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Issue # 64
Christmas Edition

Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

My, what a month! Before I get into the crazy adventures here, I do hope you are all doing well and preparing for the upcoming feast day of Christmas! It seems that the secular world makes it harder and harder to celebrate Christmas in its rightful season and you can buy Christmas décor as early as July! I don't understand what the rush is to have Christmas start sooner, life is just so much better when you take it one holiday/feast day at a time. I like when things are in their proper time and place 😊 This year, not being pregnant and dealing with morning sickness, we have had more time to intentionally prepare for Christmas and commemorate Advent. It is quite lovely. We have our advent wreath out and are slowing lighting more and more of the candles and we decided to decorate our Christmas tree in stages, one task each week of Advent to show the progression of leading up to Christmas. As our 'penance' for this season we have decided to eliminate our morning snooze button and to get up as soon as the 6:30am alarm sounds. It has been hard for sure, but aren't we supposed to do hard things sometimes?

Now, on to the adventures that this past month has brought. Can anyone guess what I have been doing the past month? If you know me well, you may have already predicted this. I am TEACHING! Yes, I am back in the classroom again. God just doesn't seem to want my teaching career to end. This time though, He decided to really shake things up and I am teaching not in my normal age range of 7th – 12th grades, but a very different thing all together. I am now a 2nd and 3rd grade teacher 😊 Unexpectedly our very experienced 2nd and 3rd grade teacher ended up in the hospital and will not be able to return this year. All at once the school was in need of a teacher so Monday night I get a call asking if I can start the next morning. Obviously, I said yes. So the next morning I packed up my little dude and we taught. The best way to get 2nd and 3rd graders quiet is to have a sleeping baby in the classroom by the way 😊 I only teach the morning classes from 8am – noon and another one of the moms covers the afternoon. Now, before you freak out, this is just temporary, the school is looking for a full-time solution but obviously it is a hard time of year for that. I really have been enjoying it though and getting better and better at understanding what they can do. This week I even got to teach some Algebra to the 3rd graders 😊

There are some characters in the class for sure! One student is simply BURSTING with things to share, another is always ailing until it is recess time, and yet another recognized Mozart's 'Spring' when I had it playing in the Library. Definitely an assortment. I get to have some great conversations with them though and get asked all sorts of things such as, "Are you a grandma?" (as I am holding my one and only child in my arms....) or "Do you walk to lose weight?" (yes, I still have plenty of baby weight to shed...). But there are some precious moments such as when we talked about the Incarnation and one little girl says, "I would have said yes to God to be the Mother of Jesus. I LOVE babies!" and a little boy followed shortly after that with, "I would have married Mary and not hesitated like St. Joseph did when he knew she was pregnant. I like taking care of babies!" As you can imagine both of these students love finishing their work early in order to have time to play with Hal 😊 He has so many adopted big siblings now and I am fairly confident we will not be having the stranger danger phase any time soon as he is well- socialized on a regular basis and LOVES when anyone talks to him.

Of course there is the usual busyness of the season with Thanksgiving dinner (which I cooked the turkey and stuffing for and they both turned out great!) and then preparing for Christmas with buying gifts and decorating and getting Christmas cards ready to send out. All in all it has certainly been the craziest month I have had in a while and I am very much looking forward to vacationing in MN for a few weeks after Christmas and enjoying some good company and no place I really HAVE to be.

Wishing you all a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! As always, I would love to hear from you and how your 2022 was 😊

P.S. I know this is getting out a little late for the 'Christmas Traditions' section but perhaps you can still do a few of them or keep them in mind for next year, or adapt them for another holiday. Have fun!

Christmas Traditions to Consider

Traditions are a very important part of life. They not only add to the meaning of a feast or special occasion but are also a source of enthusiasm and excitement. Can you imagine Christmas without gifts? Even though gifts are not the point of Christmas they have become a meaningful tradition to celebrate the gift of Christ's birth. I am sure you associate more than just gifts with Christmas. Perhaps when you think of Christmas you imagine Grandma's sugar cookies, going to midnight Mass, singing Christmas carols as a family, getting new pajamas, or whatever your family traditions are! Here is a list of some additional traditions that you can consider or suggest to your parents to make this year a little extra special.

