



The Enlightenment



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Special Edition

2011 Solstice Celebration

On Saturday evening December 17th, about thirty HALA members met at the home of Alison and Jon Hore to celebrate the winter Solstice, the time of year when the hours of daylight start to increase and we look forward to new beginnings. This year our celebration took the form of a wine, cheese and dessert party, with a truly extraordinary variety of desserts prepared and artistically presented by Alison. It was a most enjoyable evening; great conversation, great camaraderie and a singsong led by Rod Martin accompanied by Bill Chefurka on his violin. A few of pictures, taken by Jon, are displayed on the following pages.



President Rod Leading the Singsong with Bill on the Violin



A Fabulous Selection of Delectable Desserts



Alison, Jane, André and Jon



Following the Song Sheet.



Having a Drink or Two

A Winter's Tale

By Dagmar Gondard-Zelinkova

I read with great interest, the comments on Christmas celebrations, published in the HC newsletter and on the HC website. What an amazing variety of views! As for me, I don't celebrate Christmas. Possible reasons: I was brought up that way and, also, probably because I spent a big part of my life in Africa. While I drew immense pleasure from the discovery of the richness of various local traditions, I haven't adopted any. Except for the period of fasting which I derived from the celebration of Ramadan and which I adapted to the needs of my own body and lifestyle. I usually fast in April, which seldom coincides with the official Ramadan. Apart from this personally-tailored fasting, I am tradition-free.

I am now back in the Western world and feel completely alien amidst all the Christmas frenzy. I can see only its negative side – too much hassle and rushing; too much senseless spending. When I drive by the places where trees are piled by the dozens, it breaks my heart. I have to put up with it though – what else can I do? I do put up with Christmas parties, too. All the invitations come from people with good hearts, and because they are nice to me, I try to be nice to them and respect their traditions. I never comment on their tree and, when it comes to singing carols, I join with everybody and, moving my lips as best as I can, I pretend to sing. It takes a bit of effort on my part and, when there are two or three parties in row, I feel tense. But then, in Africa, it was the same – good things went with bad ones. I had to take the whole package. Be that as it may, I try not to hurt other people's feelings.

Yet, despite all my good resolutions, I recently hurt somebody badly. I hurt my friend. Here is the story: The beginning goes back many years, to when I lived in Toronto. A friend of mine came to see me at Christmas time and was shocked that I did not have a tree. I tried to explain to him why it was so, and he tried to explain to me, the importance of Christmas celebration. We had a long discussion that ended with my friend sighing, "If at least you had a tree!" So I told him that my heart is bleeding when I see the Christmas hecatomb. I did not convince my friend.

The following Christmas, when I opened the present he had brought me, I discovered a little plastic Christmas tree. My friend started to set it up, and when I saw him so happy and full of excitement, I joined him. We chatted merrily, while decorating the tree and sipping champagne. When my friend left, I put the little plastic tree back into the box. I hate plastic. But then... it does not take that much to make somebody happy, just a little effort. And that effort I would do. In the future, when I knew that my friend was coming, I would, on that day, set up the Christmas tree to please him. It worked that way; and my friend, the little tree and I spent quite a few happy moments together. Then I left Toronto for the country. During the move, certain things got lost. Among them, the little plastic Christmas tree. Oh well...

When my friend came the following Christmas and learnt that the little tree was lost, he was sad. The champagne we were drinking was not enough to bring back the happy atmosphere of the past. My friend's eyes were wandering around the room and I knew how badly he was missing the Christmas tree. At one point, he got up, went to the window and, pointing at my evergreens outside, said: "You have hundreds of them. Don't tell me that you can't take one for Christmas!" To which I replied: "Why should I remove the tree from its natural environment and bring it inside? It does not make sense. I like to see it where it is." But my friend didn't see it that way. He was moody. Then he was back again by the window and sighed, "If at least you decorated one!"

The next Christmas, my friend arrived with a string of Christmas lights with their green plastic-covered wire, ready to be plugged in. When I saw him rushing into the barn and coming back with a ladder, happy and full of excitement, I went to the barn too, picked up a second ladder, and here we were, chatting merrily while decorating a big Christmas tree. It was one of those wonderful afternoons, not too cold and full of sunshine. We had a good time. And we had more good times later on, while we were sitting by the fire, sipping champagne and looking at the tree beyond the window. It looked nice with all those lights on it. It looked much better than the little plastic tree and I heard my friend saying, "If you don't want to go to trouble of taking the lights down, you can leave them on forever." I guess I could do that...

The next spring, I was rebuilding my deck and the tree was accidentally knocked down. The lights were smashed – a write-off. I felt sorry for the tree and I felt sorry for my friend. This time I knew that some replacement would have to be found. But then, at that time of the year, I had so much to do, what with the building of the deck and so many other things. I decided that I would not worry about it just then, but would think about it later on – I would come up with some solution.

