

A little girl was watching her parents dress for a New Years Eve Party. When she saw her dad donning his tuxedo, she warned, "Daddy, you shouldn't wear that suit." "And why not darling?" he replied. "You know that it always gives you a headache the next morning." (From an e-mail)

And I read that there are now more overweight people in the United States than average-weight people. So overweight people are now average. Which means we've met our New Year's resolution!

I've always loved the phrase "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." Often it's translated that "she pondered." When we think about what the phrase "all these things" refers to, it's no wonder she pondered. Here's a teenage kid who has just had a baby in the back stall of a barn, with some confusion about just how this came about, although there was that strange thing with an angel about 9 months ago. Her husband is muttering about taxes and the fact that the King in these parts, Herod, has just issued a decree ordering infanticide. And if that's not enough to think about, there's all this traffic of visiting astrologers, sheep ranchers, and angels, who keep dropping by with questions and proclamations and chorales. To top it off, legends all say that the animals who are jammed in there with her talk. Not many cows speak Hebrew, but that seems to be what was going on. It certainly would give a person to do some heavy thinking. I'd say 'ponder' is the perfect word for what Mary was doing.

Old Job did a lot of similar thinking once upon a time on his ash heap. And Jonah, sitting in the steamy dark, awash in a whale's gastric juices and half-digested squid. Those guys did some pondering too, I bet.

And us, too. We get a bit of a break from our normal routine during the Christmas holidays, and whether we whoop it up or just go to bed to celebrate New Years, we have a chance to ponder. To ponder is not to brood or grieve. It is to wonder at a deep level. It's prayer.

I wonder about friends I had long ago and have lost touch with. Where are they now? What are they like? Did their lives turn out well? What would happen if I tried to find them and called them up? ("Hey, it's me, John Durbin, from Spangler." "WHO? – Oh you were that weird kid who buried all the neighborhood pets – and dressed up in a blanket that looked like a vestment-- and played mass and gave out necko wafers for communion....")

I wonder about all those people who don't know it now, but who will not be here to ponder at this time next year. If they knew it now, would it help? Would they feel compelled to change anything? And how about all those children who will be here this time next year, but who are just made up of parental desire at the moment?

Sometimes when I ponder I make secret pacts with myself. The kind of thing you don't tell anybody because you don't want to be caught doing something dumb like making New Year's resolutions. You keep this stuff to yourself so you don't get caught out on a limb and then not do whatever it is you said you were going to do. Once I listed all the good things I did over the past year, and then turned them into resolutions and backdated them! That was a great feeling!

And as I ponder, I recall school days. Going back to school the first week after the Christmas holidays, swearing secretly to myself that I was going to do better this year. And for a few days, I really DID do better, kept up with all the reading. I didn't always keep doing better – there are a lot of distractions when you are young – but for a few days at least – a few days of hopeful possibility – I had proof I really could do better. If I wanted to.

Now, at the cusp of old age, in thought that is hopefully more careful and reflective of experience, I almost unconsciously promise myself the same. I could do better. We could probably all do better.

I am reminded of the story about a man who found the horse of the king and he didn't know it was the king's horse and he kept it, but the king found out and arrested him and was going to kill him for stealing his horse. The man tried to explain and said he would willingly take his punishment, but did the king know that he could teach the horse to talk and if so the king would be a pretty impressive king, what with a talking horse and all? So the king thinks what does he have to lose and says sure. He'll give him a year. Well, the man's friends think he is nuts. But the man says – well, who knows? The king may die, I may die, the horse may die, the world may come to an end, the king might forget. But just maybe, just maybe, the horse may talk. One must believe that anything can happen. Which is why, when asked how my homily was going this week, I told the person, "Oh, I've been talking to a horse about it." It gave them something to ponder! (adapted from Fulghum, IT WAS ON FIRE WHEN I LAY DOWN ON IT, p. 55-59) The person shot back – "well maybe it will be worth listening to this time!" And then I had something to ponder! (That person is going to hell, by the way! Now that's just my opinion. My humble opinion. My humble but correct opinion!)

