

Reflection for Advent Vespers

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As some of you know, I have seasonal excitement disorder. I embrace this time of the year – I love the month of December, the season of Advent, and the shorter days and longer nights. I feel no sorrow or misery in this extended dark time. Perhaps living through two winters in Norway gave me a greater appreciation for the darkness and the light carried within that darkness.

I look forward to the late afternoon when I can look out my kitchen window to see the iridescent blues and purples over Orcutt Harbor. Often, a streak of pink appears, and I dare not leave for fear of missing this quickly changing kaleidoscope of color and light. It is "the untrimmable light of the world," to take a line from Mary Oliver's poem "Mindful." This phrase is one of the replies to her statement: *Oh, good scholar, I say to myself, how can you help but grow wise with such teachings as these.*

During our year in Lillehammer, I learned the term "blå timer," which translates to "the blue hours." It describes the soft blue light at twilight that can last for several hours during the Nordic winter. Lillehammer has always been known for its special light, with painters traveling there for years to capture it. Not only did I experience the blå timer, but I had another experience with light there that I'll never forget. It was on Christmas Day. We put the turkey in the oven and went skiing on the trails above the farm where we lived. The untrimmable light of the sky and the landscape manifested itself in a palette of whites and grays, so many variations that it was like

opening a Sherwin-Williams fan deck of colors to these pages. The light of the natural world; an ordinary thing that can become quite extraordinary. And did I mention the silhouettes of trees on the snow in the moonlight? *How can we help but grow wise with such teachings as these.*

It was also in Norway that I observed that at the darkest time of the year, people celebrate the most. This happens at gatherings with family and friends, especially between Christmas Eve and New Year's. Norwegians bring light during this darkness by buying more flowers and lighting more candles. This is both a public and private expression. It's not unusual to find a tea light or candle next to the food samples in the supermarket or a candle greeting you at the desk when you walk into the public library. This all speaks to hospitality. Visiting a friend at this time of year always entails an invitation to have a cup of coffee, a plate of cookies (the Norwegian expectation is to have seven different types of cookies available for the holidays), and, of course, one would never sit down to enjoy this without a candle being lit. Norwegians call this "kos" – the instant happiness you feel when you are comfortable and warm and having a good time together with others. Another word for this is "hygge." We experience "hygge" at Miriam's pizza parties. You may know this book: *The Little Book of Hygge - The Danish Way To Live Well*. It makes this bold statement: "No recipe for hygge is complete without candles."

In Norway, my eyes were opened about how one might "carry the light," literally and figuratively. My friend Gry told me she always travels with a tea light. When she arrives at a hotel, she'll light her tea light to create that feeling of kos or hygge, a sense of home and coziness.

But it wasn't until I observed a woman at the Lillehammer Library that I realized that "All you need in life is a tea light." She was sitting very quietly next to her art exhibition, reading her book, and on a small table next to her was simply this:



No candle holder, just this little tin holding a flame. Simplicity... "All you need in life is a tea light." And I don't want you to be without one. Please take one from the basket when you leave tonight.

Because of our time in Norway, we now light a candle at every dinner. We plug in the mini lights inside our home throughout the year. Call it nostalgia or *hygge*, and there is a hefty dose of that, but it's also a reminder to bring light into the world, *to be* a light in the world.

In closing, I would like to leave you with this passage by The Rev. Cameron Trimble: "Advent is the season of holy darkness, the time when truth hides in shadow and asks if we're willing to look. Each year it returns, not to redeem the world but to remind us that light is always being born through us, again and again."

Amen.