

This started out as one of those snarky-kvetchy columns about The Holidays.



I had planned to rail against the Christmas decorations in downtown Beaufort, which must have broken some kind of record – not to mention every rule of good taste – by going up *a week before Halloween* this year! Along Bay Street, the cardboard skeletons and plastic witches looked somewhat obscene – if not exactly scary – cavorting in the festive glow of candy-cane street lights, ‘neath holly-embroidered banners. “Season’s Greetings”? In October? It felt more like a trick than a treat.

So I was all set to board the Bah Humbug express... rant the good rant about the “commercialization of Christmas”... You know, get my Charlie Brown on, like we columnists love to do this time of year. (Actually, we prefer to do it a bit later in the year, but when the ornaments go up in mid October...)

Then a funny thing happened. I started thinking. (Yes, it happens occasionally.) And as I was thinking – and this happens occasionally, too – a song popped into my head, completely unbidden.

“Cause we need a little Christmas, right this very minute...”

You know the one, right? Did you know it was from the musical “Mame”? I didn’t. Anyway, there it was in my head, and I’m sitting at my computer, trying to generate a snide diatribe against The Powers That Be (aka The Forces That Would Rush Christmas), and I just can’t do it. Because of the damn song. I’m pretty sure I know who those Forces are, and I like them. (My friends on Main Street Beaufort? My neighbors on City Council? My pal, Mayor Billy?) I’m pretty sure I understand their motives, too, and they’re righteous. What initially appeared as little more than tacky, crass commercialism I now see as a kind-hearted attempt to jump-start holiday business for the downtown merchants, who’ve been suffering – along with the rest of us – through one of the toughest economic years in personal memory.

I no longer felt snide. I felt a little ashamed. My diatribe was dead in the water. But the song was still in my head.

“Haul out the holly... put out the tree before my spirit falls again....”

And I was still thinking. I thought about how easy it is to condemn and ridicule others when you don't bother to understand their intentions... and how almost

impossible

it is once you

do.

I thought about all the times my sarcasm, or cynicism, or crankiness, or flat-out anger had been upgraded to something different – something better – by a song, or an image, or a sweetly resonant phrase. I've been writing a lot, lately, about the transformative power of art, for I am a true believer. And yes, it's kind of like a religion.

Incidentally, those of you who find my references to my *other* religion tiresome – or worse – need to understand that a worship service, for me, is very similar to a great concert or play. It's all poetry and song, soul-searching and sorrow, joy and transcendence. This is why I write about it here. For the same reasons I write about movies and books and music. They all feed me, and I long to share the feast. How I wish I could share that

particular

feast without offending anybody or losing my credibility as a writer. Acclaimed memoirist and new Catholic convert Mary Karr discussed this problem in a recent interview:

“Talking about spiritual matters to a secular audience is like doing card tricks on the radio. It's like, ‘This is really cool, everybody,’ and they're like, ‘Yeah, OK.’”

Frustrating as it is, I know she's right.

So let's get back to that other religion, the one it *is* okay to talk about – Art. I know that many of my readers are fellow “believers,” and for those of you who are, Christmas really *is*

coming early this year. Just peruse this publication. You'll be amazed by all the opportunities we have right here, right now, to participate in the sacred act of creation – for this, I believe, is what happens when we engage in the arts, whether as producers or consumers, performers or

spectators.

For starters, just look at our cover! When this image of Rebecca Davenport's painting "Triad" appeared in my inbox, I literally gasped. I don't have to explain why, do I? Just look at the detail! Look at those faces! Their expressions. This image is just so... *true*. G.K. Chesterton said, "the important thing in life is not to keep a steady system of pleasure and composure (which can be done quite well by hardening one's heart or thickening one's head), but to keep alive in oneself the immortal power of astonishment and laughter, and a kind of young reverence." Rebecca's "Triad" astonishes me and fills me with reverence. And, yes, it also makes me laugh. (See our article about Rebecca's new exhibit in this issue.)

Speaking of laughter, don't miss Mark Shaffer's article about the inaugural production of the new Beaufort Theatre Company, "Arsenic & Old Lace." Full disclosure requires that I tell you my husband's directing this play, but that's not the only reason it's going to be great. The cast is first rate – I've performed with many of them before – and they're working with wonderful material. Live theatre is like nothing else. When the cast is on, and the audience is on, and they're sending their energy back and forth and everything's clicking... I get chills just thinking about it. Can't wait to see this show! But even if you're not a fan of theatre, read the article. Creative writing is an art form in itself, and Mark Shaffer is one of the finest wordsmiths around. I happen to know those elegant, witty sentences he scatters across the page – casually, as if by accident – are actually the product of long, lonely hours spent sweating every word. Mark can pull you into a story like nobody else, and wherever he takes you, you'll be so glad you went.

Some believe music is the ultimate art form, bypassing the rational mind – at least for the listener – and going straight for the heart. My choir has been working on a Bach cantata for Christmas, and while mastering the intricacies of this inspired music, we've been ignoring the lyrics and singing "ta-ta-ta" instead. Adding the words will be icing on the cake, but the music is still the cake. But, that's for next month. There's plenty of beautiful music being made here over the next couple of weeks. The Winthrop Chorale will be singing with Vic Varner's fabulous BHS Voices, and the ever-talented Charlie Frost is playing an organ concert based on the music of Black America, just to name a few examples. And, of course, our local hot spots continue to feature great bands and solo performers on a regular basis. Find out who's where at our "Music" link.

As usual, I've said too much and run out of space, but please read this issue carefully, because there are so many people out there sharing their gifts this month. And yes, it's a little early, but if you're anything like me, you could really use an early gift or two this year...

especially a gift of the spirit.

"For we've grown a little leaner, grown a little colder, grown a little sadder, grown a little older..."

And we need a little Christmas. Now.

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