

CHRISTMAS EVE

For many years, toward the end of the year, I have sat down to write this story. Each year I go through at least one day of reliving what happened long ago, agonizing over how to write about it this time. The story is not important. What I have learned from it is.

Winter 1944, a time now remembered in Holland as The Hunger Winter. Holland had been occupied by the Germans for more than four years then, and would remain occupied until the next summer. In December of 1944 the war did not go well for the Germans -- it did not go well for the Allies either. Earlier that year, the Allies had landed an airborne division in the eastern part of Holland in an attempt to make a swift end to the war. It left the Allies in control of small pieces of land that undoubtedly made life more difficult for the Germans, but it did not end the war. For us, who were caught behind the lines, so to speak, the war got much worse. The Germans were still in control of the western part of Holland where the big cities are, and held a fragile life-line to Germany.

I lived with good people who took great risks housing--and hiding--me and a few other young men. All men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five had been called to work in Germany to 'assist in the war effort'. We called it slave labor and we knew that foreigners manning essential war factories, would simply free up more Germans to fight their war. I did not want to be caught; I had to hide.

German soldiers were getting nastier in 1944, they felt threatened. They were threatened, by the Allies as well as by the Resistance in many countries of Western Europe. A month earlier soldiers had surrounded Rotterdam and in three days searched every house, an operation that took several days. Other times they had searched for contraband, or 'underground newsletters'. This time they looked for people.

That winter the Germans were also systematically stealing what was left in the western part of Holland. No longer chocolate, sugar, radios, blankets and other consumer goods -- now they took what could be used for their war effort: the copper wire of the overhead power line of the railroads. Later the rails. They took fuel: coal, gas, oil, so that we were without light, without heat, and often without water. Food, which had been rationed for four years, now was almost impossible to find. Soldiers took what was still to be found on farms.

In our house we survived on sugar beets and tulip bulbs. Some people did not survive that winter.

I was twenty-two and had been living under German Occupation for four years. I had joined the Resistance very early: my parents were in another part of the world, there were no people who would worry about me or who could be held hostage for me. In the earliest days of the war, resisters were those who had resisted all their lives, the 'underworld'. It was they who taught me to survive while being prey. I learned to hide, but mostly I learned being always on the alert, thinking of escape routes even in sleep. Much later, when we had weapons, I learned to shoot handguns, rifles and the assault weapons of those days.

The Hunger Winter was bad. Living was dangerous. The Resistance was organized by that time from England, I was given regular assignments. I remember those as very dangerous (they were!). We were hungry most of the time. We had no lights, no Christmas trees, no gifts. It was a bleak, cold and dark winter.

From the beginning of the Occupation there had been a curfew from sunset to sunrise: nobody was allowed out during the hours of darkness. That year the Germans gave us a Christmas present: curfew would be lifted for a few hours on Christmas Eve, so that churches could have services in the dark of a late December afternoon.

Just before Christmas I stayed in a house very near a small Catholic church. Some of us decided to go to Mass; we could run home in less than a minute if we had to. It would be an adventure, relief perhaps from the endless struggle to stay alive and alert.

Religion had not played much part in my life, although I thought much about things we now would call 'spiritual'. To me any church service would be a novelty, Catholic Mass a mystery. I had seen the inside of cathedrals as a tourist, but I had no idea what went on during a service -- and this was 1944, when Mass was said in Latin.

The little church was packed. We carefully faced forward, looking at the three or four priests who were doing mysterious things on what I thought of as 'the stage'. We looked ahead because nobody wanted to be recognized or recognize anybody. It was obvious that there were many people in that church who would have to be careful not to be seen in daylight. We pretended we did not see who sat next to us; when a few late-comers drifted in, we squeezed together on the wooden benches, careful not to look at our neighbors.

