

“Climbing a Christmas Tree”

For quite a few years now, instead of cutting a tree to “celebrate life” (truly a bizarre act), I have climbed up a fir, pine, oak or alder on the day of my birth—December 25.

Growing up in the Puget Sound region and living the latter half of my life in the Bay Area, I am addicted to trees. It’s all Treeland to me. I spent hours up in trees as a boy and felt the exhilaration of sitting high to spy—to see farther than most ground-bound folks. I still can’t name every evergreen or conifer, towering giant or tiny growth, but I can name the gifts they give me: living breath, a place to think and not think, a reminder to look higher, a need to keep going up. My walks in the woods have fully replaced everything faith once gave.

At some point over the last 25 years it hit me like a brick knocked by reindeer off the chimney: Why on earth do we kill anything we can (including our bank accounts) in this season of green and snow and peaceful silence in the woods? Why on earth do we slaughter countless animals and trees and call that “Peace on Earth”? I have always known the answer: Why on *earth*? Because we’d rather think of heaven. Earth is dirty and dusty, dangerous and full of death— it’s just so earthy! The angels are calling us higher to heaven, are they not? No, but the birds are, the mountains, the rooted trees—the true heralds of this beautiful season when Nature is fully unwrapped, naked and seductive. The natural presents are free, not gold or glittery, but endlessly enticing to the wonder of Winter, here in the only home and heaven we have.

I chose to cut down the tree of faith rather than a living tree. Now, December means so much more to me. It means avoiding the black fridays, blue light specials and red stoplights of traffic jams as much as possible. It means staying away from the crowds herding in to store sales and sanctuary tales. I love some of the lights and songs. I suppose I’ll never let go of a few old tunes. Those Christmas Eve candlelight services I led with a pastor friend for years held some beautiful moments. But how dull and fairly depressing the old rituals and ancient words read in darkened chapels seem now.

None of that can hold a candle to the wild smells and sights and full sensual enjoyment of this time of year when the pageantry goes right by our windows and doors. The choirs have real wings, the secular scriptures are written in the rain and rivers, the snows and blows. The sermons are the best kind of all: silent.

My Christmas Baby blog is one place I can express an abiding appreciation for the natural gifts of the season and explore better ways to “do Christmas” than the artificial (and deadly) options we’ve been handed. As a child who shares the traditional day of nativity, I would say that the fairy tale of the Christchild has us hoodwinked. If it was about a poor, homeless child born of rebellious teens in an oppressive society, a minority kid whose cradle was a damp and dirty cow trough in a barn—gawd, one might almost believe there was something quite amazing about to happen. But we’ve been bamboozled into purity, piety and a Baby God wrapped in ribbon and tinsel and stuffed under a fast-dying tree with a starry mess on top. Kinda pretty, but actually quite ugly. I once re-wrote the story as a local news item and read it to prisoners on Christmas. When I finished, one man asked me, with wide-eyes and serious face, if my non-supernaturalized story was true! I smiled.

To climb and not cut a tree in this darker, wetter time of year, is risky. If I slip and fall, chances are the slick and sticky arms would not catch me; I would hit the roots and end my life on the same day it began. I have no fear with that. What shakes me more is the thought that I once gave up this exhilarating participation in Nature, this wonderful annual experience of life and living, these virescent living trees, for dead trees and a December dream.

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