

Bringing Christmas Home

Memories and Stories

by

Friends and Members of

Westminster Presbyterian Church

December 2010

*This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the inception of Christmas Dinners at Westminster. You can read a bit more history of the dinners in the first Remembrance on page two, written by Dureen Ruff. The theme for our thirtieth anniversary is **Bringing Christmas Home**. As we planned this celebration we invited members and friends of Westminster to tell us a remembrance of a Christmas that is dear to their heart. In the pages that follow you will find a variety of stories --visions from childhood and family traditions that have passed through generations and spanning oceans and continents. It is our hope that these stories will stimulate your own remembrances of Christmas, of family gatherings and of the love indelibly stamped in your heart through the celebration of Jesus' birth.*

Westminster Christmas Dinner Memories

Dureen Ruff

Since 1980, the first weekend in December has been marked on our calendar as a very special time. That weekend (with few exceptions) has been the date of the Westminster Christmas Dinners. It was Dr. Meisel's wish, at that time, that we have a social event that would bring together our Westminster community, beyond the sanctuary and classrooms, for a time of fellowship to celebrate the Christmas season. As it is for many other Westminster families, this event has become an important part of the Ruff family's annual Christmas traditions.

It has now been 30 years since that first gathering which included a simple buffet dinner served from long tables in the Cloister Hall, joyful and familiar music and words presented on the stage.... and especially, in our beautifully decorated Great Hall... the sharing of personal Christmas stories by members as they enjoyed food and fellowship.

In those earliest years, I loved helping with the decorating of the tables and the room, but in 1986, I volunteered to chair the event because I had discovered a little book titled "Let's Keep Christmas" and I thought it would be the perfect vehicle to build a Christmas program around. It was written by Kathryn Marshall, the wife of the Rev. Dr. Peter Marshall who also wrote "A Man Called Peter" which was a very popular movie in the 50's starring Michael Todd.

The story was based on a sermon preached by Peter Marshall (a Scottish-American Presbyterian minister) about the celebration of Christmas and his concerns that this very special holiday (holy day) was being over commercialized and that we needed to return to our lovely traditions and "keep Christmas" as it was intended to be kept. Our Christmas Dinner theme was "Keeping Christmas" with John Heefner in a starring role, seated in a big wingback chair (his own) near a glowing "fireplace" and beautifully decorated tree, reading parts of Peter Marshall's Christmas sermon. As I recall the tree was from my husband Rick's tree farm and the program cover was designed by our artistic daughter Kris. It was indeed a family affair for the Ruffs and the Heefners.

Over those many years the Ruffs and Heefners have happily shared the responsibilities of chairing this event many times with the help of dedicated and talented Westminster members.

This year's Christmas Dinner theme of "Bringing Christmas Home" would certainly receive applause from Peter Marshall and Don Meisel.

What brings Christmas home for me, and always tugs at my heart, is the whole group singing of Silent Night in the softly lit space of the Great Hall.

Thelma Hunter

One of our enduring family memories is Christmas Eve at Westminster. In the good old days when all the Hunter boys followed their parents' plans with no question and no discussion, we started with a nice supper (not lutefisk), got comfortable on couches or floor to listen to Barrymore reciting "The Christmas Carol" by Dickens. We all knew the words and the inflections of that master storyteller as the years went by.

Then came the exciting part; getting dressed to go out at 9:30 at night, enjoying Christmas lights and finally entering the magic space that was Westminster. Jenny Cullen played the violin for years and hers was almost the first sound we heard. The pushing and jostling started because I had received my first (and only) mink coat and all four boys wanted to snuggle close and fall asleep! Somehow, each got a little piece of it.

When sons 5 & 6 came along, the first four were too old to care so each boy had a side to himself. It was serenely beautiful to be surrounded by boys who were quiet, content, absorbing the atmosphere of Christmas Eve at Westminster, ending with those magic words, "and now it is Christmas". Even now, we reminisce and speak "the words" and it still produces goose bumps.

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The Lost Was Found **Norma M. Serumgard**

Once upon a time *Norma Marilyn Enga Serumgard* was a little 4-year-old girl (1935). I grew up on a farm in southern Minnesota. We were eight miles from Minneecota, MN. and about ten miles from Ivanhoe, MN. We had a long driveway along the Lyon/Lincoln County line, down a hill to our farm house. Our playground was a twenty acre pasture with a spring-fed creek running through it.

In our family there were eight children. The oldest was a girl, and then there were those four boys. I came along next. A year or two later, two girls were born.

On the farm there were a variety of animals, but best of all we had a very special dog named *Mitzy!* *Mitzy* was a beautiful brownish-buff colored dog with soft long curly ears.

One day in late December, I asked my mother if I could get dressed and go to meet my brothers coming home from our country school. The school was about 1.5 miles from our home. There were several paths across the fields leading to and from the school. My mother helped me get dressed in my warm wool snowsuit that she had sewn for me. It was a beautiful sunny, quiet afternoon with lots of snow on the ground.

So my dog, *Mitzy* and I set out up the long driveway. After awhile I got tired and I dug a hole in the snow bank along the road and crawled in and fell fast asleep.

When it came to suppertime, the family started asking and looking for me. My mother thought I had come home with the boys as she said. She remembered me walking away up the driveway to meet the boys... So, some of the family raced up the driveway in search of me. It wasn't long before they spotted *Mitzy!* *Mitzy* had stayed with me the entire time and thus they were able to find me nearly buried in the snow and still fast asleep.

My mother said it was the best Christmas present ever, and all thanks to our dog **MITZY!** I got thawed out and was given a lot of caring love from my whole family.

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Have A Musical Christmas!

Marge Carter

Each Christmas day at our house, family and friends gather mid-afternoon around our dining room table for a Christmas feast. And after the dishes are cleared, we adjourn to the living room for an evening of music and conversation. Everyone has an opportunity to choose a carol or popular Christmas song—and, if desired, to play a rhythm instrument of choice.

