

The gift of Christmas presence: Mindfulness exercises for the 12 Days of Christmas, Part 2

Jennifer Halling | Dec. 21, 2010 Eco Catholic

The Fifth Day of Christmas: Eating an Orange

Do you remember in the *Little House on the Prairie* books how delighted Mary and Laura were to find an orange in their Christmas stocking? It was precious to them because at the time having an orange in the winter was a rare treat. Today we can eat an orange every day if we wish to do so, but it can still be a lesson in mindfulness, as Thich Nhat Hanh models for us in his meditation on eating a tangerine in the book *Peace is Every Step*.

First, hold the orange in the palm of your hand, noting its weight and texture. Think about the seed and the sun and rain that became the orange tree and led it to blossom and bear fruit. Peel the orange, inhaling the aroma of the zest. Taste a bit of the bitter pith. Break the orange into segments and squeeze a few drops of juice onto your tongue; notice how your tongue reacts. Bite into a segment and feel it squish in your mouth. As thoughts arise, acknowledge them and gently turn your attention back to the act of slowly eating your orange, for that is all this moment needs to hold.

The Sixth Day of Christmas: Stroking or Brushing an Animal

As Eckhart Tolle says in the book *Guardians of Being*, "Just watching an animal closely can take you out of your mind and bring you into the present moment, which is where the animal lives all the time—surrendered to life. When you pet a dog or listen to a cat purring, thinking may subside for a moment and a space of stillness arises within you, a doorway into Being." Thus for today's meditation, you will need a dog or cat and a perhaps a brush. If you don't have a dog or cat, borrow one or go visit the humane society. As you stroke or brush the animal, pay attention to the way the fur feels, the presence of any static electricity, the rhythm of the animal's breathing and of your own breath, any sounds of contentment (purring, sighing, licking), and the warmth beneath your hands. As thoughts arise, acknowledge them and gently turn your attention back to the act of stroking or brushing, for that is all this moment needs to hold.

The Seventh Day of Christmas: Wearing Perfume or Cologne

Although we seldom make a conscious effort to awaken our sense of smell, it is a powerful sensory tool, evoking memory more strongly than any of our other senses. Today, obtain some perfume, cologne, scented lotion, or essential oil that is different from what you typically might use. Place a dab under your nose, on your wrists, and on your throat at each of the Church's canonical hours of the day (at least, the ones for which you are awake!): Matins (midnight), Lauds (sunrise), Prime (6 AM), Terce (9 AM), Sext (noon), None (3 PM), Vespers (sunset) and Compline (9 PM). As you engage in this unusual call to prayer, breathe deeply of the sweetness of life and be aware of any emotions and memories that arise. Like a dog hot on the scent of its master, allow your olfactory sense to lead you into the aromatic garden of God's presence, for that is all this moment needs to hold.

The Eighth Day of Christmas: Giving Birth

Giving birth takes tremendous concentration, whether one is birthing a child, a poem, a painting, or a new business. Today, get lost in the "flow" that accompanies artistic expression by using your hands to hold a pen, paintbrush, scissors, camera, clay, musical instrument, or other tool that will assist you in giving birth to that which wishes to be born, be it a sketch, collage, song, story, photograph, jewelry, or pinch pot. Notice how the instrument feels in your hand, along with the colors, sounds, or textures you are generating. In imitation of our Divine Creator, give yourself over to the act of creating, for that is all this moment needs to hold.

The Ninth Day of Christmas: Kneading Your Feet

When Moses encountered the burning bush, he was instructed to remove his sandals, so that nothing would stand between him and the Ground of his being. At the last supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, according honor to this part of our body. Today, then, either offer to swap foot massages with a family member or friend or take time to knead your own feet. Begin by warming some lotion under hot running water, and enjoy its warmth and scent. Firmly massage all sides and the base of each toe. Move on to the ball of the foot, noticing any bumps, calluses, or warts. Rub the instep and along the outside edge of the foot, being aware of any areas of tenderness, and use your thumbs to massage the bottom of the foot. Gently flex all the toes forward and back, and massage the back of the heel. Be fully present to the sensation of warmth and tingling in your foot, for that is all this moment needs to hold. Conclude with a prayer of gratitude for your feet, whose soles keep your soul grounded in the world.

The Tenth Day of Christmas: Breathing

As Gunilla Norris says in her book *Simple Ways Towards the Sacred*, "When we are born, we are born into a relationship with air, with breathing". With every inhalation we are given life. With every exhalation we must surrender that life, for another breath to be given to us." Today, set aside some time to enjoy the gift of your breath. Try filling your lungs with as much air as they can hold. Breathe so you sound like Darth Vader. Notice how your breathing changes when you hold your arms high above your head and when your head is between your knees. Breathe through just one nostril and then the other, switching back and forth. Lie on your back and place your hands on your belly, feeling your breath flow in and out. Be united with God who is as close as your next breath, for that is all this moment needs to hold.

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The Eleventh Day of Christmas: Stargazing

Epiphany is fast approaching, so in honor of the world's most famous stargazers, the magi, go outside tonight to behold the beauty of the heavens. Even if you live in an area with a lot of light pollution, you will be able to enjoy the sight of the moon. As you venture outside, notice how long it takes your eyes to adjust to the darkness; smell and feel the night air; and observe the frosty presence of your breath. If you are able to see stars, go to the Web site <http://www.jodcast.net/rss-nightsky.xml> to learn what constellations and planets to look for. Allow yourself to become rapt by the wonders of the heavens, for that is all this moment needs to hold.

The Twelfth Day of Christmas: Choosing Music for Your Funeral

Because there is nothing quite like the contemplation of our mortality to bring us to our senses and help us to live in the gladness of today, your final meditation is to pick out the music you would like to have played at your funeral. Spend some time perusing hymnals, your record collection, or the musical holdings at the local library and write down your choices so your family is aware of your desires. Sing, hum, or listen to recordings of the music you have chosen, while you have ears to hear! Give your full attention to this foretaste of the heavenly choir, for that is all this moment needs to hold.

It is my hope that by practicing poverty of spirit during the Christmas season, we will be able to reflect God's presence in the world through our own presence to others. As the theologian Howard Thurman said, "When the song of the angels is stilled; when the star in the sky is gone; when the kings have returned home; when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart."

Part One: [The gift of Christmas presence: Mindfulness exercises for the 12 Days of Christmas](#) [1]

[These Christmas mindfulness exercises were written by Jennifer Halling, who for many years was on the staff of Shantivanam, the prayer community in northeastern Kansas founded by Fr. Ed Hays. She works now as a copy editor and certified funeral celebrant in Lawrence, Kan.]

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