This pondering of Mary is not wringing her hands or losing heart; she does not allow fear of the unknown to paralyze her. Rather, she stored up in her heart what she did not comprehend, and in a spirit of trust and wonder, she returned from time to time to visit them and recommit them as well as herself, her son, her husband and their futures to God. It's a wonderful example of prayer as we begin a new year and bring an old one to a close.

It is that kind of prayerful pondering that enables us to look back over a calendar with a perspective of a year which give us the distance we didn't have as the days flew past. Just as we leaf through pictures in a photo album, watch old home videos, or look back from the pinnacle of a 50th or 25th anniversary, we can sometimes savor more in retrospect than we did in the flash of the moment. When we are not totally caught up in the present, we may be more attuned to the subtle ways God is working over the long haul. What seemed like a crisis showed how well we could cope with the unexpected; what seemed like a disaster brought blessing in the long run. Something we treated casually at the time had important consequences several months later. If we try seriously to pray over the texts of our lives, the turning of a calendar year can be a helpful prompt, an invaluable opportunity. (HOMILY SERVICE, Dec 02, p. 33)

So two questions might be helpful today. First, what have been the fruits of our prayer, our pondering in this season? In this year that has passed? What have we been reflecting on in our heart? And secondly, what will we take away from this past year, and this year's celebration of the Christmas season? How will it impact us throughout the coming year?

Second point. The precious quality of the time that we have been given. In his book, THE CHOSEN, Chaim Potok's main character has a conversation with his father about the seeming insignificance of human life in the face of suffering and death. His father responds, "Human beings do not live forever, Reuven. We live less than the time it takes to blink an eye, if we measure our lives against eternity. So it may be asked what value is there to a human life. There is so much pain in the world. What does it mean to have to suffer so much if our lives are nothing more than the blink of an eye?" He paused again, his eyes misty now, and then went on. "I learned a long time ago, Reuven, that a blink of an eye in itself is nothing. But the eye that blinks, that is something. A span of life is nothing. But the man who lives that span, he is something. He can fill that tiny span with meaning, so its quality is immeasurable though its quantity may be insignificant." The turn of a year is a time to reflect on the quality of our living, the quality of our very own blink of an eye.

Accounting for the past year, new resolutions, reflections, ponderings may be the way to move closer to God's desire and will for our lives.

Third and finally, a word about where this pondering and awareness of the quality of our time should lead us. It should lead us to love. Two musicals bring the answer. In RENT, the company of singers marks the story they are telling by singing what has become known as the 'anthem' of the musical, "SEASONS OF LOVE." In it they ask the question that so often occurs to us on the first day of a new year: "How do you measure a year in the life of a woman or a man?" In images distinctly reminiscent of the Book of Sirach, the singers answer their own question: "in daylights – in sunsets, in midnights – in cups of coffee, in inches – in miles, in laughter – in strife." As if that doesn't conjure up enough memories of the past year, they go on, 'In truths that she learned or in times that he cried, in bridges he burned or the way that she died.' Then, as if to make the meaning of their song indisputable they sing, "How do you measure a year? How about love? Measure in love."

Similar sentiments are found in CHORUS LINE, where after one of the members of their company has been injured, they ask themselves; "Why are we killing ourselves for this when it could be snapped, snatched away in an instant?" And they answer – FOR LOVE.

Kiss the day goodbye and point me toward tomorrow./ We did what we had to do.

The gift was ours to borrow./ It's as if we always knew

Love's what we'll remember./ Won't regret. Can't forget what I did for love.

As we ponder and pray over the year past and the year to come, remember the love that we shared, the people we shared it with, and the God who makes it all possible. It is love that this new year should be about. And we have the sentiment expressed perfectly by St. Francis of Assisi, who taught his friars: "Let us begin again, for up to now we have done nothing." Amen.