There are sleigh bells, tambourines, maracas, claves, drums, triangles, cymbals, and even a cowbell. When my younger brother David was alive, he would proudly and skillfully play his snare drum. Those present who play piano or guitar provide accompaniments (as they are so moved) for the singing.

To include everyone in the fun, we supply the words on a song sheet—and also have several copies of “Carolers’ Favorites” for those who want to sing parts. A few popular choices are “Deck the Halls;” “Sleep, Holy Babe;” “Winter Wonderland;” and, especially when children are present, “Jingle Bells.” Our Musical Christmas usually ends with the singing of “Silent Night” in four-part harmony.

Having a Musical Christmas dates back to my childhood, as I grew up in the Salvation Army (Dad was a corps officer—a minister) and my musical training as an instrumentalist and a vocalist started early. My family played trios and quartets in front of the S.A. Christmas kettles—and we often sang in nursing homes and for service clubs.

Last Christmas, with several choir singers present (one from far away), we featured vocal solos, trios and quartets, as well as a piano solo (Bill playing his favorite, “Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas”), and even a reading of Robert Frost’s poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” accompanied by beautiful illustrations to match the blanket of snow outside.

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A Childhood Memory of Christmas

Marie Kruskop

I grew up in Redwood Falls, Minnesota, a lovely little town in southwestern Minnesota located on the Minnesota River. My church home was the First Presbyterian Church (though, to my knowledge there was no Second Presbyterian Church). I was baptized and confirmed there, and it is a place I still feel welcomed when I return home. It is a place with many fond memories for me, one of which is Christmas Eve - complete with a children's pageant, not unlike ours here at Westminster, though on a bit smaller scale! After the pageant, we would each receive a small white bag from the local Ben Franklin store, filled to overflowing with old-time Christmas candy - ribbon candy and those little round pieces with a pretty little design in the middle. We would then walk out into the darkness and stillness of a star-filled Christmas Eve night, the magic and wonder of the Christ child's birth surrounding us as we headed for home.

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John Williamson

It was December of 1963. At the time, I was married and had a two-year-old daughter. We lived in the Philadelphia area and I was involved in sales at the time. I had a meeting up in Detroit on 26 December, so we decided we would head up there on the 24th and spend Christmas there so that I was ready for the next day. I was in Baltimore on business so I flew directly to Detroit and my wife flew up from Philadelphia. My plan was to go to the nearest shopping mall as soon as my plane landed and get gifts for my wife and daughter.

It turned out that there was a severe thunderstorm warning out for the Detroit area and we were almost two hours late landing. I grabbed a cab and he took me to the nearest mall to the airport. Sadly that was the time when a retailer ALL closed around 1:00 PM on Christmas Eve, and it was now 3:00 PM. To compound the problem, there was torrential rain and the temp was around 70 degrees. Not too much of a Christmas atmosphere....

On the way to the hotel the cab driver spotted a small drug store that was still open. Being desperate at this time to get gifts for my family I had him pull in while I checked out what might be available in the store. My poor wife ended up with a cheap bottle of perfume and my little girl received a small stuffed dog.

Indeed this was a Christmas to remember. By the way the rain continued through the 26th and the temp was in the 70's. I have not been nor will I ever go to Detroit again.

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Advent Awakening
Marilyn & Alan Youel

Just when you felt convince
that the inevitable was
already happening, just
when the dailyness of
every single thing had
finally persuaded you
not to expect,
not even to look, just when
tomorrow had completely lost
its meaning as distinct from
everyday, a melody of dancing
was caught from far away, one
sigh became transmuted in
mid-air into a gasp of sheer
astonishment, and now a word,
He comes, new whispered on
December's wind, melts grim-set
lips to simple speech and
song and framing salutations.

(J. Barrie Shepherd)

Each year as Advent follows Thanksgiving, a theme of Light comes into our home in ways we cannot quite explain. The candles appear happily in each window, and the research begins for a puppet play for the grandchildren. For the past 15 years different ideas have evolved. And these stories, acted out on the lighted puppet stage, seem to help us feel connected to the season and to our family and its traditions, help us to “feel the strong grasp of our fathers on our one hand and the tight circle of our mothers’ fingers around the other, and it is certain that they will never let go of us again.” And Christmas continues ... ways they modeled in the 1940’s. The moms would buy presents as they could, and the fathers would wait to shop until Christmas Eve, arriving at the children’s service just in time to hear the familiar words woven into song ...

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Remembering Christmas

Liz Bennett

From as far back as I can remember Christmas was a very special time. It was celebrated in the same tradition every year from my earliest childhood until my 26th year when I left the country to come to America. I never missed a Christmas in all that time.

As children, in December, we were not brought into town in order not to see any commercial Christmas trees. That restriction only went into effect after the “big Santa” which was a festival held on December 6th. There was no Christmas “stuff” out before that.

So no shopping after Santa, those last couple of weeks. . . On the 23rd of December, my parents would go out and buy a Christmas tree and hide it in the garage.

Starting the 23rd, the living room was locked off; and there was a little piece of tinsel sticking out from under the door. We were told that it may have been left by the angel who locked the door.

On December 24th, in the evening we all gathered in the library – that is all my family, my grandmother and great aunt, and occasionally a few others. There were approximately eight to ten of us. The celebration started there in the library with us kids playing the recorder and we had some other music. My mom would read the Christmas story and then she would give a little homily – she was a devout Christian person. Then we all would have what we called “Jesus’ birthday cake”. In the middle of the cake we placed a large bee’s-wax candle that my Dad had brought home from the war (WWII). We called it the peace candle. All of us gathered around the table would have an apple with a smaller beeswax candle stuck into the apple. Mom would bring the Jesus cake and the candles into the library where we were celebrating. It was a very special thing.

We continued singing and celebrating, but then, after while, Mom would disappear. We pretended not to notice as we would go on with more recorder music and Christmas stories.