I cannot remember the beginning of the Mass, but gradually there seemed to be a rhythm to the comings and goings around the altar. Some of the people in the church knew what to do: kneel, say a prayer, stand up, say a prayer, kneel again. Most of us remained seated. What the priests were saying was lost to me, I did not understand Latin. Yet, everyone there felt a sense of uplift, of hope. We were so sick of war, we yearned for peace, for better times, for an end to what was then an intolerable yoke of oppression. I could almost see our yearnings spiral around the candles. Yes, there were a few candles. It had been years since anybody could buy a candle. In our homes we had strange contraptions that burned what oil we could find, using wicks made of old clothes. In the little church were real candles, not many but enough.

That afternoon I gave myself to the healing balm of being with strangers and yet feeling safe, sharing, even without words, our suffering. I am sure some of us dared hope again. Maybe the Germans were getting more lenient, perhaps they knew they had lost the war anyway, and they were trying to show us how decent they really were? Maybe the war would end soon. I let myself go in order to take part in an ancient rite that seemed fraught with holiness and Divine grace, even though I could not understand the words.

The Mass seemed to be moving toward an apotheosis, the tempo speeded up perhaps. Whatever it was, I think many of us felt something giving closure, a glorious hymn to end this simple event..

It was very still in the church, we sat spellbound, everyone's attention riveted on the senior priest who solemnly approached the altar, lifting his face to the cross, his back to us, raising his arms...

At that moment, a young priest stepped out of the darkness, facing us. He stood in front of the older priest, they were almost back to back. The young priest spoke in Dutch over the singsong of the Mass, and said, very clearly and precisely: We have received word that the Germans are about to raid this church. All who do not want to be found

here, leave immediately and quickly.

It took a second for his message to break the spell, and for its meaning to sink in. Then, without a word, at least half the people in the church got up and tip-toed out, leaving open prayer books in empty spaces on the benches.

Inside the church it had been shadowy; outside it was pitch dark (there had been no street lights for years). In seconds, all those who had left the church, were absorbed in the early night. I ran home on soft feet. I could hear those who remained in the church begin to sing an old Christmas song: Silent Night (they sang in Dutch, although the song originally was German).

Minutes later, four or five cars drove up, a dozen or more German soldiers, fully armed, stormed into the church.

A few of us in my house had stationed ourselves at a window from where we could see a corner of the church. The singing seemed to have faded. We could not hear what went on inside. Then soldiers appeared outside the church dragging two priests out on the steps.

Gunshots. More soldiers came out, dragging men out.
More gunshots. From our attic window we could not see but we heard a voice, in German, "Da wahr noch ein..." There was another... One more gunshot.
(later, when I thought about it, I imagined that referred to the twelve apostles and Jesus)

Again we heard singing, louder, full. I heard women's voices, very few men's voices. I imagined children singing, high and loud.

The soldiers got into their cars and roared away.

For timeless moments the singing continued, then it died.

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In dead, dark silence people slowly left the church, stumbling over the corpses that had been left on the steps.
In our house nobody said a word, we were numb.
I do not remember ever talking about what happened with anyone in the house, not even after the war.

The next morning German soldiers moved the bodies to be displayed, laid out in a row, in the cold winter's light; left there for a week or more.

We heard that they had shot, point blank, twelve men (three, perhaps four priests). And that final shot killed a 12-year old boy, who was shot in the face. He had no face any more.

The first day people walked by and left a piece of green, a ribbon. Someone had put a handkerchief over where the face of the boy should be.
The next day the Germans posted a guard.

For the next ten days nobody, not a single person, walked by that place.

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Other incidents that last winter of the war perhaps pushed away my memory of that Christmas Eve. Finding food became an obsession. I 'forgot' about that afternoon midnight mass for more than a quarter century, although for years I felt extremely uncomfortable around Christmas time, without knowing why.

Eventually I learned what the Mass means, what its ritual acts out, but I never could enter a Catholic church, although I could not have said why. Hearing Christmas songs on the radio, or later on television, made me physically nauseous.