- 1) **Put on a Christmas or New Year's skit.** We did this for YEARS growing up! It was tradition in our house to invite the godparents over for New Year's Day to celebrate. Having 15 kids in our family meant a lot of godparents with all their kids too! It was a blast! And at the ripe age of about 10, I decided to put on a show for this grand occasion and I wrote, directed, and starred in our first ever New Year's Play. It was just a silly comedy, but it was enjoyed by all. As the years progressed we got more sophisticated and rigged up red curtains and everything and did productions of classic Christmas tales such as 'The Little Match Girl' and 'The Three Trees'. It was such fun 'rehearsing' beforehand and making costumes and sets! So, this year, give it a try! Find a story, cast your family members, and put together a show for your friends, grandparents, cousins, or neighbors. Even little ones can do it! If they are too young to memorize, have them dress up and act out as you narrate the story. These are truly some of my family's fondest memories!



Our Cast for 'A Little Match Girl' ~ 2007

- 2) **Have an Epiphany Gift.** Most people open gifts Christmas Day and then spend the rest of the Christmas season enjoying them and the following feast of Epiphany gets a little overlooked. What if there was a special gift that was saved just for Epiphany? My family would have a 'family gift' we could open in Epiphany. It would often be a game or books, or some such thing that could be shared by all and it helped us to remember to commemorate the feast of the 3 kings.



- 3) **Don't put Baby Jesus in the manger until Christmas Morning.** I know a lot of people already do this and that is great! Every house should have a manger scene set out some time during Advent and there should be just one piece missing, Baby Jesus (you can have the kings set somewhere else as though still 'traveling' to the stable as well). The first thing that should happen on Christmas morning as a family is to put Baby Jesus in his place in the manger. It is always a special moment and you could add to it by singing a favorite Christmas hymn (mine is Away in a Manger).



- 4) **Designate a day to go look at Christmas lights.** Some cities have a large display open to the public and this makes for a great family destination on Gaudete Sunday, the last Sunday of Advent, Christmas Eve,



or whatever day you all choose to do it on. If your town/city doesn't have a display, find a local neighborhood that does. Some people do an excellent job of Christmas lights. Our neighbor growing up had a HUGE display that we always drove past after Midnight Mass before we went home to open presents.

Learning to Love Reading

My sister recently wrote this essay concerning the development of her love for reading. It brought back a lot of good memories for me, and I thought I would share it with you in this issue.

Minnesotan Made

AnneMarie Gerads

In our house in the countryside of central Minnesota, where I was born, the fifth of fifteen children, in 1997, we grew up to the reading of books. With so many children at home and my mother tackling homeschooling us as well, she didn't have much extra time to sit down and satisfy our endless thirst for stories; however, that office was filled by another. Looking back, I realized that we were more spoiled than I thought; though not spoiled in the typical way.

We had that grand and glorious gift of our own personal great-uncle; or, at least, he seemed to be there personally for our own enjoyment. It was he who first brought the joy of reading into my life. His defining virtue was that he seemed to have an inexhaustible endurance for reading to us. I don't really remember if there was a day in my early childhood of which he was not a part; he seemed as much a staple to the family as my own parents were. However, I did know that there was a distinction, that he wasn't really one of the mundane family circle. For as much as was there every morning, or every afternoon (or at least so it appeared to my childish mind) he would disappear every evening, chugging away in his rusty, old, beaten-up, yellow Ram Charger. I have not seen one of those since his passing some ten or fifteen years ago; I think that the uniqueness of his mode of transportation gave it the charm of Cinderella's own coach, of whom he read to us so often.

Uncle Hubert, for such we called this dear old man, although he was in fact our great uncle, didn't seem to really have a place among the grownups; or maybe I just never thought so because we so completely commandeered him as our own. Perhaps it was because he was reaching an age in the circle of life where he seemed once more like us than like the grownups.