Then, all of a sudden we hear a little bell ringing. We would run out into the hall, and the door of the living room would open and there was a giant eight-foot Christmas tree decorated with 36 brightly burning candles. It was a breathtaking sight! Silent night was quietly playing on the Hi Fi. There were no other lights on but the 36 candles. Momma told us each year that the 36 candles represented the number of years Jesus lived on earth. And we were celebrating his birthday.

It was just magical to walk in the living room and see that tree and those lights –to smell the fragrance of the tree and those beeswax candles. We then would sit around and admire the tree and try to find what was different this year because Mom always managed to have a few new decorations along with some special Christmas candy – candy which we were allowed to have one piece each day.

Then we would put the candles out after ten or fifteen minutes. Every day after that we would repeat the ritual of lighting of the candles for the twelve holy nights of Christmas. It a very different experience to be there around the tree with real candles. There are no good words to describe that.

It was a very special time for us all. We were always home together for Christmas. I was the first one to break that tradition, when at 26 I left home to come to this country. It was one of my first traumatic experiences in life ---not to be home for Christmas.

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Christmas Remembrances

Carol Terry

“Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house
Everything was stirring, yes even our mouse

(Eating up bird seed that had dropped on the floor
He sat on his haunches just asking for more)

Ah yes, so many memories creeping back in my heart
Of a childhood dear, but where do I start?

I fly back and back and it's Christmas Eve
and I'm filled with anticipation as only a child can be

Cookies are frosted and everywhere decorations I adore
While under the tree are crammed presents for me -gifts galore.

But now it's time to depart to a family gathering at Aunt Lil's
With cousins and aunts and gourmet eating all complete with frills
With our Swedish heritage, Scandinavian treats abound
Lefsa, Lutefisk, krum kaka, and Reece Crème are found

All's so perfect -could it be family, the season, or all that whipped cream?
I really can't decipher - tis like walking in a dream?

We sit down for the feast, squeezing up to the table
Then the courses begin; we eat as much as we're able
So much butter and cream -alas, we'll all get fatter
And where's Aunti Lill? In the kitchen mixing new batter

When the dinner ends and all special treats passed
It's time for grandchildren with grandmother -at last
There's at least twenty grands gathered round her chair
For her annual presentation of coins -all done with a flare

She wraps her red fox fur deftly 'round her neck
But takes and eternity for the "are you all are present?" check.

Finally it's time, and, in turn, we hold up one hand
And, from the fox's mouth, magically, quarters do land

Quarters dispersed, fox put away –time for the family talent show
Participation is a given; for all it's simply, "Do anything you know".
In our whole family singing is like breathing and brings us great joy
So tonight come solos—"Oh Holy Night: and "Sweet Little Jesus Boy"

We grands sing, recite poetry, play instruments and much more
Then, whoa! We hear sleigh bells –could it be Santa at the door?

Then an uncle shouts, "I see Santa and reindeer –
And listen – bells ARE ringing

So with hearts pounding wildly, we begin cheering, clapping, and singing
"Hurrah, hurrah, Santa Clause is coming" - "Hurrah, hurrah, Santa Clause is coming"
Leaving our posts for a spot under the tree, we squeal in delight as all come running.

Santa enters, moustache askew, with pants slipping down towards his knees
But, as a true believer at four, none of this really matters to me
Santa pulls from his pack a present for all. It's grand –we all must have been good
But soon he departs via door, not chimney. The why of this is not understood
We try to settle down and take a deep breath as Uncle Bob rises once more to sing
Then with lyrical passion his voice above us soars – 'Twas the Birthday of a King"

And then - - -

The organ strikes up the happy birthday song,
and Aunt Lill arrives with cake in hand.
Lights are dimmed, the candles glow;
Happy Birthday dear Jesus; this I understand

We leave Auntie Lill's around midnight – snowflakes drifting in the air
And, as I drift with them in a blissful state, I am already quite aware
That Christmas is not just Santa – it's also family and unending love
It's singing, laughing, sharing, and that something special sent from above

A baby is born –Tis the Birthday of a King—
His special spirit carries us into the night
Yes, it 'twas the magic of a young child's Christmas,
but even more it was God's light

So now hear me exclaim 'ere this poem leaves your sight
Merry Christmas to all and to all I wish GOD'S LIGHT !

Home at Christmas

Annie Glasgow

(music: It came Upon a Midnight Clear)

The nights were clear and crisp in the Utah winter when our choir, garbed in boots, parkas, scarves and mittens, warm caps, joyful hearts filled with the warmth and compassion of the season, gathered for our annual caroling trek. It wasn't limited to "over the river and through the woods". Oh no! Through snow and darkness, up walks shoveled and filled with white, into warmth and light and spilling into corridors of nursing homes, senior centers and hospitals we went. Familiar carols were the currency of our offerings, rich beyond any measure. And always, we honored the request of our lead tenor ... tall, lean and gentle (we must have known he would leave us so soon) and sing softly.

(music: "Lo, How The Rose Ere Blooming)

Since a childhood filled with the love and making of music, of Christmas candles and carols, piano, flute and family. I have never separated the holiday from the expressions of faith found in the writing, music and wording of the great Christmas Carols, Oratorios and Operas. I never asked whether I would go Christmas caroling, any more than I asked to breathe. It just WAS!

And following the caroling of the choir was a gathering at our home, and its 23 foot ceilings were filled with the sound of voices still not wearied by singing, possibly a little lubricated by mulled wine and treasured camaraderie. But beyond that were the joys of music as it happened in our hearts and defined the Season for us. We were "earthbound angels" but there was no limit to our joy.

And Blessings abound! That wasn't all. The resounding roof, the hospitality and contribution of us all led to more choir parties and rehearsals in our home. And we were truly blessed in that space as we all are by the Joyful music at this season.

We not only "heard the Bells on Christmas Day", but throughout the year as we remembered the rafters and their Christmas ringing.

(music: Joy to the World)

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Christmas Activities and Traditions

Sarah Hall

Christmas really started feeling like Christmas when we started celebrating it here. Every year we would take the kids down to Glencoe and celebrate there. It was really nice but there's nothing like spending Christmas in your own home.

