

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
20 December, 2009

Gifts
for *Lessons and Carols*

Think with me for just a few moments: What comes to mind when I say, *Tell me about a really great gift you've received.*

I think first of books and music and camping equipment:

My great grandmother giving me piano lessons.

My grandmother giving me a Hardy Boys mystery.

Kem giving me *The Oxford English Dictionary* ... admitting to which seals my fate as a nerd. And did I mention that I was so excited when I opened it I *wept*? Be afraid.

And I think of getting the complete collection of Cat Stevens' music - also from Kem - and, from my mom, over the course of my childhood, really nice hiking boots, my first down sleeping bag, a bookcase (there's a theme here).

But when I take this question deeper - *Tell me about a really great gift you've received* - I remember gifts of time: presents of presence.

My grandfather: Getting up early and sharing the whacky breakfast he always made for us: a soft-boiled egg, supermarket coffee roll, stinky blue cheese, squares of Hersey's milk chocolate, and warm orange juice (his had whiskey in it). Playing marble roll and Chinese checkers together. Walking up the long hill to visit the ducks on the pond at Menotomy Rocks park.

Mr Lemaire: my sixth grade teacher, working with three of us to make Dylan Thomas' *A Child's Christmas in Wales* into a play for our class. Dr. Nicosen: leading our high school English class in Thoreau's footsteps to Walden Pond, and showing us where his bean field had really been planted ... which, to our delight, was not where the national park service said it was (and the sign is still wrong!).

My mind goes to places as varied as a hospital bed, Kem sitting beside me as I recovered from shoulder surgery; and a wintry sunrise in the Berkshires, which our junior high youth group advisor, Pat Green, had awakened us to see, a gift in a gift.

When we start talking about gifts from this perspective, presents of presence, we know exactly what it is we should be giving.... Mary talks about the hell of alcoholism and the simple but profound joy of piling into a car with her new friends in AA, driving through the suburbs to look at Christmas lights. Bob recalls an empty beach, where he walked through his grief hour after hour, day after day, after a death in the family; a rotation of friends never left him alone. But there doesn't need to be a tragedy for us to give this kind of gift, to *be* this kind of gift.

One of the best gifts I ever received came at the holidays many years ago, when I put electric candles in every window of the house; our younger daughters helped. Not. It took forever. As darkness fell, I bundled them into their snowsuits, told them to close their eyes, and carried them out the front door and into the street, one on each hip. One, two, three, *open!* They were too young to have been able to imagine the full effect of light in the darkness. So they did what so many girls do: they *screamed*. Really loudly. It was profoundly satisfying. Not the screaming! The surprise. The wonder. The sheer, unadulterated joy at the gift of making light in the darkness.

My spiritual companions, in this season of both heightened expectations and deepened disappointment, let's make presents of our presence and light the darkness in someone else's life. A smile is like a lighthouse. A kind word could make all the difference. It's a spiritual practice, with bonus points for gifting a stranger. And, yes, it's magical; the biggest gift is reserved for us, after all: there will be more love, more joy, and more peace.