With a roar from the muffler announcing his entrance into the yard, the anticipation would begin. Twinkling eyes began to peep over the windowsill. Then, with a thumping up the stairs, in he came. His crutches were soon safely stashed behind the door, and he himself deposited in the chair nearest it. Nimble fingers searched around in his shirt pocket, looking for the Tootsie Rolls which the already-watering mouths were anticipating; though a playful pinch from a pliers which was always hung from his belt was sometimes a reward.

Then, up onto his lap we clambered and climbed; though, being the fifth and with more following behind me throughout the years, real estate was a hot commodity. I don't know what the record was for number of children on his lap, but we made good use of it; some of the older kids who had outgrown that loitered behind his chair. Some days, for one reason or another, there would be only one contender for that coveted place on his lap, and then oh, what bliss! Then all difficulties were removed together! For, with several kids wanting to hear a story, of course then there were several ideas of what that story should be. I don't know if we ever came to blows over it, but my great uncle was always very calm and sedate throughout. Only if we really couldn't decide amongst ourselves would he step in as the Supreme and Serene Judge, choosing one book for immediate perusal while the other was set aside with the promise that it would in turn be read next.



We spent countless hours employed in such delicious occupation; looking back now, I really don't understand how he had the patience to read to us for so long, and often times it was old classics that we would revisit again and again. He seemed to find them as innocently inexhaustible as we did!

This joy and child-likeness pervaded his very being and we didn't always simply sit still while he was reading to us; sometimes he would employ us as well. One of our sporadic tasks was to give him a haircut. The problem, or rather the alleviation, of this task was that he was bald. That, however, did not daunt us- at least not much. Off we rushed at the request to get our tiny pair of scissors, standing on a chair behind him to peer down upon his pate. There were, in fact, tiny hairs up there, interspersed here and there among the expanse. So, clip, clip, we went; though I am surprised that no blood was drawn.

At other times, he would joke that he wanted his hair done like ours, so off we dashed, returning with a multi-colored clown wig in tow from our massive Dress-up box. He sat patiently while we crowned him, proceeding to pigtail the colorful, tight curls, giggling furiously the while. One of my fondest pictures is him sitting at our dining room table, princess tiara perched atop his head, with me on his knee and book in hand; reading from it as I listened intently.



My love of books grew with me, and I was soon devouring them on my own once I could read, though I couldn't quite replace that blissful feeling of sitting on Uncle Hubert's lap as he read. I began to work my own way through the short picture books on the children's bookcase in the living room, then moved on to the chapterbooks on the shelves lining the hallway upstairs. I loved puzzles, so some of my favorites were Nancy Drew, then the Hardy Boys once I made my way through those, and eventually Father Brown and Sherlock Holmes once I expanded my attention span. I was a fairly quick learner, so I would try to finish my homework by noon, then curl up in a remote corner with a book. Books were my constant companions. Mass was a forty-five minute drive away, so I would read a book on the way there and back. When I went to my cousin's I would bring a book to read in preference to playing Barbie dolls with her.

I tried to do most things with a book in hand, and I got fairly good at the art of multitasking as I got a little bit older. I must have been around ten, but my sister still tells the story of the time that I was tasked with feeding the baby. Book in one hand, and spoon in the other, I dutifully began, and my multitasking was set to work. I am afraid that I was more attentive to the book than to the baby, though, for it was only once my sister pointed it out to me that I realized the baby was crying. I was still aiming the spoonfuls aright, but baby wasn't happy with the indifferent air with which I was applying them, and that although I was technically taking care of her, my mind was in a whole new world.

In spite of my love of books, it took me a while to really appreciate what my mother had provided for us in that domain, and how blessed we were to have so many and such good books! I am sure that there are better out there, but I do know that starting from my great uncle's knee, we children were given a genuine love of knowledge for which I am truly thankful.

I am all for reading but boy could it be frustrating to deal with her as a sister some days! You were always having to chase her nose out of a book! We did grow up with a great selection of books though and I intend to make sure that my children are able to have the same experience. And Uncle Hubert was undoubtably the BEST story reader. When my nieces and nephew come over they always beg me to read them stories but after half an hour my poor little voice is gettign tired and my energy levels drained and I think back to those days when he literally read to us for HOURS! I sure wish I knew his secret ☺

Uncle Hubert not only read books to us and fed us tootsie rolls, but also introduced us to other cultural things such as how to play Cribbage and various quotes from Shakespeare. There are still times when I am surprised someone does not recognize the quote, "Parting is such sweet sorrow" for that was how Uncle Hubert would dismiss us nearly ever time he said good-bye. Then I realize that not everyone had a great – uncle Hubert to teach them such things, and then part of me feels sorry for them and hopes that they have someone in their life like him for I truly could not imagine my childhood without him.

