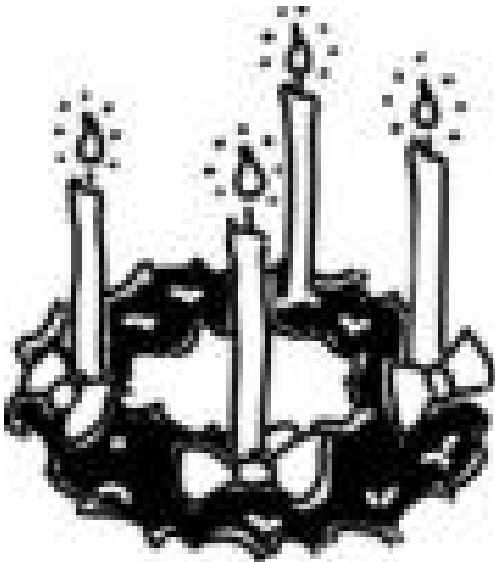


## The adventure of Advent

Rich Heffern | Dec. 2, 2010 Eco Catholic

Sometimes I manage to enjoy it when something comes up that derails or discombobulates me in the morning. Since my carefully laid plans have been capriciously monkey wrenched, that particular day might turn out to be an adventure, something I have begrudgingly learned to value.

The definition of an adventure is an undertaking or enterprise of a hazardous nature. We have no way of discerning ahead of time what the outcome will be. If we could, it would lose its exciting aspect.



So adventures can be exhilarating but they can also be frightening or

confusing. What's going to happen? There are no precedents, no assurances when things are turned completely upside down. It's impossible to imagine what the future will exactly look like. Our bewildering fears about the future haunt us.

We begin to embrace the adventure when we realize that we must necessarily live with unsettled questions, with not knowing, and that this is how much of life actually really is.

The poet Keats said of Shakespeare that he was possessed of "negative capability," that is the playwright was "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason."

It's a state of intentional, rigorous open-mindedness. In Shakespeare's case, it took the form of a certain shapelessness of personality, an ability to obliterate himself and flow into another being so that he could fashion character studies in prose that have seldom been surpassed.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke extends this quality to our spiritual life: "We must accept our reality as vastly as we possibly can. This is in the end the only kind of courage that is required of us: the courage to face the strangest, most unusual, most inexplicable experiences that can meet us." Only someone who is ready for everything, who doesn't exclude any experience, even the most incomprehensible and fearful, will "sound the depths of his

own being.?

The creative and poetic church knows that passing through Advent has all the qualities of such an adventure. In fact, ?advent? dwells within the longer word. Advent is the faith adventure that leads to ? well, Christmas, but every seasonal return is still filled with suspense.

The angel broke the news to Mary, but announced first: Do not be afraid. This is the right counsel for a faith adventure. The first Advent candle we light reminds us to be trustful as we proceed through this season. Advent is about waiting, being uncertain, even fearful of what?s coming.

A good Advent practice this year might be that of fear taming, providing oneself with a daily occasion to become a connoisseur of fears, to see where they dwell in our bodies, and to divide the rational from the irrational.

It?s an exercise that can help us in this uncertain economy as well.

?A fear a day keeps the psychiatrist away,? says psychologist of religion Sam Keene. ?We learn to fly not by becoming fearless, but by the daily practice of courage.?

This Advent, pay attention to each fear as it comes along, Keene advises: ?Take an inventory of your body. Do your hands get sweaty, your knees shaky, your stomach jittery, does your mind conjure up catastrophic scenarios??

Sit and breathe deeply, inviting your muscles to release their burden of fear. ?When we neither steel ourselves to be brave nor flee from the danger, an area of freedom opens up within which we discover new options. We cease to be fear?s victim and we break the trance-like cycle of dread, the feedback loop, the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure that shrinks our world.?

The Advent adventure has begun.

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