We spend Christmas Eve doing activities. Sometimes it's skating. And in the evening we go have dinner at Brett's parents and then we go to Westminster. We go to both services – the four o'clock for the pageant... that's fun... you gotta do the kid's pageant... then we have dinner and come back at ten o'clock. One year it snowed and it was very pretty as we came back. The weather adds that wonderful element of mystery.

I try to do as much baking as I can but sometimes the cutout cookies don't come off the countertop and, oh, it gets frustrating!

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It was Christmas Time

Warren Hoffman

It was Christmas time, and our oldest grand daughter, Rachel, asked if she could play pool. So, we went downstairs and started playing pool. And, you have to know that I'm an incredibly average, no, a mediocre pool player.

So, Rachel says to me, "Grandpa, you work with a lot of doctors, don't you?"

I said, "sure".

"And what do you do with them?" she asks.

"I ask them a very simple question."

"What's that, Grandpa?"

"My question is: *what's the purpose of your life, doctor?*"

"And, what do they say?" Rachel asks.

So, I gave her lots and lots of answers that I've heard over the years.... Now remember, here's a fourth grader, who is now asking: "*Grandpa what's the purpose of your life?*"

I have never been asked before, what the purpose of my life is –let alone be asked by my own granddaughter!

I tried to remember that I did not have a PhD, or a college student or high school student, but a fourth grader standing in front of me.

And so, I said in language that she could understand and that I could understand: "*The purpose of my life, Rachel, is to help other people do well.*"

"Oh, ok, that's fine. Now, Grandpa, can you help me play pool better?"

I said, "sure, let's give it a go!" So, I told her how to play pool a little better, and you know what? She beat me! And that's OK. And her beating me, and her question, was her gift to me --one of the best Christmas gifts I've ever received.

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Memories of Christmas

Phyllis Paul

I was 14 and my oldest brother was in France during WWII in the Battle of the Bulge at Christmas time. My mother had a live Christmas tree and she kept it until he came home in March. There was not a needle left on the tree but all the balls were on and all the trimmings and the packages underneath.

He was in the front lines. He had one of those minesweepers and went ahead of the troops. They got into a town where the soup was still hot because the Germans had just left.

We always loved to have Christmas. After my mother got older and her house got too full of all the families my sisters-in-law and I took over. We got together and said "Let's do it. Our houses are bigger and it'll be easier." And I said "Who's gonna tell Grandma?" Well, guess who. I was not at all happy about telling her. I was nervous. But I did tell her and I can't remember how she accepted it. When I turned that age and the kids kept coming home for Christmas they would say "Oh, I bet Grandma was relieved when you told her. I know I'd be relieved!" But nobody's told *me* yet... I keep having them!

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Christmas Away from Home

Peggy Tillitt

If you haven't had the chance, I recommend spending the holiday season in England, especially if the host for your visit is your son who lives in London.

Jim and I flew there in 1999 to celebrate Christmas with our son and some special friends who made us feel welcome and at home in a different setting.

I remember walking through the streets of London, enjoying the decorations and festive atmosphere, and then coming back to trim a beautiful tree and celebrate the gift of Christmas that is given whenever and wherever family and friends gather together.

Since it was the millennium celebration as well, we ate fabulous food, drank "millennium" champagne, and then welcomed in the year 2000 up on Parliament Hill, looking down at a

fireworks display on the Thames River. Many people had gathered, some with their children, some bringing their own fireworks to add their own spirit of celebration to this special event.

We had visited St. Paul's Cathedral earlier in the week for Evensong. As the young choir boys were not there, we were invited to sit in their choir stall for the service, a memorable experience in itself.

Altogether, it was an experience in sharing the joy and the meaning of the Christmas season that I will never forget.

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Curiosity Can Ruin Christmas

Pat Van Valkenburg

I don't recall how old I was but I must've been old enough to be left home alone at night.

It was Christmas Eve and I must've been recovering from something so I got left at home while the family went to church but I wasn't sick enough to have to stay in bed. So I came down and I started opening Christmas presents. And I tried very hard to wrap them up again so that nobody would be able to tell that I had done that. I didn't open them all... just certain ones... but not necessarily the ones with my name on them.

We had an aunt and uncle who lived in Arizona who had sent packages and there was one for my sister and one for me. I opened mine and it was a nice, lovely turquoise necklace. So, of course, I wanted to see what my sister got. Her package was a little bit squished from being in the mail. I opened her package... and it was empty! I was just horrified. I had to wrap it back up again and then pretend on Christmas morning that I didn't know anything about that. It was the worst feeling to have done something I shouldn't have done and then to try to cover it up. Oh, my gosh! That was an agonizing experience. I never peeked at a present again in my whole life... it just ruined Christmas for me.

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A Child's Christmas in Norway

Mary Alette Davis

What a snowy quaintness that phrase evokes. When I was seven years old, my Christmas world was darker than the Minnesota Christmases I knew. In Norway, we were not so far from the Arctic Circle and so the brightness of Christmas tree candles burned through what seemed an eternal night, probably starting mid-afternoon until mid morning the next day. The dark mystery of that long ago winter lights up when I remember Christmas near the Mjose, the lake in eastern Norway where my family lived 50 years ago for one year.

My father had received a Fulbright scholarship, and all six of us children (families were big in those days) were part of 'the luggage' he and my mother managed to keep track of – and nourish throughout Europe and events that could fill a book. But when we finally landed in a sizeable house in the woods near Brummunddal, Norge – I thought I had landed in Narnia – or a fairy tale. Our house was practically rent-free, an 'extra house' that had been built by the son of the lumber factory owner for his own family until he took over the 'main farmhouse' down the road when his father retired and moved to a nearby house with his wife – which was called the 'Grandparents House'.

