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Advent, the human season

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

Advent is a season made for imperfect people, all of us, in other words, trying to maintain our balance as we scramble up the final slope of the shadow seamed mountain of the year. Advent's climb leads us to a view of the far reaches of the heavenly but in a profoundly human way. We pass through its weeks as we stroll by a succession of Christmas windows, surprised by images of ourselves superimposed on the displays, behold, as the angel of Christmas might say, this is what you really look like in everyday life.

Perhaps that is why the knowing liturgy allows us to view ourselves by candlelight so that we can gradually revise our self-images softened by its glow and be born again to a more homely, more human, and more livable understanding of ourselves.

These candles placed regularly along our climb toward the top of the year also embody the truth about the calling that transcends our occupations and professions. By their very nature, as we by ours, the candles let their substance be consumed by giving light, no matter how brief or flickering. These illuminations weave the weeks of Advent together by their symbolization of the Mystery of the Light of the World toward whose celebration they lead.

These tapers, like the Christmas windows from which our avatars stare back at us, also illuminate how, as psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan expressed it, "we are much more simply human than anything else." We are called to give off the great human signal of the season to all the searching and the lonely in the growing winter darkness, come over here, there's plenty of room, we all belong to the same family.

Advent is from the Latin that means "to come to," catching the period's significance as an ongoing journey, the being "in via," or "on the way," as our spiritual lives were described by ancient Christian writers.

The word "Advent" is a plum pudding of meanings, for it signifies a "coming or arrival, especially of something awaited or momentous." We are aware of the biblical mystery of this long awaited coming but there are no feelings more familiar to men and women than those generated by our hellos and our goodbyes, by our longing for union and suffering separation, for our looking forward to comings or arrivals of all kinds, from graduations to weddings, to birthday parties and family reunions.

Perhaps this wonder, that Advent underscores as it recognizes its utter humanity, is most powerfully experienced everyday before our eyes. As Joseph Campbell expressed it, "The latest version of Beauty and the Beast is taking place right now on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street." That is the Christmas-like wonder repeated when lovers find each other in the airport crowd as they first did, against all odds, in the great shouldering crowd of the world itself.

If we travel far enough back in the origin of words we find a distant root of Advent in *gwa* that means "to come" but that is also linked to "welcome" and "guest." This archeological dig of words helps us grasp the many layers of the Advent Mystery and of how, in its illumination of our natures, it overflows with sacramental manifestations of what it means to be human.

Advent allows us to rediscover not the sour version of a puritanical religion that is hard on humans but is one of living mystery and wonder. We feel this mystery in greater and lesser ways in all the comings and goings of this time of the year. We are all on the way to someplace else or are restlessly waiting for someone to come to us; we are suffused in the small mysteries of these defining human transactions that reveal the heart of our humanity.

It also underscores all that is wondrous even in the more homely aspects of being human. We are always on journeys of one kind or another and the whole mystery of our destiny is repeated every time we leave home for work, take up an unfinished task, or dream about the future. There is nothing more human than our setting up camp only to break it at dawn and set off for another that seems filled with more promise or more challenge for us.

These all fit with Advent's pilgrimage that, as we reflect on it, puts us on a track that intersects with the Divine journey to the very same destination, to the "end," as Chesterton wrote, "of the wandering star," to becoming human that is the fathomless Mystery of Christmas.

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