That year, my friend did not come at Christmas time; his mother was ill and he could not leave her alone. For some reason that I can no longer remember, he did not come the following winter either. As time passed, I forgot about the whole thing. The next Christmas, when the door opened and my friend stepped in, I suddenly remembered the tree. Too late. My friend was not happy. He was not happy at all. And he showered me with his bitter remarks: How could I lead such a life of isolation, far from Christmas lights and excitement? How could I live without celebrating when everybody celebrates? "But I DO celebrate," I replied.

It's true. I celebrate. Just like everyone else, I too have my winter excitement. I too have my special event. It never falls on the same calendar day. Most likely I can expect it sometime during January or February. Because I don't know the exact date, I simply wait for it to happen. It usually starts happening at bedtime. I have just put aside my book and am ready to switch off the lights, when something outside the window catches my eye. Another closer look out of the window and already I feel something stirring within me. I go to the door, and when I open it, I know that the Night has come. There's not the slightest whisper of wind. Everything is still. High sky. Full moon. Everything is bright. It's beautiful. It's a vast, perfectly silent, moonlit night. My Night! Quietly, I start to dress up. I don't have to hurry, I don't have to think. Everything is happening so naturally. By the door, my skis are waiting. I grab them and go out onto the frozen lake. The first strides are awkward. It's cold. My muscles are stiff. Gradually, with each stride, my movements grow smoother. Soon I am gliding through the sparkling, silvery night. I have a vague notion of heading somewhere north, irresistibly drawn into the mysterious darkness, stretching far away in front of me. I am never frightened. I never get lost. When I come back home, I am inhabited by an unspeakable peace. I never know how far I have been. I don't know how long I've been gone. At some point, sometime in the middle of the night, I must have turned around and come safely back. In some winters, such nights may come two or three in a row, and I celebrate them all. But I also remember one year when the snow was rotten and the lake not safe to be on. That winter, I didn't celebrate...

While I was telling my friend about my special Nights, I got so carried away by their reliving that I forgot about his presence. When I looked at him he was shaking his head and I heard him sighing, "It has nothing to do with Christmas!" I guess not...

I didn't see my friend for three years in a row. When he came last Christmas, I was overwhelmed with joy. The present he brought me was wonderfully wrapped in a shining green and golden paper with a huge white star. I know that my friend puts all his heart into the wrapping of Christmas gifts. I gave him a big hug. Then I took the paper off and opened the box...

Oh...! I wish that what happened next, had never happened. I know that there are circumstances when certain words should never be said. I know the awesome power of words – they can do marvels yet, sometimes, they can harm like razor sharp shards. I, of course, know all this. Yet sometimes we are caught off guard. Sometimes we are tense. Sometimes the words escape from our mouth and we would like to take them back but they are gone. They are irretrievably gone. When I took the green and golden paper off and opened the box, and saw the little plastic Christmas tree, two little words flew out of my mouth. I don't know if I whispered them or shrieked them... "OH NO...!"

Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova is a Francophone, European by birth. She lived in Europe for about 20 years and in Africa for another 20 before making Canada her home. She is a member of Humanist Canada, Secular Ontario, the Centre for Inquiry, the Canadian Secular Alliance, and has volunteered for Dying With Dignity. She is a lover of nature and animals and lives on a beautiful wooded property on Baptiste Lake Ontario.

It's That Time of Year Again

The New Year will soon be upon us and that means the HALA Annual General Meeting is in the offing. It will be held at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre on Wednesday January 11th at 7:30 p.m. At this meeting the 2012 HALA Board of Directors will be confirmed. A notice of those nominated for 2012 has already been sent to all paid up members. The AGM will be followed by a talk by Rod Martin entitled "Faith, Reason and Atheism."

The New Year is also time for paying our membership fees. Please plan on paying your fees at the January meeting or alternatively, send a cheque payable to HALA to Membership Secretary Walter Heywood at 539 Canterbury Road, London ON. N6G 2N5. Dues are only \$20.00 for regular members or \$25.00 for a family membership. Limited income membership is \$10.00.

Every year we plan on holding a special event at the Wolf Performance Hall. This year on Wednesday May 9th we expect to have Tarek Fatah as our key speaker. Tarek is well known as a moderate Muslim and his topic will be: "Blending Values in a Multicultural Society." We rely on donations in order to stage these meritorious events and tax receipts will be issued for all contributions over \$10.00. We ask that everyone give consideration to making a donation if possible, in the near future.

It Has Been a Good Year

In 2011 HALA membership reached a high of 53 memberships for 71 members. We held seven meetings at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre and two events at the Wolf Performance Hall. Once again your Program Committee provided us with a series of interesting and informative speakers. And we held two social events, namely the annual picnic at the farm of Pat & Bill Chefurka and the annual Solstice Celebration at the home of Alison and Jon Hore. We are most appreciative for the hospitality of our hosts and hostesses.