when we were all waiting for "Stormageddon", the much anticipated mega storm. For days it was all people talked about. (Reminded me of one of my favorite TV shows, *GAME OF THRONES*, where they're always cautioning each other that "Winter is coming!") As we passed The Warfield, an old movie theater that's become one of the city's premiere rock concert venues. I was chatting with an older (i.e., my age) Black man and we both noted the totally unfamiliar name of the group advertised on the marquee, acknowledging that we must both be getting old. Across the aisle from us was an equally senior White woman, whose badly stained sweat pants and multiple scarves suggested she was probably homeless. When she overheard our chuckling about the strange group name, she rose and began a very loud speech about the crap kids are listening to these days and how the glory days of rock music are all in the past. As she got off at the next stop she turned to both of us, smiled and shouted "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, baby! In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida!" (For the younger folks reading this, that is the title track of an album from 1968 by Iron Butterfly. It was supposed to be called "In The Garden of Eden", but the band member who wrote the title on the pilot disc was stoned.)

As we prepare once again to celebrate the re-birth of light in our world (and that LIGHT which the darkness - still! - has never managed to put out), my holiday blessing to you is "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, Baby! In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida!"

With lots of love from the City of St. Francis,

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