

THE PROMISE

By Sandy Brewer

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There is something universal and transcendent about Christmas, an underlying harmonic that draws people together, sparking the potential for uplifting the human spirit. It's not limited to a religious point of view. It's broader than that and mystically amorphous – this possibility, this feeling, that all is well in spite of what might be going on. It's an emotion that can be triggered by the colors of the season, the lights, the music – even the pathos – spreading from the ice skaters in Rockefeller Center to the pristine wilderness of western Canada to the beaches of Tahiti. Peace on earth, good will toward men. Women, too.

For me, it's always been the music...

So, not surprisingly, last December I found myself seated front and center in the McCallum Theater in Palm Desert, listening to it's annual musical presentation, "Colors of Christmas." Love Peabo Bryson! Later in the program Deniece Williams took the stage. Strobe lights danced colorfully all around her as she began her solo. "Oh Holy Night." Her rendition was stirring.

Unexpectedly, awesomely, I was drawn into the landscape of my life...

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It was a long time ago, over half a century to be exact, when I sang "Oh Holy Night" for the last time in the Christmas Eve service as a member of the children's choir of my church. I was in the eighth grade, and when I graduated in the spring, the powers that be were going to kick me and all my aging classmates out. Too big for the choir robes, I guess.

But for one last time, this was my moment. I walked solemnly down the side aisles of the darkened church with the other members of the choir, penlights held waist high shining up at the towering cathedral ceiling, as we marched around the back of the church and up the broad center aisle, forming a two-by-two processional making our way up to the altar. The organ blared with a strange sonorous triumph, as only an organ can do, and the packed congregation belted out "Joy to the World." Garbed in long, sleeveless black robes covered with white, cherubic tops, we quietly shuffled ourselves into the form of a cross on the elevated altar. It was a big church, a big altar, and with penlights aglow we made quite a fine religious symbol, if I do say so myself.

The congregation completed their song. Miss Miller, baton in hand, stepped out to the center of the aisle, faced us kids, and with a mighty down-stroke of her right hand, we began my favorite Christmas carol of all time. “Oh, Holy Night.”

To the world of the fifties, I was just another kid singing her heart out at a Christmas Eve pageant on a blustery winter evening in the toddling town of Chicago. To my school I was an “A” student and president of my class. And in what I came to know as my “away from home world,” these were all true things. But there was a darker, sinister, totally secret world in which I was also forced to live. In my “at home world” I co-existed in the brutal underbelly of humanity with a sadistic, rapist father and a venomous, all controlling mother. Not that they looked that way to others. My father was a deacon of the church, and my mother, well, in truth, she was always a little crazy. Wall-papered kitchen, fluffy curtains, and pillbox hats notwithstanding, when the doors to my house closed every night, I was entrapped in a life-threatening, hidden world, dangerous and terrifying, like the catacombs of the sewers.

It was traumatic and cruel beyond words, but I survived as a child by being able to compartmentalize into my separate worlds. Yet sometimes these “compartments” came much too close to each other, and on rare occasions, like the Christmas Eve of my thirteenth year, they almost collided. As I stood at the altar, chiming in with gusto on the alto harmony of “Oh, Holy Night,” I quietly hallucinated. Right there, in that darkened church, in front of God and everybody. Although, at the time I didn’t know that was what was happening to me. I would sing a few bars and then suddenly I would be somewhere else. A few more bars, and, once again, this altered reality – a reality in which I had just given birth to a son. In a flash, I popped back to the altar, still singing.

*Fall on your knees  
Oh hear the angels’ voices  
It is the night of the dear Savior’s birth.*

Less than six weeks later, denial could no longer hold the physical forces within my body at bay, and I gave birth to a little boy, my father’s son. He died in my arms a short time later...

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I sat there in the darkened theater listening to Deniece, witnessing the dancing strobes, and watching from within a panorama of my life. There was no sorrow or regret, the healing had happened for me years before. Yet, except for when I wrote my memoir, *PURSUIT OF LIGHT: An Extraordinary Journey*, it was so rare for me to reference my current life with any part of my past. Yesterday had become like a past life – irrelevant compared to today.

And that’s when it struck me. It had been exactly fifty years (minus twelve days) since I had last sung that carol in the choir. In those fifty years I had gone through hell, and then rose above it to find the depth of my own being. Fifty years, during which I had

journeyed from a child whose parents had literally tried to kill her to a woman who became a successful therapist, speaker, author, and advocate. A woman who is known for her laughter and passion for life. I looked at my husband, the man of my dreams seated on my left, and thought about my three adult children and outrageous grandchildren. I was filled with wonder! Fifty years ago I didn't think I'd live to be eighteen, then I didn't think I would live to be thirty. Yet here I was, a happy, prospering, fulfilled woman. I was stunned by the wonder of it! How a child, in the midst of horror, found a way to hold on to a spark of light of what she might be and keep that spark alive. How children and adults all over the world today in the direst of circumstances manage to breathe life into the possibility of themselves and a better tomorrow. The magnificence, the dominance, the power of the human spirit! My heart was filled with awe of what my journey had been and what possibilities still lay in front of me. Awe for others and what their journeys have been. What a privilege to have a life, and to be a part of a life force that will not quit, that perseveres for the promise of all that we can be both individually and as a collective.

It's winter once again. Even in California you can tell. No snow, but there's a chill in the air. Another Christmas rolls around. If this season finds you in difficult times, may you know grace greater than your pain, and love greater than your sorrow. For whatever our personal challenges are, the greatest aspect of our truest nature as human beings is love.

Peace on earth, good will to all of us whether we are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or like me, none of the above. Peace on earth and good will in our hearts for all that we might be or might choose to become, no matter where we have been or what we have experienced.

*Sandy Brewer is author of *Pursuit of Light, An Extraordinary Journey*, a rare triumph of the human spirit. An authentic, true-life page turner, horrific and inspirational, brilliant and compelling, filled with practical teachings of empowerment and compassion. Beautifully blending wisdom, humor and pathos, it profoundly demonstrates an uplifting pathway out of darkness into light.*

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