

## Christmas Eve 2001

By Anne Wondra

Christmas Eve 2001, in a small rural town, the church is packed and the priest starts his sermon. He says it all started in the 60's—this “me” attitude and self-centeredness—as he called it. He mentioned the sexual revolution and a few other things I don't recall right now. His perception was that all of the changes of the 60's and those after were detrimental to the soul. I disagree. I was there too.

In the traditions of patriarchy, the ideal person is forever an obedient child. The father always knows what's best, and one is not to trust the inner promptings of the Spirit. To think for oneself is discouraged. The body is “at war” with the Spirit, and the human mind is not to be trusted. And in matters of faith, morals, spirituality, and religion, the pastor, bishop, pope, or other clergy are the ones to be consulted. And only their interpretations and those of that particular tradition are to be considered morally right. In a strict patriarchal environment, control, authority, maintenance of appearances, and the status quo are political realities.

In the 60's Americans became adolescents. People started thinking for themselves and questioning the traditional patriarchal social and religious party lines. Vatican II, the Beatles, and the Civil Rights Movement awakened us to the realities of global diversity, social justice issues, and the beginnings of religious tolerance and active involvement of the mind, body, and spirit.

As a child of Vatican II, I delighted at the affirmation of one's conscience as the final moral authority of one's actions. I also delighted that the altar was turned around so the priest and people were facing each other and that the mass was now in English so I could understand the words and participate. I also delighted that the music changed to include guitars, youth groups, and music that sometimes had a dancing beat—what better way to integrate mind, body and spirit into prayer! “Praying on the dance floor” in years following was a natural progression. Even today, I pray and dance to the beat of the music—mind, body, and spirit...close your eyes and listen as you move.

The songs of the Beatles, a group from Liverpool, England, were part of my adolescent initiation into music and a new kind of spirituality. Their songs, “Imagine,” “Let it Be,” and many others still speak to my spirit.

The age of adolescence is a turbulent time because our natural developmental hormones are activated. Our mind begins functioning with new analytical capabilities, our bodies transform into adult shapes and capabilities, and with it, our emotions are unleashed to feel and experience in ways we never have before. The lessons we learn in adolescence are transformative—they shape our soul. In spiritual terms, adolescence is a time of initiation, often marked by ritual—death and rebirth, the child becomes an adult.

As an adult, a person thinks for themselves, forms their own opinions—based on information they've sought, gathered, analyzed, and evaluated—and then takes ownership and responsibility for their conclusions and actions.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 60's brought to light the issues of social injustice—particularly racism, but also sexism. And a new generation of adolescents—my generation—was paying attention. The injustice of treating someone differently—often as inferior, cruelly, and/or less than human—simply because of their skin color was recognized, named, debated, and fought over heatedly. Not since women were allowed to vote in 1920 was there such a societal upheaval. Why? Because women with voting rights and black Americans with equal rights and privileges as white-skinned Americans were threats to the status quo, “business as usual,” and the foundations of patriarchal control and power structures. The Women's Rights Movement of the 70's, though more subtle, was and is a similar foundational threat that is still being played out.

So where was Spirituality in all of this? I saw the Spirit present in all those who wrestled with what they'd been taught, and made new choices based on their own experiences and interpretations of what was just and right. On this Christmas Eve 2001, I take much for granted based on the choices and courageous actions of those before me. I have colleagues from many nations, and the color of one's skin or their gender is never a consideration in determining their qualifications for a job or their pay scale. The Spirit was in the souls of those whose determination made positive change happen. Spirituality, among other things, is about fully utilizing your mind, body, and Spirit, and living responsibly and justly.

Now let's talk about that "me attitude" and "self-centeredness" issue.

When power and control structures are undermined or threatened, people and institutions get ugly, manipulative, and destructive. And their weapon of choice is often words. Contrary to the childhood taunt that "Words will never hurt me," words are indeed destructive to one's inner self-esteem—UNLESS one has learned a few vital SELF-preservation strategies. Information and a healthy sense of self worth are two of them.

An interesting irony is that religious institutions and leaders taught us the great commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. Most drew our attention to the "Love your neighbor" part. But look again. Love your neighbor AS YOURSELF. In other words, LOVE YOURSELF FIRST—love, respect and honor yourself as one who is loved, entrusted, and empowered by the very Spirit and Breath of Life who lives and breathes through your actions and choices—so you can love your neighbor in the same fashion.

And yet, when we embrace that command, take it to heart, and make choices that take us outside institutional lines, the institutional authority figures step in and use put-down (guilt-producing) words like "selfish" and "self-centered" to describe our actions in an attempt to regain "control" over us again. The same kind of pattern happens in power-control relationships too.

So I ask, is it a "Me attitude" and "self-centeredness" that you see around you today? Or is it a healthy sense of self-worth and value that allows individuals to do the right and just thing, even when it threatens the control and power structures of various people or social institutions? Maybe it's some of both—and that's not new since the 60's.

I do know that there's a little more kindness in the world these days, a recognition that our lives are fragile and precious, and that a lot of people—across race, religions, and political parties—have come together to help others in countless ways in the wake of September 11. Our hearts and spirits were touched.

And if the social changes of the 60's and decades thereafter were labors of a nation coming of age, then we're not done yet. Adulthood holds its own opportunities, insights, challenges, and changes. Let the Spirit dance among us, and let us take up the dance.

**Music:** *I Hope You'll Dance* by LeAnn Womack

**Reading/Book:** *The Invitation* by Oriah Mountain Dreamer

Be blessed and blessing - Anne