We were the beneficiaries of this tradition as we moved into Langbakken, a house on a hill, in the woods...on an elk run...in the Norwegian countryside. I went to school every other day (this was the real fairy tale as far as I was concerned) and in those dark winter mornings, my brother Paul and I would 'spark', take chairs on runners that scooted down snowy forest paths and 'unsalted' snow covered country roads, to the village school. Each of us children had our own sparky – and used them like bicycles to get around all winter.

But Christmas in Norway was a marker for our family's traditions. We already were 'Norwegian Americans', with the tradition of opening presents on Christmas Eve, and having 15 different kinds of Christmas cookies homemade by my grandmother each year.

But this year planted a few things that still hold us together whether we are together at Christmas or not.

Our friends the Langmoens, and across the lake Mjose, the Andreason's, had huge Christmas parties for their businesses, which were more like family parties, (not 'Mad Men' office parties). Wilhelm Andreason ran the Konditorie, restaurant/bakery of Gjovik and it was a wonderful delicious place and Hans Langmoen who ran the lumber factory in Brummunddal and had a scar left on his cheek as a souvenir from being in the Norwegian resistance to the Nazis. Wilhelm and Ma had 8 children, Hans and Hanna 4.

When these family run businesses had their parties, we were all invited. The Julenisse, the Christmas elf – definitely a descendent of the pagan trolls, arrived with gifts for everyone. We never confused this Julenisse with Christ as Santa Claus is sometimes for children. The Julenisse isn't particularly good... but is a creature that you look out for, red-hatted, small and bearded – animals are their special friends, if your cat purrs or your dog sighs,

the Julenisse is nearby. And there are different ones, and they can be very mischievous if you don't treat them right. We learned that if you leave them cookies at Christmas, they are apt to leave your keys, wallet, travel tickets alone...if you don't – well we always knew who to blame when we couldn't find our valuables. In later years, back in the States, my father somehow remembered that if you really don't want to annoy the nisse, on Christmas Eve (after church) you should leave them a glass of Aquavit – the caraway flavored liquor which Scandinavians so proudly drink in one fell swoop after a meal of cod, potatoes, butter... Today of course, we have carried on that important tradition! (You may wonder why I still lose things. Could it be that it's not all the Julenisse's fault? I don't want to stop believing or blaming).

As odd as it may seem, food in Norway at Christmas for a child from the Midwest in the middle of the 20th century, seemed – exotic. Children now know all kinds of flavors at early ages. I had never had cardamom before I was in Norway, and the Christmas breads all seemed to float in that scent above the butter and dark sweet gjetost, the brown goat cheese, best when it is 'ekte' which means 'real'. Other Christmas treats were eggedosis, whipped raw eggs with sugar until they become frothy, light and rich and homemade marzipan – we'd grind the almonds into paste with sugar and egg whites and then shape ornaments, or little figures out of them. Because it was cold and the windows closed, houses carried the smell of apples which our friends stored and snacked on throughout the winter, as we would potato chips. No wonder they were all so healthy – and they were always going out for 'friske luft' –fresh air. Hiking or cross country skiing for miles was often how one got from a small town to another. Norway had not yet experienced its great oil discovery and was in slow economic recovery from the depression and occupation of the Nazis in World War II. It was not the rich culture it is now. The Norway I experienced was based on family, and family owned businesses that regarded their employees as family too – which now I recognize as true community which has gone through suffering and loss, but celebrates life even more deeply because of it.

Christmas in Norway was not so much about gifts, but about being together. Everyone sang their Christmas songs, just as we did in the U.S., some religious, "Jeg Er Saa Glad Hver Jule Kvel" some not – but one new thing we learned at these large family/work parties was the traditional dance around the Christmas tree. First the candles would be lit, live candles in metal holders clipped on to the tree, flaming in defiance of the dark and any fire safety laws, if they existed at that time. First the Jule nisse would give out the gifts and then we'd sing and finally dance to "O Jul Med Den Glaede" around the tree, curtsying and bowing as all Norwegian children learned to do at an early age.

Our family has carried this singing dance out every year since. Now with families of our own, our spouses grin and bear it, and mumble through the jumble of Norwegian words. Our children think it so important to our extended family identity that they sang it for the congregation at my mother's funeral. Over the years, whatever siblings and families can have gathered on Christmas day and dance long into the night, shaking the rafters and filling whatever closed up house we are in with not apples but a gymnasium-like smell. We start with the Norwegian, then go to the Brazilian Paiz Tropical (tropical place, blessed

by God) and continue with Earth Wind and Fire, old Motown, the Beatles, The Beach Boys, They Might Be Giants (Istanbul)... we 'Norskies' (as we affectionately used to call ourselves) go a little crazy.

So what seems to be a quaint controlled Norwegian custom has truly been a release. I keep thinking that the dancing got wilder as our parents passed away in the last decades. Now, on these darkest nights, we are dancing for them too. It is life we are celebrating even in their absence...God's greatest gift of life comes to us in the darkest time. So this secular dance, this human energy is maybe a gift from the Julenisse –but is especially a gift from God who gives us birth, hope, and light even in the dead of winter. Truly a “Yule with its Gladness”, every year!

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John Heefner

An early cherished Christmas memory from a small farm town in Iowa. It was the Christmas we received a freshly cut tree wrapped in burlap and shipped to us by bus from friends in distant northern Minnesota. It occupied a special corner in our small living room. Mother had a collection of little double-sided mirror decorations of varying shapes and sizes she carefully hung from the tree's branches by invisible threads. The mirrors shimmered and danced and caught the many-colored lights' reflections as well as those of a myriad of wonderful decorations. My own personal spot was on the floor under the tree with my head touching its trunk. There was a magical world of twirling mirrors, lights reflected everywhere and the intoxicating smell and touch of the fresh fir. In the background mother had playing her favorite, "O Holy Night", accompanied by the smell of cinnamon or some other holiday delight. These magical moments of Christmas splendor have never gone away and have contributed to my sense of wonder and beauty in so many facets of my life. A “*Thank You*” to Mom and Dad.

