

Geoffrey Gibbs

Winter Solstice Offering

December 2021

Pandemic Journal



Kinsman Press

geoffgibbs@uri.edu

401-783-1682

14 Helme Road,

Kingston, RI 02881

Copyright © 2021

All Rights Reserved

Winter Solstice Offering

I crave light and become depressed by darkness. So when holiday time arrives and there are the glowing bulbs on evergreens inside, complimented by their reflections on glossy ornaments, and more outdoor lights with their many colors strung along the frames of houses and on trees, and flickering warmth from fireplaces I feel a tremendous relief. Hanukkah, the Winter Solstice, and Christmas have come and the sunlight I long for will incrementally return. The following week brings New Years, but I am too old to make a new resolution. Light as a metaphor for seeking good, truth, or revelation goes back to the great Persian philosopher Zoroaster. We need symbols to represent those things which are hard to put into words. So for three thousand years Zoroaster's message that we should embrace the light has rung true, even though his religion fades away with only a few thousand adherents remaining. His fire temples are mostly ruins. His eternal flames have sputtered out.

Even American patriots and politicians at an earlier time wanted an everlasting fire to blaze below the dome of our Capital, but all the smoke made it impractical. There is of course an eternal flame kept lit for John Kennedy, a good man if only briefly a president—but long enough to send us forth into outer-space. As for Hanukkah—one day's supply of oil lasted eight days—a symbol that hope is perhaps as significant as attainment. What does the light and darkness actually represent? There is the expression that one has at last seen the light. Although we may not reach the ultimate realization, the struggle toward it remains equally significant.

Certainly our craving for light which seems to relieve any sadness, must go back to all those centuries we lived in dark cold caves, hoping that the previous inhabitants would not disturb us during our sleep. Just imagine what existing deep within a cave would be like when the fire went out and we had to grope about searching for our flints and then smashing them together, wishing for a spark. Keeping flames lit must have been just about the most important activity there was. Torches would be available to scare wolves, tigers, bears, and unfriendly strangers away. As a person with limited vision, I particularly crave strong illumination and was very angry when in 2007 the bright incandescent bulbs were retired to be replaced with those sickly LEDs and fluorescents that I can hardly read by. Now my reading guarantees a headache, but it is a price to be paid for having anything of interest I can find to stuff into my head.

✱

Summer solstice, near the end of June is the Northern Hemisphere's longest day. We must be thankful for these defining days (the shortest and the longest) because they are like the separate topics of this essay. Life needs such definition to keep us sane. Occasionally I visit my daughter in Norway in the summer and the length of the day is so long that cardboard has to be put in the windows to block the sunlight which is still shining long into what at home would be the night. I should mention that even the Norwegian don't try to sleep through all the sunlight. Instead they stay up later and later, singing songs with their resonant deep voices in a 6/8 lilting rhythm as they drink mead (fermented honey prepared to an age-old recipe).

Six months later there is Christmas—a time when darkness descends and we need ways to bolster us from falling into melancholy. My father and mother adored the Christmas celebration and made much of it. They attempted to preserve as many of the age-old traditions as possible. It did not matter to them as to whether the Nativity in Matthew and Luke was historically accurate. They found it true in a much more important way. The story reached their hearts, as it had ensnared multitudes since ancient times. They loved the pagan aspects which had been grafted on to it from Roman, Celtic, German, and other peoples—the decorated tree, bows of holly, beautifully wrapped gifts, Santa's sleigh pulled through the sky by reindeer, and secular Christmas songs. It was only natural that celebrations should incorporate all that was beloved and beautiful from time immemorial.

There were wonderful decorations on the tree including a miniature little *art deco* village from the 1930s. Although they had lost some of their luster, a star-shaped ornament for the crown and a heavy brass ball had survived from the 19th century. There were a jovial little Santa and merry elves perched on limbs. Once all the decorations had been hung from each bough, the entire tree was draped with tinsel. When it lit up it fulfilled the mission Martin Luther had given it hundreds of years earlier, to use light to reinforce faith (which for us was also faith in humankind). To the right of the tree was a red-brick fireplace with scallop-shaped lamps on each side. For the holidays the mantle was draped in evergreens with large pine cones and red bows. Placed in the center was a blue mirror sprinkled with artificial snow. Upon it was a whole German skating party of lead figures promenading arm in arm. Hanging from the fireplace were three red stockings bulging with secret delights. Red-striped peppermints were in a bowl by the piano. Paper snowflakes were taped to the windows.