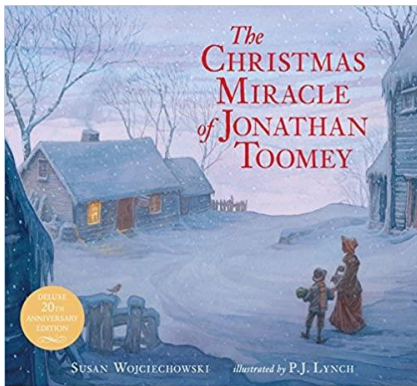
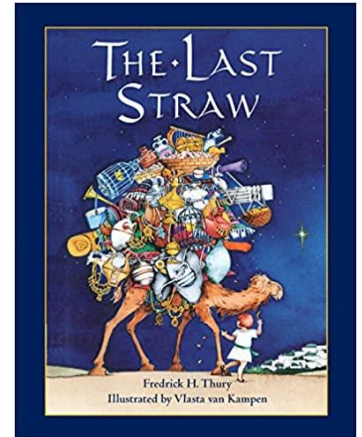
Read me or Rue It

Here are a few of my favorite Christmas stories that are fun for the whole family. (Hint: these are great last minute Christmas/Epiphany gifts 😊)

The Last Straw by Fredrick Thury

An entertaining and uplifting account of one of the camels that accompanied the wise men to Bethlehem. This elderly camel is not as wise as one would expect and foolishly brags about his abilities. However, he finds peace and rest when his journey is rewarded with a gentle touch from a baby in a manger.

P.S. There is another lovely Christmas story with the same title but by author Paula McDonald. It relates the story of a family that changes their hearts during the Christmas season. The tradition they start of placing a piece of straw in the manger scene to prepare a bed for Christ was one that my family practiced growing up. However, it is out of print and is rather expensive. So, if you find a copy, I very much recommend buying it!

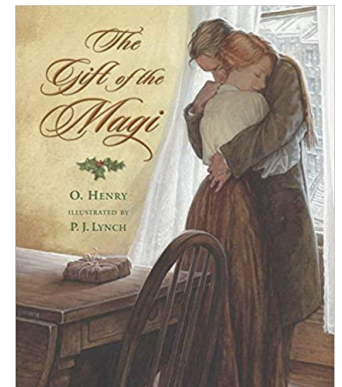


The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey by Susan Wojciechowski

One of my favorite stories of all time, this tale of a crochety old carpenter who is asked to complete a manger scene for a widow and her son will surely help to bring the Christmas spirit to your own home. The simple requests of the child as the carpenter creates each piece show a deeper understanding of the importance of this little child who came to be born in the manger. The artwork in this book is simply beautiful. It is about \$17 on Amazon but well worth the investment in my opinion. Beautiful books are so important and there are few that do such a lovely job as this one.

The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry

This moving story of the love and generosity of a couple during the Christmas season is a wonderful example to all of us. This was one of the stories we adapted for our New Year's play. You can find this story in many collections of short stories as well as on its own. Amazon has a lovely illustrated version of it that makes it more enjoyable for younger readers as the language is a little more elevated and more suited to teens/adults. If you are not familiar with this story, you need to look it up! Christmas is about love, the love God has for us, so much so that He sent His only Son to earth, and this story is the perfect example of living out that true love in our own lives.



I would love to hear what you all have been reading! What are some of your favorite Christmas stories? I have been reading Christmas stories with the students during Advent and I have been finding some very lovely books! Now I want to go buy them all for my own library 😊 We own a decent amount of books but there are always more wonderful ones that I want to get! Anyone else have this problem? Always wanting to buy more books than you have shelf space for 😊

“A book is a gift you can open again and again.”

– Garrison Keillor