

Linda Simmons
The Paradox of Christmas
Dec. 22, 2013

Last year, I attended *The Black Nativity* by Langston Hughes, which is a retelling of the Nativity story with an entirely African-American cast. The gospel song-play, as it is called, was sung by the company Black and produced by the National Center of Afro-American Artists at the Main Stage Theater in Roxbury. The show begins with the theater completely darkened. Barefoot singers clad only in white robes and carrying electric candles walk in, singing the classic hymn "Go Tell It On the Mountain." They fill the stage with their elegance, circling and singing and then Mary and Joseph break out of the group and seat themselves center stage.

Mary is very pregnant with baby Jesus. After several songs are sung, Joseph dramatically gestures knocking on door after door seeking shelter for Mary to birth their baby and is turned away. Suddenly, unable to contain his grief and fear for his wife and coming child any longer, he breaks into a tormented dance while Mary, seated center stage, clutches her belly and arches her back as her contractions begin.

Finally, Mary gets up and pushes Joseph off stage in the frenzy of her deepening labor. then 5 or 6 djembe drummers come onto the upper stage in African ceremonial dress and begin drumming and Mary fills the stage with her labored dancing.

The stage, previously lit with orange and blue lights, is now bathed in a deep red hue. Fiercely, in pain, clutching her pregnant belly, Mary pounds her feet over and over again on the stage, she thrusts her hands into the air, and she implores the audience, reaching out to us from one corner of the stage to the next, come, help me she gestures wildly, come help me. I looked around, ready to jump up. Shouldn't we help her? Joseph is clearly of no use! Really women, it's up to us now right?

Mary's dance went on for maybe 8 minutes, the tempo of the drums rising, Mary whirling more and more out of control. Of course we all know where it ends right?

A baby would be born but if you have ever been present at a birth there is a moment inside of every labor that is the most stunningly mysterious that is ever known in which every assumption, every bit of what is known about all of life is suspended for only a few seconds but those seconds seem like eternity. There is this place that opens between all that is and all that might be, between here and there, between life and the eternal, between the real and the miraculous, and then a child is born....and breath fills the body of all who witness this again and sight fills the eyes again and all that we know to be true about time and gravity and biology returns and a child is born and it is still a miracle.

Watching this song-play and Mary's dance, I felt blessed by Mary who no longer felt a virgin to me, or maybe it is better said, who no longer needed to be a virgin because she became in the moments of that dance a woman and a mother and I knew her

and I know that she knew me, that she knew all of us.

And so it is almost Christmas morning and I wake up and look in the mirror and I see me and I know that the same ole' Christmas cookies will be waiting and the same ole Christmas conversations that I love and well, that I grow weary of participating in but walk right into and play my part in like I am a wind up toy in a Macy's display window, and like everyone else, I still want it all: the miracle, the newness, the moment in which life will be suspended for only a few seconds just like it was when watching what I felt so clearly to be Mary laboring her baby that evening during the Black Nativity: the time between life and the eternal, the touching of a place that opens between all that is and all that might be, between here and there, between life and the miraculous...because it is almost Christmas and Christmas is that eternal birthing moment you see. It is that eternal birthing of the promise of love, of forgiveness, of a beauty beyond all hope, of a light that pierces every darkness.

Christmas is in its core the promise that life comes again, that life will always come again, and we want to touch it and be changed by it, to be made new by it and have everything around us made new by it too.

And perhaps this can all be so if we enter the Christmas miracle through another door, through the door of our own hearts. Let me take you on another journey for a few moments, not quite as dramatic as the one the Black Nativity took me on, but full of its own kind of mystery nonetheless. Join me if you will for a moment on a journey. I ask you to put your hand on your heart for a moment, wherever you are, put your hand on your heart. Imagine your heart beating there beneath your ribs sending the life force through your whole body, just imagine the working of your heart for just a moment.

Take a deep breath and just be with your own physical heart for this moment. Lower your eyes and focus on your one beautiful heart. And now imagine with me for just a moment the day of your own birth, that there was a day that you were born, that on one glorious day, your mother went into labor and danced your birth no less dramatically than Mary on that stage and I assure you that djembe drums beat just as loudly in her head for much longer than 8 minutes and that for her and for others there was a moment when the most stunning mystery occurred in which every assumption, every bit of what is known about all of life was suspended for only a few seconds but those seconds seem like eternity...and this place opened between all that is and all that might be, between here and there, between life and the eternal between the real and the miraculous, and you were born....

and breath filled the body of all who waited for you again and sight filled the eyes of all who waited for you again with all that they knew to be true about time and gravity and biology and you were born and you are a miracle, and you are a miracle.

You see, that's what we forget every Christmas morning when we look in the mirror. We forget that we are a miracle. We forget that we are part of the Christmas story, that we are part of the life of Jesus, that Jesus called to us as surely as he called to any other when he said that the kingdom of heaven is within us. We are all the sons and daughters of a mystery, born to a mother that labored us as she was held between the eternal and the present and her body was broken wide open and we came into this world and we are still here, we are still here, right now. How miraculous!

Our hearts still beat, they beat as one this almost Christmas morning, and will beat as one on Christmas morning as we eat the same ole wonderful Christmas cookies, who would have it any other way! And we listen to the same old family stories and play the same ole roles like wind up toys in a Macy's store window and if we would have that part of the story another way, here is the good news, we can, we can have that part of the story another way. We can change because that is part of the gift, part of what it means to be a miracle, we can be reborn all the time.

This reminds me of when I had Lora and Paul Stewart sign as new members in our church records book. I was still new here and I had them sign under the new births heading rather than membership. When I told them, they told me they were the first reborn UUs in all of history!

We can change our script, no one else's, but we can change our script, we can, even when we are sure it is ole' uncle Ned that should change, we can change. We can. It is our part of the gift.

Annie Dillard writes in her short story, *God in the Doorway*: I am still running, running from that knowledge, that eye, that love from which there is no refuge. I believe the love from which there is no refuge lives right in our bodies, right here in our very flesh and can guide us to the miracle of our one glorious life. Look in the mirror today and see the wonder of Christmas on your own face. It is surely there as you are surely here and we are all so blessed that you are.

Merry Christmas and Amen!