*

In my mature years I thought that I would never find any celebrations which matched those of my youth. But I was wrong, because these traditions have a way of continuing. One thinks of Russia where after 70 years of official atheism, the Orthodox churches were reopened as if the attempted destruction had only been a moment. My musical gifts serve a real purpose at holiday time. At the piano I play all the carols and secular Christmas songs from memory. Children dance as I improvise excerpts from Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker." A great-niece with a lovely voice sings "O Holy Night," an aria with elaborate piano arpeggiations and a thrilling high note composed by Adolphe Adam. He is a one-song composer (but what a song)!

Memories of those people we often only see at Christmas give impetus to the thought that just as my dear wife is no longer with us, that my time to depart will eventually come—but it generates no fear, because there is a blissful relaxation which comes from surrendering to the inevitable. And now there are new generations of great-great nieces and nephews. I get much delight out of playing with children because as a creative person I have worked hard to maintain my imagination and inspiration. I am perfectly happy to read the same children's book over and over (children love repetition). On Christmas day I take a walk around the neighborhood and view fondly all the houses which have outside decorations. A few Christmases ago another celebrant, a most delightful woman who actually had dated a Beatle (I can't remember which one), accompanied me as I took her down the lanes which had elaborately decorated houses. Unfortunately she passed away, way before her time and now she is only an echo of comradeship still in my mind. There are others walking by who smile and make appropriate salutations. It doesn't matter if the behavior is a little bit contrived for the occasion. From my perspective, people are as they present themselves to me. I am not searching for evidence that politeness may be artificial—who minds as long as the warm atmosphere is preserved while beyond our coats and scarfs the air is chill, the wind and snow are blowing?

Now that it appears that the pandemic era is approaching its end, or continuing as an endemic disease like the common cold or flu, we wonder whether family gatherings of multiple generations will reappear. Or have our habits been so reshaped and corrupted that withdrawal into self is all that is left to us? Being somewhat a hermit dictated by fate rather than by choice, I must say that isolation is a most dangerous way to live. Inner life becomes everything and we are wrapped up in ourselves—magnifying every little vulnerability. I want holiday celebrations to return as they have been in the past with the self submerged into a glorious union with others.

Introduction to “Mary’s Lord of Misrule”

The ancestor I know by name who is the earliest one I can identify is John Thorogood, “a singing-man at Westminster Abbey and in the court of Queen Mary Tudor (Bloody Queen Mary). He was chosen by Henry VIII to be Mary’s Lord of Misrule for 1521. It was John’s responsibility to oversee the Christmas revels starting at Halloween and ending January 6th. He may have accompanied her at her various residencies such as Ludlow Castle, Wales (1525). His later execution when he attempted to assassinate Mary is a very specific family legend which cannot be verified. Doubtlessly the royal family would have preferred to keep such an act secret. It was recounted by Esther Thorogood (born in 1809), the wife of Henry Gibbs II who with his father was a dissenter from the Anglican Church. As I have stated before, they came to New York City where father and son both worked in the Fulton Fish Market and preached on Sundays. In the following poem there has been no attempt to duplicate English as it would have been spoken in the 16th century.

The story of another John Thorogood who was imprisoned for a year in 1839 for not paying Episcopal church tax cannot be directly associated with my family. But it is interesting that the time of his arrest is contemporaneous with Esther’s coming to America. They surely were related, at least by their similar beliefs in separation of church and state.

Now I am sure that most modern Americans would frown on paying state required tithes (automatic payments of 10% of income to churches, mosques, or synagogues). But yet that is the case, still in our country. How is it engineered without our knowing it? Churches are grouped together with public charities and not expected to pay state or federal tax. Properties directly associated with religious observance would seem appropriate for this sort of treatment. Whether other real estate owned by churches is taxed differs according to each state. To give an example: Trinity Church in NYC owns \$6 billion in real estate properties and as far as I can ascertain does not pay any tax on them. We take for granted that private and church schools do not pay tax and also receive certain support from states such as bussing of students. But yet in low-income areas, churches are barely surviving. Catholic seminaries and nunneries are closing. Church buildings cannot be repaired and congregations eventually have no choice but to disband. The money that congregations might put into coffers, is instead paid in taxes which support religious institutions in rich communities. One should understand that nothing is fair in this world unless it is understood and inequities tackled—and in present America, with fewer newspapers and reporters and with

unedited web trivia obscuring what is significant, much of the corruption of government and individuals is no longer revealed.