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Laura Lee Moffet

For me, home has been many different places. The one thing we try to do every year is make a gingerbread house. Our special place for Christmas is my aunt's Victorian B & B in Niagara Falls, New York. It is great being there and seeing the falls frozen.

I make the gingerbread, cut it out with the patterns, make the frosting and pipe on the frosting. I support the roof with cans till it dries. It's a day of making the gingerbread; it's a

day of assembling the house; and it's a day of putting all the treats on it. In Texas we built a lake with our house, but here in Minnesota we make it an ice rink.

The kids get involved. It started with Patrick when he was about 2. A good friend of mine had that tradition in her family. My family was German, and it seemed, why not adopt that tradition. We never dreamed we would be moving around so much. Sometimes we don't get it ready for Christmas and it becomes a Valentine's House or an Easter house, but we really try for Christmas. We put candy canes on it, different years we've had a pretzel roof or a necco wafers for the roof, lots of color.

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John Nealon

I grew up in a big Lebanese family. We would go to a church that my mother's father founded in the early 1900's in Rochester, New York. It was a small congregation. A lot of our social life revolved around the church. At Christmas the kids always loved the midnight mass because we got to stay up late. That was the fun time to go to church... Sunday afternoons were more the problem!

Christmas was all about family, lots of Lebanese food and lots of love.

Services were always very ceremonial in our church. A lot of hymns would be sung including a lot in Arabic. It was always a mix of English and Arabic because a number of our members were from Lebanon. We didn't understand the Arabic and Mom didn't know it that well so she didn't teach us. We would sing "The Lord Have Mercy" and those types of hymns we would sing in Arabic.

The years blend... but I remember when I was young we would get together with members of our church and go out Christmas caroling door to door throughout the Advent season. That was a great experience. You don't see that much today.

The services would always have a procession. As boys – I had two brothers – we would serve as altar boys and if we didn't make it the altar was not well serviced. Some of the men would have to go because there weren't a lot of kids in our church. In the procession the altar boy who carried the incense would spray it on the priest who carried the Bible and the other boy would carry the cross.

The imagery of Christ on the cross made me more aware of the death even as I celebrated Christmas. I would mix Christmas and Easter a lot because that imagery of Christ dying was so prevalent. The celebration of his birth was mixed with his death and resurrection. It always seemed somewhat pessimistic to me and I appreciate we don't see that imagery at Westminster.

John Greenwald

When I was growing up in Iowa City, and my dad was still working as a doctor, we had some neighbors that lived around the corner from us. Every year they had us over for oyster stew and some sort of traditional dessert. I have distinctive memories of it because I hate oyster stew. Our friends, the Powers, Nancy made the stew with lots of butter and cream. Since I hated the oysters I concentrated on eating the broth.

Dr. Powers always read the Christmas story from Luke from the King James Version because that was the version of the Bible he grew up with. From 1965 on, that was what Charles Schulz used for "A Charlie Brown Christmas". That's how I memorized the Christmas story. Every time I hear that version of the Christmas story those are the two things I think about. To this day no other version of the Christmas story sounds right to me.

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The Christmas Tree That Never Died!

Elisabeth von Berrinberg

It was February 19th, 1945 and our tree from the past Christmas was still sitting in the corner of our living room. Somewhat unusual, for by tradition it was used as firewood around the day of Epiphany (Jan.6th). Was it premonition, a foreboding which had my mother insist, that we "leave it up" just a little longer than usual?

Perhaps so, for on that same evening, without any warnings by the sirens, the sound of a single airplane became noticeable. Was it one of ours? Just then a message came over the radio: "Single enemy airplane in the vicinity of Wuerzburg, course east. No immediate danger is expected!" This was good enough for us. Our city had been spared by the bombings, which other cities had to endure. The allies wouldn't dare to bomb a city in which the great Winston Churchill was once a student!

But that evening our lives would change forever!

The plane was now directly over us. Suddenly the steady hum of its engine changed its pitch. The aircraft was diving! "To the cellar!" my father ordered us. But before we could reach it, the house began to shake as a bomb had hit the house on the end of our street. The electricity went out and we had to fumble through the dark to make our way from the upper floor to the cellar.

An hour passed but it felt like eternity.

When my father decided to check what was going on "above" he quickly returned to lead us up to see for ourselves. There were flames reaching the sky, the dense smoke had filled the air and people were running from the apartment building that had suffered a direct hit. When daylight broke my father decided to check what damage our own house had suffered. What awaited us, made us forget the sleep we ever felt. Every window was broken and a cold draft, filled with the smell of smoke had settled in the house. When I entered my bedroom, a chill came over me. There in my bed, right on the pillow rested a stone that had broken out of the wall.

But among all the terrifying and sad experiences we had that night, there were also funny situations. At least they were to us children, for the sight of a "naked" Christmas tree made us break into laughter.

"What's so funny!" My father asked in somber voice as he stuck his head in from the kitchen. "Look at it!" We pointed toward the tree. There it was, leaning half tipped against the wall, its branches stripped of its needles which now covered the floor, the furniture and some even made it to the kitchen, where they settled on top of the potato soup that sat in the kettle on the stove.

The trees decor had vanished too. Splinters of once delicate ornaments were scattered everywhere. Only empty pieces of strings were tangling on the "skeleton" the sad remains of the symbol of Christmas., the season of peace! Oh, did I mention the "Lametta"? The silver strands that are the finishing touch of every Christmas tree? With occasional replenishments needed, whenever the recycled ones had to be replaced, the purchase of new ones was no longer available. Aluminum was needed to make bombs!

But we had found a way to replace them with what had come to us by way of falling from the sky.

The aluminum strands dropped by "enemy" airplanes to disturb the radar, had landed everywhere, including on the fields adjacent to the land on which our summer cabin was located. Their width was about an inch. Wide enough to cut them into four "Lametta" strands, and "voila" our Lametta shortage was solved. When Christmas 1945 came around, we had been living at the cabin for nearly ten months. It was on March 16th 1945 when our city was destroyed by a single bomb attack, which left our own house in the city in ruins.