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Twenty-five years later, in the early 70s, I took a workshop designed to get us in touch with a side of us our culture suppresses: our soul, our heart, our intuition. I lived in Honolulu then. It was warm and balmy that winter, flower scent in the air; a soft, warm rain--typical for December in Hawai'i--fell all evening.

The day before Christmas Eve, we did an exercise in class. 'Very simple,' the teacher said: 'think back to an important event in your life and re-live it, re-experience it.'

After all those years, for some reason, I remembered that long-ago Christmas Eve. Not only remembered, but I relived and experienced it all over again. When that memory exploded back into my consciousness, I lost control.

I felt as if my body was being torn apart, I could not deal with all the images, the feelings that crowded into my awareness. In the warmth of Honolulu I felt the clammy cold of that unheated little church. In the bright room where the workshop was held my eyes saw again the dark candle-lit interior, the wooden benches, people hunched in threadbare coats, our eyes on that priest with his hands held up in prayer.

I had never felt so disoriented.

I learned what the word 'devastated' means. I hurt! The pain of that great burst of many, different, contradictory feelings was too much to contain, to comprehend. I felt as if someone had given me a punch in the solar plexus, I was hunched over, holding my stomach. I could hardly breathe.

The other workshop students were supportive, but could not understand what was going on, and I could not tell them. I left.

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At the time I shared an apartment with a friend who had an unusual knack for seeing into the heart of things. I told him, barely able to talk, what had happened in class as well as I could in bits and pieces between explosions of rage. I tried to control my emotions, to be coherent, but probably not too successfully.

My friend 'was there for me', as we say today. We had a cup of soup, or perhaps coffee, I don't remember. It was late night, or very early morning. I was still shaking uncontrollably and unable to control or comprehend the chaos within me.

Over his cup of steaming soup he looked at me with a strange expression, his head cocked to one side, and said, "most of what I picked up was tremendous anger and

rage." I nodded, yes. anger, and I was still overcome with waves of nausea. Violent feelings were still roiling around inside me, without sorting themselves into coherence.

Quietly and thoughtfully, he said, "what makes you so angry?"

I stammered something about "...the Germans..."

He interrupted me, held up his hand, stop!

Then he said very, very softly--I had to strain to hear him--"what about the Christians?"

I did not know what he was talking about.

Earlier we had discovered that the only way for us to share a small apartment was to be honest with each other. Our friendship was based on helping each other 'see'.

I knew I had to take him seriously. What he said must be important.

Suddenly, I understood. What he said broke through my emotional storm to some place deep inside, I could see around, beyond my anger and heard 'the Christians' sing. We were not that far from the little church, and we could clearly hear the singing - background to the gunshots.

Yes, I remembered the Christians.

I shall always recall that 'shift' in point of view.

I heard again waves of song coming from that little church. Voices pure... or perhaps not so pure but achingly human. The singing a light in the cold dark night; that sound the only reference point in my mind.

Hearing the singing I hardly heard the gunshots any more.

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'What about the Christians' became a sort of mnemonic for me. For years the phrase would remind me to look at anything, particularly highly charged emotional happenings, from at least two points of view, from more than one angle. That takes practice, of course. We are conditioned to choose one point of view and stick to it. I found it an important skill to learn to see beyond the obvious.

Of course I also knew that I had to sort out and somehow deal with those clashing emotions that had all emerged at once. My anger, and the other side of that coin: fear, had come back first. This memory brought back a hundred others, memories of a war that stole five years of my life (my young man years: 18-23). I felt rage again at having to relive being helpless in the face of forces that trampled all subtleties, reliving the necessity of always hiding. Rage at the ruthless oppression we endured. The Christmas Eve memories were just another opening to a true Pandora's Box of suppressed experiences (there were other 'openings' — today we call it Delayed Stress Syndrome, then we did not know that awful, crazy memories can hide for twenty-five years to come out in an uncontrolled chaos of emotions)

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It was work, It took great effort to get beyond that mad mixture of feelings and meanings. Again and again I had to remind myself, 'What about the Christians'. It was important that I work through the agony and the rage, even the constant fear we lived

with, if I wanted to have a reasonably normal life, particularly living in a country where the norm is to be always positive, keep the bad stuff hidden.