It is now time to enter the world of verse to tell a story from years ago—it cares little about viewpoints and instead wishes to marshal all of the senses and feelings to celebrate what it is to be human.

Mary's Lord of Misrule

Red haired and freckled Mary sits at the virginal and plays a hymn.
She sings the Latin in her clear true voice while smiling Thorogood looks on.
He has taught her well, as well as he was taught at Westminster.
The sound echoes through the royal chapel where Spanish Catherine of Aragon
Sits devoutly with her well-worn missal. The three of them are alone
And emersed in their devotions—the two women to God,
And John Thorogood to music and to them.

Henry the 8th has just announced that Thorogood will be Lord of Misrule
For this 1521 holiday season. There is much to do. John must have the palace
Cleaned and decorated. A huge evergreen will be hung with ornaments
With a star on top. Mummers must be hired to put on a good show.
Musicians will be rehearsed to provide fine fanfares, promenades, and dances.
Couples must be invited to jig and kiss under the mistletoe.

In the kitchen the multiple fireplaces will all be stoked up for much cooking—
Wild boar, deer, lamb, beef, turkey, minced pies, and enough spirits to lift spirits.
Almost everything is extremely fattening and awfully sweet to help preserve it.
Vegetables are considered too dangerous to eat. The hounds must be well-fed too,
To prepare for the great hunts through the King's forests where even the wild beasts
Await the arrows, swords, and small cannons with pride.

No other entertainments are allowed throughout the land.
Henry has already banned most games and sports for common people.

They must preserve all energies to continually help him prosper.
 Almost all the great Catholic monasteries have been raided and burned to the ground.
 For the Christmas season even the sewing wheels are silent and draped with flowers.

Mary has finished the hymn and now turns to a song book.
 When Catherine hears the secular English lyrics
 She wrinkles up her nose in displeasure,
 But her daughter sings so beautifully that Catherine doesn't try to stop it.

Crown me with quavers,
 Pin me with Semi-quavers too.
 Shod my feet with crotchets.
 Lift the lyric higher and higher.
 Make it a musical spire,
 So that it may swell my desire for you.

Trill me and thrill me.
 Grace note my beautiful face.
 Scale the heights of love
 And rest for a moment of bliss
 Followed by a passionate kiss like this.

Soon we come to the repeat.
 All must be played again
 To new words which praise you more
 To reach to the inner-most core

Of the one that I adore and want much more
 Than sound can sing. Stay for a duet.
 Together we will fuse as one
 Until the song at last is done,
 Finished with one last rapid run.
 Lu-lu-la, lu-lu-la.

Now we skip to 1555 and find that John is still alive —

Serving in Queen Mary's royal court.

He remains a beloved valet

Whose faithfulness is a given each day.

In evenings at the virginal he will play

A variation to assuage her aches and cares.

He performs for her as she writhes in pain,

Hoping she is pregnant again.

The swelling swells as notes swirl up

An octave of scales until the tempo slows.

In the courtyard bonfires burn Protestant heretics.

Any deviation leads to the hangman's noose.

Interrogations are facilitated by much torture

And cries of agony must be masked by more music.

The next day John stands tall in thrall

Beside her thrown where amid mown

She curses Ireland for rising up,

Unwilling to drink her loving cup.

To assembled knights she gives an order:

"Go and chop off the right breast of every Irish lass!"

John cannot believe his ears which still are keen.

From its sheath he draws his sword which has never cast a blow.

He runs toward Mary, the girl that he loves so.

"I will start with you!" he shouts.

Before five steps, John Thorogood is dead

And Mary soon will never leave her bed.

My family for five hundred years
 Continues to tell this tale with tears.
 And now who is there who can say it's true,
 Neither books, nor I, nor you.

