

An Advent Reflection

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Most of you probably don't know this, but a little over a year ago, in a corporate reorganization, I lost my position as a Senior Research Associate... after 14 years of service... with 24 hours notice. At first, I felt as if I had completely lost my identity and my family, but within a day or so, the shock gave way to a sense of anticipation and patience - of advent if you will. I did not know where this came from, this desire to take what I had learned from the past and just move forward into the future. So, I started looking around Baltimore for interesting things people were doing. I want to work for social justice, and this certainly is a place where legions of people are working tirelessly for that end. I want to tell their stories.

Shortly after I lost my job, Pam and I received a three-dimensional silver *mobile*, a sculpture that a friend of ours had designed to hang, balance, and turn in our stairway. I would end each day on the second floor landing with a cup of tea and my journal and watch its grace.

It reminds me of storytelling – how each piece responds to its environment in subtly different ways, each one a “version” of a story. Together, they tell of this space and place, as they converse with each other about the stairs, the air, the light, our motion. As we can only tell authentic stories in engagement with others, they are in communion.

Christmas came, my father died the next morning. I spent each evening sitting at the top of the stairs watching the piece turn, contemplating, writing, reading, sipping tea. I was not

despondent, I could only seem to stare and ponder. It was never still, but also never quite moving.

One evening, sitting there, “Be silent and know that I am God,” whispered to me. Somehow though, the wording didn’t feel quite right, it carried a different tone than I remembered. I couldn’t remember its source, so I wrote a friend who worshipped with me in an Episcopal parish in Chicago many years ago, and he wrote back: “Psalms 46:10.” Just that. In some translations, it turns out the wording is right. But I got out an old Oxfordian Bible from the late 19th century from its case in my office to find an earlier translation.

“Be still and know that I am God.”

But in that version of the psalm, a word repeated over and over in the text at the end of many stanzas, and I noticed it in other psalms as well, a word I had never heard – “Selah.” S, e, l, a, h.

I found that there was a history of studying this word. Some thought it to be like a musical stop, as the psalms were originally sung. Others thought it to be like an “amen.” But its word origin was what caught me. It came from the word for “scale,” as in “to weigh.” That evening sitting at the top of the stairs, beneath Selah, I wrote:

“Remember:

a musical stop, a pause...

an amen...

listen...

hang...

weigh, as a scale...

balance...

turn and consider...

be still and know that I AM God...

Selah

I hear it often as I engage with the world... and nightly, as I
return to the landing. A constant presence. A constant
presence. From the past, looking forward.