

# “Behold!”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
24 December 2013  
Christmas Eve

## **READING**      “A Gift” by Nancy L. Dahlberg

It was Sunday. Christmas. Our family had spent the holidays in San Francisco with my husband’s parents. But in order for us to be back at work on Monday, we found ourselves driving the 400 miles home to Los Angeles on Christmas Day.

It is normally an 8-hour drive, but with kids it can be a 14-hour endurance test. When we could stand it no longer, we stopped for lunch in King City. This little metropolis is made up of six gas stations and three sleazy diners, and it was into one of these diners that the four of us trooped--road weary and saddle sore.

As I sat Erik, our 1-year-old, in a high chair, I looked around the room and wondered, “What am I doing in this place?”

The restaurant was nearly empty. We were the only family and ours were the only children. Everyone else was busy eating, talking quietly, aware perhaps that we were all somehow out of place on this special day, when even the cynical pause to reflect on peace and brotherhood.

My reverie was interrupted when I heard Erik squeal with glee, “Hithere.” (Two words he thought were one.) “Hithere” he pounded his fat baby hands—whack, whack—on the metal high chair tray. His face was alive with excitement, eyes wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled, and chirped, and giggled, and then I saw the source of the merriment...and my eyes could not take it all in at once.

A tattered rag of a coat—obviously bought by someone else eons ago—dirty, greasy, and worn...baggy pants--both they and the zipper at half-mast over a spindly body—toes that poked out of would-be shoes...a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over and a face like none other...gums as bare as Erik’s...hair uncombed, unwashed, and unbearable...whiskers too short to be called a beard, but way, way beyond a shadow, and a nose so varicose that it looked like the map of New York.

I was too far away to smell him--but I knew he smelled--and his hands were waving in the air, flapping about on loose wrists.

“Hi there baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster.”

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between “What do we do?” and “Poor devil.”

Erik continued to laugh and answer, “Hi, Hithere.” Every call was echoed. I noticed waitresses eyebrows shoot to their foreheads, and several people sitting near us “ahemed” out loud.

This old geezer was creating a nuisance with *my* beautiful baby.

I shoved a cracker at Erik, and he pulverized it on the tray. I whispered “Why me?” under my breath.

Our meal came, and the cacophony continued. Now the old bum was shouting from across the room: “Do ya know patty cake?...Atta boy... Do ya know peek-a-boo?...Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo!”

Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance, I was embarrassed. My husband, Dennis, was humiliated. Even our six-year-old said, “Why is that old man talking so loud?”

We ate in silence—all except Erik, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring applause of a skid-row bum.

Finally, I had enough. I turned the high chair. Erik screamed and clamored around to face his old buddy. Now I was mad.

Dennis went to pay the check, imploring me to “get Erik and meet me in the parking lot.”

I trundled Erik out of the high chair and looked toward the exit. The old man sat poised and waiting, his chair directly between me and the door.

“Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik.” I bolted for the door.

I soon became obvious that both the Lord and Erik had other plans.

As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back, walking to sidestep him--and any air he might be breathing. As I did so, Erik, all the while with his eyes riveted to his best friend, leaned far over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's "pick me up" position.

In a split second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight I came eye-to-eye with the old man. Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum's eyes both asked and implored, "Would you *let* me hold your baby?" There was no need for me to answer since Erik propelled himself from my arms to the man's.

Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship. Erik laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, and pain, and hard labor--gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back.

I stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm and commanding voice, "You take care of this baby."

Somehow I managed, "I will", from a throat that contained a stone.

He pried Erik from his chest--unwillingly, longingly--as though he was in pain. "God bless you ma'm. You've given me my Christmas gift."

I said nothing more than a muttered thanks.

With Erik back in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly and why I was saying, "My God, oh God, forgive me."

## Homily: “Behold!”

*And behold an angel of the Lord stood before them,  
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,  
and they were greatly afraid.*

*Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold,  
I bring you good tidings of great joy...*

Be not afraid. Behold!

The angel really nails it.

The angel, with glory shining all about,  
makes the timeless connection that exists between fear and wonder.

Be not afraid. Behold!

Now, that’s easier said than done.  
Especially, I’m guessing, for an angel of the Lord.

But when we mere mortals are greatly afraid,  
there’s often little room left in our lives for wonder.

It can be hard to believe, whenever we’re feeling full of fear,  
that somehow glad tidings of joy are just about to break out all around.

Yet, fear and wonder are so intimately woven together  
in our world and in our lives.

The one tiny word in the English language  
that captures this strange connection is awe—  
that feeling of deep reverence  
that is made up of both fear and wonder.