The spruce tree next to the cabin was perfect for a Christmas tree without having to cut it down. From cardboard we cut out disks which we covered with crayons. And as the finishing touch we used our saved up "enemy Lametta" to decorate it. A sentimental ending to this story became real, when our mother decided to never use a harvested "real" tree again. This was to be in memory of the last Christmas we celebrated in the house in the city.

The "skeleton tree" had thus earned a special name in our family. It was the Christmas tree forever in our memory.

It was: “ The Christmas tree that never died”

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Cindy Iverson

1. Christmas as long as I can remember was the Christmas Eve service (when we were younger and stayed up that late!!) . It now has been replaced by the afternoon family service, so our 3 year old grandson can attend. To me, the beginning of the service was hearing "Once Upon a Royal David's City". Its words still bring a tear to my eyes. Yes, Christmas would be always associated with that hymn. Lastly, was hearing Dr Lowe's final parting words, "And now---(with a pause) it is Christmas". Only then, was it Christmas. And then the chimes would go off and we would depart in silence. It was indeed Christmas at that moment.

2. Only after my parents' death did I appreciate my father's Finnish roots, his parents coming from Finland. Grandma always made the Finnish Biscuit, Pulla. When she died, I thought I would never have it again. Then I found Sarah Jane's Bakery in NE Minneapolis and Palm Bakery in St Louis Park. It was then I started my family's own tradition--having pulla for Christmas morning breakfast. Now my kids know that our meal would not be the same without this special bread. I would hope that they would pass on my tradition among others they will start in their own families.

3. . My Aunt Dorothy (Gordon M Comb's wife) always had a beautiful table setting for the holidays at their home always perfect in every way. She would serve sherbet before our meal, either on top of fruit or alone. I liked it!! Now for Christmas, I will choose lime and raspberry sherbet, of course the Christmas colors! Easter would bring rainbow sherbet. I've never departed from the tradition as long as I've been married. Now that Aunt Dorothy is gone, her tradition lives on.

4. My Christmas trees are laden with my children's homemade ornaments, bazaar finds, wooden painted ornaments made by patients at MD Anderson Children's hospital in Texas, and a few old fashioned ornaments I've found along the way, including glittered pine cones from my aunt and uncle's house, and little dolls my mother made of pipe cleaners. But I wanted to remember our parents at this time of year, so I made ornaments for my parents and my husband's parents bearing their faces on small golden picture frames and a special pink ribbon ornament symbolizing breast cancer with my mother's name on it.

So many memories and traditions--I didn't really think I had traditions; thinking others had more significant stories to tell. But going over mine in my head, I realize that I do have things I do every year. In fact part of my tradition is making sure I do EVERYTHING , in the most perfect way; so that at times I get so stressed that I can't enjoy the season--and that's not what it's supposed to be about. So now, I play my Christmas CDs, try to calm down and truly enjoy the reason we celebrate.

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Christmas in New Orleans

Charlie Devore

I was stationed in the Navy in New Orleans, in December of 1956, and I had just gotten involved in New Orleans music. I was 23 yrs. old and I just got started while I was stationed there. While there, I met and became good friends with Bill Russell, a jazz historian. Russell was a treasure of Jazz knowledge! He also was a personal friend of Mahalia Jackson. He had known her since she was a child, singing in the local Baptist Church choir. By 1956 Mahalia had become the world's greatest Gospel singer, traveling all around the country. Now remember, this was the 1950s. Mahalia grew up in very, very poor surroundings. And now (in 1956), she had spent years living in shabby hotels, performing night after night.

Bill told me that Mahalia was coming to New Orleans for Christmas, to "Uptown" as they call it in New Orleans. She was coming to sing in the choir in the small Baptist church where she grew up. Dave Garroway, the T.V. producer, got wind of it and came to record the Christmas service for his TV program. It was an afternoon program --a very emotional time for all who attended.

My friend, Bill Russell, and I attended the service, sitting way in the back of the sanctuary. It was 1956, and as far as I could tell, I was almost the only white face in the crowd.

The night before the program, Bill Russell, said to me: "what I'd like to do is to buy Mahalia a Christmas tree. She came from a very poor family, and I happen to know that she has never had her own Christmas tree. As a child, they were too poor; and now that she has been traveling she has never been in one place long enough to have a Christmas tree."

Well, Bill didn't own a car. I happened to have a car, so away we went to find some place that still had some trees for sale. We couldn't get a very large tree because it wouldn't fit in my car, and besides, Bill only had one string of lights and some tinsel in his pocket.

The long and short of it is: we found a small evergreen tree, stuffed it in my trunk; and off we went to attend the Christmas service at the Baptist Church.

The service was terrific. It ended with a brief version of Silent Night. Then, when the T.V. Cameras were turned off, the music continued. Silent Night must have gone on for another fifteen or twenty minutes. You've never heard a place rock like that sanctuary. The night was not silent –it rocked!

After the service, Bill and I waited for a short while so that Mahalia could get back to her room in "UPTOWN". When we got there, we were met at the door, and told that Mahalia was resting in the living room.

We found her asleep. So, very quietly, we set up the tree. Bill strung the one string of lights, and I decorated with the tinsel. When we finished we plugged in the lights and just at that moment Mahalia opened her eyes.

I will never forget the expression on her face. It was her very own Christmas tree.... And it was presented to her by her life-long friend –Bill Russell.

As I look back on it, I knew I had witnessed a very special moment. Three years later, Mahalia came to St Paul for a concert. After the performance I got in line to greet her. While I was still a long way back in the line of admirers, Mahalia spotted me, pointed at me and shouted: "You! You're the one who brought me my Christmas tree!"

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Charles Ungemach

Christmas morning, 1938 in Denver Colorado. The clock reads 5:59 a.m. and a boy, named Charles, is under strict orders from dad and mom not to disturb them before 6:00 a.m. Well, you know that Charles is watching the clock, and has been watching it for nearly an hour. Finally, "Its 6!" he cries and runs down the hall to his parents' room. They reluctantly tell him he can go downstairs, but must **not** open any presents until they and Jackie, his 5 year old sister come down.