Then, after learning to hear 'the Christians' again, I had to go one step further. I also had to get past 'feeling sorry' for the people who were killed. That perhaps was even more difficult.

Today everyone has seen murder and mayhem on television as shocking as my Christmas Eve memory: soldiers storming into a church, killing priests, leaving bodies as an example -- all that has become every day fare. At the end of the 20th century everyone knows that is what people do.

In mid-century I found it shocking to the core of my being. I grew up in a world where we trusted each other. I had never before then experienced Man's inhumanity to Man.

I was told I had to adjust my thinking. That is human nature, I was told, we are a violent species. We will always have wars.

No.

I refuse to accept that Man's inhumanity is "normal" even though television has tried to make it appear so. It is an abomination, it is wrong. Since World War II there have been few years without a war somewhere on this planet. That is not normal. Millions of people have died in the most gruesome wars ever imagined. The twentieth century may well have been the bloodiest in all human history.

I tried to adjust my thinking. Maybe I should accept "what is?" There is not much I can do about it, obviously.

But I cannot change what I think are the most basic human qualities that I have. I know, from experience, that Man is not a predator, violence is a learned behavior, it is not in our genes!

We, our species, ought to have learned that violence breeds violence and that the only way to stop breeding more violence is to stop violence.

My wounds are real; what is not real is to deny my feelings.

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I am grateful that I faced the pain and confusion by sorting out at least a few of the mix of contrary emotions, although it was and is hard work. I accept that some shreds of that memory, and others, will always be with me; the scars are there. In fact, the memory of that little church in 1944, is still full of strong emotions although it is not rage that I feel but a complex loving acceptance of all that it is to be human.

Of course I know that it is just as often the Christians who kill and the Germans who sing. Today there are Bosnians who kill and other, courageous Bosnians who love — or Irish, Indians, Africans, Arabs and Israelis, and of course we ourselves.; We all have the ability to love as well as to hate.

I remind myself that Christ told us to love each other as we love ourselves -- not as we wish ourselves or others to be, but as we are. The Buddha said that we may not be

able to be free of pain and suffering that comes from being alive, but we can rise above it by compassion, which I understand to mean unconditional love, love without judgment, without expectations, without conditions.

What else can we do but love?

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There have been years when I thought I wanted to attend a midnight mass on Christmas Eve. I thought I wanted to feel again the hope we felt in the darkest of that winter night. We so yearned to be safe again, safe in our own homes, our own streets. We wanted to be reassured that life was not just unrelenting hunger, endless cold, the sick fear we all knew twenty-four hours a day. We desperately wanted to know that things would be all right again, or at least better. When, toward the end of the Mass, the priest raised his arms, I held my breath.

I expected—I wanted!—some great thing to happen, a miracle, a lightning flash, a thunder clap. God Himself would hurl down a new Commandment that would magically put right the awful mess we had made on earth.

But God did not thunder.

A man gave us warning.

I and many others owe my life to that young priest; he himself must have been killed. I do not know his name, but I honor him, as I honor the people inside who sang.

robert wolff ©; 1994 -- I hope and pray that this is the last year I must relive and rewrite this story.
robert wolff © January 2, 2004 —I reread and lived this again when I read that American troops had stormed into a Mosque in Iraq, with their shoes on, machine guns in their arms.

I did not rewrite the story; each year my experiences seem more insignificant, albeit mild compared to the daily news.

Yet today I feel stronger than ever that Man's inhumanity to Man is an abomination. War is wrong; there is no excuse for war.