

Going Home Another Way

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January 6, 2019

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opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh

For at least 60 years, probably longer, it has been fashionable to comment on the inappropriate nature of the gifts that the Wise Men brought to Bethlehem. Comedians, cartoonists, and meme creators suggest that three wise *women* would have brought diapers and casseroles, and stuck around to help clean up. In *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, an account of the year a family of bullies took over the Christmas pageant, Barbara Robinson has her three kings abandon the fancy bath salts, oil cruet, and treasure chest meant to symbolize gold, frankincense and myrrh. Instead they lug their family's food shelf holiday basket ham to the manger. Unitarian Universalist minister [Lynn Ungar](#), speaking through the voice of the camels writes:

I ask you, what would a king know of choosing presents for a child? Had they ever even seen a baby born to such simple folks, so naked of pretension, so open to the wind? What would such a child care for perfumes and gold? Far better to have asked one born in the desert, tested by wind and sand. We saw what he would need: the gift of perseverance, of continuing on the hard way, making do with what there is, living on what you have inside. The gift of holding up under a burden, of lifting another with grace, of kneeling To accept the weight of what you must bear. Our footsteps could have rocked him with the rhythm of the road, shown him comfort in a harsh land, the dignity of continually moving forward.

Lynn's words echo those William Carlos Williams wrote more than half a century before:

*What could a baby know
of gold ornaments
or frankincense and myrrh,
of priestly robes
and devout genuflections?*

But Williams wasn't making light of the gifts. Indeed his poem continues

But the imagination

*knows all stories
before they are told
and knows the truth of this one
past all defection.*

*The rich gifts
so unsuitable for a child
though devoutly proffered,
stood for all that love can bring.*

*The men were old
how could they know
of a mother's needs
of a child's
appetite?*

Biblical scholars say that's the point—the double point, actually. Those most precious gifts stood for love, and thus are not to be laughed at or dismissed despite their unsuitability. And, more importantly to some, the kingly gifts, offered by kings, indicated the true nature of the infant—the one foretold but not yet realized. That he himself was destined to be the king of kings.

Lynn Ungar goes on to say the **infant Jesus** got the gifts he needed from that encounter despite the kings' clumsy intentions:

*...But never mind. We saw the baby, felt him reach for the bright tassels of our gear.
We desert amblers have our ways of seeing what you chatterers must miss. That child
at heart knows something about following a star. Our gifts are given. Have no doubt.
His life will bear the print of who we are.*

That's why I include her poem every Christmas Eve (when we compress the story of Jesus' conception and birth and adoration into one telling).

Williams says **the kings** got the gift they needed from the encounter:

*But as they kneeled
the child was fed.
They saw it
and gave praise!
A miracle
had taken place,
hard gold to love,*

a mother's milk!

before

their wondering eyes.

The ass brayed

the cattle lowed.

It was their nature.

All men by their nature give praise.

It is all

they can do.

...

What is death,

beside this?

Nothing. The wise men

came with gift

and bowed down

to worship

this perfection.

That's why I include **his** poem every Christmas Eve.

And it is the Wise Ones receiving the gift they needed from their encounter at the manger that especially interests me this Epiphany.

Christian tradition holds that January 6 is the day the Magi, the kings, the wise ones from the East arrived at Bethlehem, seeking the infant Jesus, the one born king of the Jews. By extension it is also the day they left to return home.

Or maybe the day before the day they left for home. In the same book I mentioned earlier, the ham-toting bully/kings sit down to watch the rest of the pageant unfold rather than leave by another door as they are supposed to do, and when someone complains, the young narrator of the story thinks, "it made perfect sense for [them] to sit down and rest," and she retorts, "They're supposed to have come a long way. You wouldn't expect them to just show up, hand over the ham, and leave!".

Either way, today or tomorrow or next week, these early days of January in our present calendar are the days in which, according to legend and tradition, the Wise Ones were on the move.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

That's how the New Revised Standard Version of the Christian Scripture translates Matthew 2:12. Most contemporary versions say the same thing or something very similar—perhaps by *another route*. Close enough. But in my mind I always hear the verse as translated in the King James Version, *And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country **another way***. Maybe, though it seems unlikely, that was the version read in my childhood church, or in my family. Whatever the reason, I've been reflecting on the less specific *another way*, rather than *another road* or *another route*, as I've considered how to enter into this New Year.

Poetry and song and legend tells us how the Wise Ones got to Bethlehem—following the star that went before them, asking around for the right place—but other than that single verse in Matthew, we're told nothing of how they departed or made their way home, so there's lots to play with here.

I mean, of course, the most sensible interpretation—given that God warned them not to return to Herod—is the interpretation that sends them home on a different road or by a different route. But that isn't the only option.

Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and deciding, therefore, to go home another way, the Magi could have engaged extra muscle. To travel with an entourage of twice the size would have been another way to go, and might have given them the courage to pass right by Herod without stopping to report on Jesus' whereabouts.

Or they could have disguised themselves, traveled as women or peasants or merchants. That too would have allowed them to go home *another way*, all the while taking the same route and not endangering Jesus.

Splitting up would have been another way to go, traveling in two or three smaller caravans, instead of one big one, allowing them to slip by Herod undetected.

They even could have stayed in Bethlehem. Made a home for themselves there. That would certainly have been *going home another way*.

Or maybe, with neither extra muscle nor disguise, traveling together as they had arrived, those wise men, those kings, those Magi, went home *another*, another way. So changed by their experience that the question of complying with Herod's request was irrelevant to the rest of their story. (Not Jesus's story, but their story).

* * * * *

For a week or two now and for another week or two more, before fading away again for another year, New Year's resolutions have and will dominate/d conversations, articles,

Facebook memes—or at least the conversations, articles and Facebook memes that are not dominated by the federal government shutdown. Humorous or earnest, self-help or justice oriented, spiritual or psychological, and often a combination of all these and more. My friends, colleagues, and family members have chosen single word intentions for 2019, or resolved to drink just as much wine as in 2018 while exercising not the tiniest bit more, or to listen more and speak less, or to undertake one practice to better themselves and one practice for the betterment of their communities. Some have reflected on the successes or failures or unexpected outcomes of resolutions of years past, as prelude to declaring this year's resolutions or non-resolution stance. You've probably encountered similar themes in discussions among your family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, students, or in your own New Year's musings.

Each of these approaches might be going home another way from the holidays, going home another way from a difficult year past, going home another way from an unsatisfying present existence—that is to say, going home changed, via the road or route of resolutions. I hold or make no judgments about this way home—truly, I tend to be more judgmental of my own consistent refusal to make resolutions. Still, as I've probably said before, I consider resolution-making a double-edged sword, potentially potently transformative, potentially powerfully dangerous. I don't mean to suggest we don't know what is best for us, or what we—body and soul and mind—might need more or less of, that we aren't our own best experts on ourselves and shouldn't therefore make resolutions regarding our welfare. I do suggest, that we are complex and complicated, and often conflicted and confused, too, and hurried and harried, and oh, so, so, so easily swayed toward unkindness toward ourselves. So, while no one else is more expert on ourselves than we are, still we might not always be, and probably very rarely are, in any position to make sound and definitive pronouncements about the one thing (or the half dozen things) we need to change to become A Better Self forever and ever amen. (Or for the next 359 days amen).

That brings us back to Epiphany. The gifts offered and received at the manger. And the Magi going home another way.

Transformation inevitably results from witnessing miracles. Even for those, who like Lynn Ungar's Wise Ones are "only half-willing to be amazed." William Carlos Williams says the kings brought a gift and witnessed a miracle and bowed to worship. I can't believe those kings, having witnessed miracle and worshiped perfection, possibly returned home unchanged, that is to say, the same way they arrived. Indeed, T. S. Eliot's

Magi, in this morning's reading, say unequivocally that they returned home another way, forever changed:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, With an alien people clutching their gods.

Of course, Eliot's Magi weren't entirely happy with the change wrought by their encounter with the Holy, one of them pronouncing finally *I should be glad of another death*. That's the thing about the Holy. It changes us whether we want it or not. It changes us in ways neither predictable nor controllable. In ways we could never, not even in our most diligent and well-considered resolution-making, imagine. Encounters with the Holy send us home another way, sometimes almost unrecognizable to others or ourselves, often discontent with old ways.

And, here is the good news of Epiphany: the Holy, miracles, perfection, abound, today, in our very natural and decidedly not other-worldly world. What perfection did the Wise Ones bow before? What miracle did they witness? A mother nursing her baby. So mundane and creaturely a miracle! Such a human perfection!

The Magi, travelers from the East who were perhaps astronomers, perhaps royalty, perhaps seekers after adventure, found the Holy lying in a manger, watched over by parents whose relationship must have been on rocky ground. Most any day our lives' journeys bring us to places, to people, to relationships, to situations no more likely to house the Holy than that place, those people, that relationship. Every day we witness or engage in acts as mundane and miraculous as breastfeeding. Going home another way is our destiny, no less than theirs, those Wise Ones of song and legend.

Make resolutions if you must or if you enjoy the challenge. If they soon fall by the wayside, however, or if you don't make any, despair not. Before the New Year become the Old Year, before the sun sets tonight, in fact, the Holy will present itself to you, a miracle will fall upon your eye or ear or heart, and you will head home another way. I promise.

Amen.