Down the stairs two at a time, around the corner and into the living room--Wow! The tree is lit (probably because dad left it on about 3 hours earlier) and the old electric train is waiting to be started for its never-ending trip around the tree. Looking at the presents, Charles thought there must be a zillion of them –"come on hurry up Dad." he shouted. Finally dad comes in, but grabs Charles, picking him up and carrying him quickly into the kitchen saying, "be quiet, shush, no noise!" "Why, what's wrong? WAIT!" As we rushed from the living room, Charles did catch a glimpse of some one or something lying on the couch next to where he had just been playing.

There was a strange man lying there. He appeared to be sleeping? From what Charles could see he was big, ugly and dirty! Charles had not noticed him even though he had been only a few feet away for the last ten minutes. Who is he? Charles wondered. What was he doing there?

Mom and sister were already in the kitchen, so we all three sat on the stairs going down to the basement while Dad calls the police. Then we waited. "Shush, quiet, it's ok, don't worry" says Mom, but of course Charles was only concerned with the presents. What if the man came to steal the presents but needed a nap first?

When the police arrived Charles, Jackie and Mom stayed in the kitchen. From there they could hear much of what was going on in the living room --- "wake up!" one of the officers said. "What are you doing here?" "Come along now were going to the station"

The other officer said: "Looks like he celebrated Christmas Eve too much and just wandered in to the wrong house." (We didn't need to lock our doors in those days) "Do you want to press charges?" the officer asked. "No?" replied Dad. "Ok-- I think that's the right thing to do, today particularly-- it was just a mistake but we will take care of it. Merry Christmas!"

Finally, back to the living room and to the important part of the morning--the presents--and yes, Charles got the Red Ryder BB gun he wanted.

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Mary Hess

For us it's really all about Christmas Eve. We start a week ahead polishing the silver. Why do I have silver? I've got silver. And you know you're going to haul it out at some point during the year and so you look at all the silver and you polish what needs to be polished. The kids are now old enough to help with that so it goes a little faster. Then we haul out all the china and the table looks just beautiful. I like setting the table. For me, I couldn't care less about the food but I love to set the table! I just love for it to look beautiful. It's usually just the family and my mom. We have all the traditional Christmas foods from my childhood which includes lefse and mainly oyster stew, that's the big thing. We have gourmet oyster stew. It used to be that you dump the oysters into hot milk and add a little cinnamon... well we've now got a gourmet recipe for fabulous oyster stew. My husband makes it. It's a Norwegian tradition. In my family we always had two soups: oyster stew and fruit soup... which I hate. I always hated

it but we always had it. It's a hot, sweet, sweet, sweet soup made with all kinds of dried fruits: prunes, apricots, dates. We always had the two but I never ate the fruit soup when I was growing up so when I became an adult I said I would not make the fruit soup, I don't care how traditional it is. So we only have the oyster stew and we serve it with a really good wine.

The kids help roll the lefse and we do that the day before. It's a simple meal. You have to have a red dessert so that it looks like Christmas. We eat then we open just a couple of gifts then go to Westminster. We used to come to the children's service but now that the kids are older they like to go to the later service because it's so much more beautiful... and peaceful! So that's what we do. Last year we didn't go because of the snow and it felt so strange not going.

We always have candlelight and it's really beautiful. Every year we always have one of the children read the Christmas story from the King James Bible. It's usually the youngest one because they're the ones you can pick on. My kids now refuse to do it but that's been the tradition.

On Christmas morning we open the rest of the gifts and just crash for the rest of the day.

One other memory when I was growing up in Fergus Falls we used to have a pony and a sleigh. And my Dad would hitch up the pony to the sleigh and take my grandpa and grandma for a ride out on the lake. We had a big horsehair robe and a blue and white with the bells. I still have the bells but the sleigh was sold a long time ago.

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A Christmas Musical Memory

Paul Daniels

When I was about 10 we paid a holiday visit to relatives and attended a Children's Christmas Program at their church, which featured choirs, the lighting of the enormous Christmas tree and an invitation for individual participation. At the call for volunteers to step forward and sing a special Christmas song at the Tree, I instantly volunteered, bounding forward to the tree, to the complete embarrassment of my older sister.

Standing before the gigantic glowing tree, I quickly launched into a hardy rendition of "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" but soon realized that after the

first two lines, I was uncertain of both the text and the tune of this holiday favorite. As I fearlessly proceeded into an improvisation on that Christmas hymn, I saw my sister sinking further into the pew and took that as my cue to slowly meander sideways and backwards, eventually positioning myself behind the large Christmas tree where my Christmas rhapsody came to its confusing conclusion. According to my sister, my disappearance created the effect of a "Singing Christmas Tree" who, being a tree, couldn't be expected to know the words or the music to this familiar carol.

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Annika Lister Stroope

My mother, Susan Lister Stroope, was an exchange student to Sweden in 1968-69 through International Christian Youth Exchange. On December 13th, 1983, (when I was in the 3rd grade!), we both dressed in Sankta Lucia outfits to celebrate this Swedish holiday. Mom wouldn't let the candles in my crown be lit, which I was very disappointed about...but enjoyed the holiday, none the less! Believe it or not, whatever curl you see in my hair was from a PERM, which my mother had asked my aunt to put in my hair because it was so fine and unwieldy. It wasn't until over 10 years later that the natural curls appeared! The tree in the background was full of traditional Swedish straw ornaments.

(back cover)

A special thanks to all those who have shared their heartfelt memories. We hope their stories and all the events of the coming days, will help renew your faith, awaken your senses and imagination, and strengthen your ties with the household of God.

The 2010 Christmas Dinners committee -which includes: artists, musicians, cooks, custodians, techno-geeks, staff, support staff, writers, and story-tellers - all wish you a Christmas season filled with deep joy and abiding peace.