There is a curse upon the Lord of Misrule,
 The Abbot of Unreason which goes back more than a season.
 During the ancient Roman Saturnalia in December,
 There was also a commoner chosen to rule.
 The celebration would seem familiar even to us 2,000 years later.
 Children gave and received gifts to encourage
 Sharing rather than greed and Romans were very greedy indeed.

The ancient Lord of Misrule assumed the status of the God Saturn
 And was enthroned for 12 days and then slaughtered—
 Just as John was sacrificed also when he drew his sword,
 Attempting to exact justice from a higher lord.

*

And now we skip near 300 years,
 To another John Thorogood, the Essex dissenter in jail.
 He, unwilling to pay the Church Rate Tax,
 Had languished in a cell for the whole year of 1839,
 Obstinate that he would not pay a tithe to a church
 Which was not his own nor accept that the state
 Could force the religious tax fee out of him.

This is what is called civil disobedience,
 A rather circuitous definition for breaking the law
 Out of conscience rather than from violence or avarice.
 Thoreau, Gandhi, and King did it

And they are now revered.
How much better than being feared,
To sacrifice for principle alone,
And refuse to bow before any throne.

This is to emulate those we worship
And accept derision, death, or whip.
Conscience cannot afford to slip
For there may not be a clear way back
When we have lost the straightest track.

And now my lineage stories have been told.
From shared family memory of old.
Grasp its meaning if you like
And if not just go and take a hike
Through snow drift piled high by roads
With sleighs a-jingling with heavy loads.

Trudge along the slippery path and
Give a greeting with a hearty laugh.
Wag hello with hat and staff.
Once inside run to the fire
Where blast of warmth will make feet drier.

Outside we hear the town's loud crier
Call to us to mark each hour
With all the joys which soon will flower
From humble home to highest tower.

Eventually I will gather up the years of entries for my pandemic journal and attempt to bring them together as one work. It has no unity of design and is only the result of helter-skelter

inspiration. I search for some common theme but there is none. The writing steers away from any description of the actual battle to conquer the Covid-19 pandemic. My life is too sheltered to be able to record the heroic deeds of scientists, doctors, nurses, and care givers. So instead, I dwell on other things which have stimulated my brain for these last two years. You have come along with me, unbidden and perhaps unwillingly. As I have confessed before, I was afraid to ask you if you wanted to receive my offerings. Most presents we give reveal our own desires and preferences rather than those of the receiver. It doesn't matter. Whatever it is, it has been accomplished and now life moves forward.

Late Reflections

Share a moment of bliss with me
From inner core to furthest sea.
Feel the ache and warmth of heart
Where all our goodness has its start.

Close the book, switch off the screen—
No more time for might have been.
Take a breath and then exhale.
Praise the effort as we fail.

Of some avail it might have been—
So now just wipe the surface clean.
Time to search for other crafts
Or hunt the drawers for discarded drafts.

Silence is a threat to me.
Appreciation is not the same as doing.
So from the brain, much more is spewing.
Spread it here for someone's viewing.

Soft the flesh but softer still
The thoughts that from the brain still spill.
Splashed upon the soiled ground,
Meaning cannot now be found.

Search for something if you must.
I will no longer request your trust.
If you need to share with me
Some kind thought of sympathy,

Write it down and send it quick.
Piles of thoughts are awfully thick.
To my craft I will surely stick.
Postage stamp I soon will lick.
Mailed off it will reach some address.
Your interest I can only guess.

Other Chapbooks by Geoffrey Gibbs

Surrection Time (March 2020), Walking Kingston Hill (April 2020)

Water, Water Everywhere (May 2020), My Constitutional (June 2020)

Summer Fixation (July 2020), A Fictionalized Family Remembrance (August 2020)

Lamentations Again and Again (September 2020), Autumn Journal (December 2020)

Beyond Modernism (January 2020), My Inner Sanctum (February 2021)

Optimism Prescribed (March 2021), Vaccinating God (April 2021)

Safari of the Imagination (May 2021), Pandemic Politics (July 2021)

Uprooted Ovid (August 2021), Fictionalized Fact and Factualized Fiction (September 2021)

Covid Clowning (October 2021), The Mirror House (October 2021)

The Mirror House (November 2021), Winter Solstice (December 2021)

Back copies are available from the author.