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I felt a good measure of such awe myself yesterday afternoon,  
strolling the icy streets just a few blocks north of here.

Massive, majestic old trees encased with a shining shell of ice

were alight in stunning shades of pink and orange and purple  
as the low solstice sun made its way to the horizon.

And, yet, there in the magical, mystical air of twilight,  
I could also see around me the evidence of nature's mighty, destructive powers  
in the large tree branches newly shattered on the ground  
and in whole trees felled across the streets.

As I basked in the glory shining all around me in that strange scene,  
I was terrified, too—fearful that another tree could come down on me  
at any moment!

It was, quite literally, a scene of terrible beauty,  
not unlike what we've all seen around the city over these last three days.

It was a sacred moment made up of fear and wonder.

And though the danger was, to some degree, real,  
the task in that moment was to “be not afraid” and behold!

Now, to be sure, whenever I did stop to gaze upward,  
I was careful not to stand directly underneath  
something that might squish me in an instant.

And when walking, I did my best to move at a good clip, even on the ice.

Fear can be an incredibly helpful thing to feel.

But, even so, I paused here and there to let the scene take my breath away  
and feel myself connected to the larger story of my life (and our life) on this  
planet.

In doing that, there were glad tidings to be found.

As I made my way on, I reflected about how that walk  
was not unlike the journey we all take through this life.

Basking in beauty, while afraid of the fact that it will end.

Indeed, says the poet, it is a fearful thing to love what can be lost.  
Connection. Relationships. Life itself.

And yet this is the grand bargain of being alive:  
that everything is on loan, a gift given to us only for a time.

A bargain that asks that we be not afraid and behold.

How very helpful it would be if we had an angelic choir  
to follow us around and launch forth into a beautiful reminder  
to do just that from time to time.

How encouraging it would be to have the heavenly hosts break into song  
and help us remember that in the grip of life's terrible beauty,  
our high calling is: to "be not afraid" and behold.

That doesn't mean to be free of fear, but to be free from its hold over us.

To open ourselves to each present moment, whatever it may bring,  
and bask in the complicated wonder of it all.

To live with genuine awe, in all of its awesome, awful, awe-filled meaning.

To hold both fear and wonder  
in the perennial tension that is at the heart of being human,  
and know that, all things considered,  
we wouldn't trade it for the world.

For in that tension between fear and wonder  
is so much of what we love in this life:  
the emotionally charged experience people so often report  
when they bring a child into the world,  
when they make the leap of faith that is marriage,  
or when they bid farewell at the end to those whom they love.

Moments, all, of deep connection between  
feelings of fear and feelings of wonder.

Moments when we can't completely grasp whether our tears  
are those of joy, or sorrow, or some bittersweet mixture of both.

Moments filled with awe in its truest sense, when we feel fully alive.

Moments we learn to savour for all that they are worth,  
when we come to truly know that they won't last forever.

Such is the great glad tidings that I believe comes to us  
from that place of awe, where fear and wonder meet:  
that it is life's fragility that gives it such tremendous worth.

When we come to honour that fragility, with all due reverence,  
incredible things can and do happen.

We see the precious quality of our lives on this planet.  
We see the connections that exist between us all.  
We come to know that our lives and well-being  
are inextricably bound up with those of others.

And when we know that and feel it in our fragile, vulnerable bones,  
we reach out—just as some fifty families in this congregation have done  
in the past 24 hours since I put out a call to help out  
and house others in our congregation  
who may be living right now without power in their homes.

Be not afraid. Behold!

Behold what can happen.

Wonder at what is possible when we act in spite of our fears.

That's what I love in the story I shared earlier about the family in the diner.

It was a child who led with wonderment,  
to reach out and forge connection  
beyond his parents' fears and judgment.

With his simple "Hithere," he built a bridge  
to overcome the distance between him and the man.

And in doing so, he opened his own mother's heart  
to the better person she wanted and knew herself to be.

Behold!

That little boy named Erik wasn't the first baby in history to do that,  
and he certainly won't be the last.

Indeed, the awe that rightly accompanies the birth of every child  
has the power to change hearts the world over for good.

Of course, the enduring story we celebrate this night  
is but one of history's most compelling examples.

When those shepherds abiding in the fields with their flocks heard the happy  
news, they went with haste to share what they had learned.

May we do likewise.

May we open our hearts to the in-breaking of wonder,  
and let it at least temper our fears.

May the good news that we hear  
inspire us to cherish life and those we love even more so.

May it empower us to reach out to others in compassion and understanding,  
becoming messengers of love and light.

May it encourage us to be angels in our own right,  
calling out to others to be not afraid,  
but to behold the glory that is shining all around!

Amen.