**2016 Motivational Minutes on Christmas and New Year**

1. **The First Nativity Scene**

****

**Quote of the day:**

"The Light that shines from the humble manger is strong enough to lighten our way to the end of our days.” —Vita-Rays

**Reflection:**

Since in most countries they start putting up Christmas decorations in late November I thought it might be interesting to hear one of the stories behind the Christmas nativity story.

*The story of the first Nativity scene is a well-known Christmas standard: Saint Francis of Assisi is traditionally believed to have asked the citizens of the village of Grecchio, in 1223, to play the characters in the Nativity. What’s certain is that these “living cribs” became highly popular and the tradition spread around the world.*

*The trouble was that these were large-scale affairs that often required dozens of actors and a great deal of preparation. During the French Revolution, religious reenactments were suppressed, and Nativities were reduced to miniature scenes that families could recreate at home.*

*Some of the most famous of these are the brightly colored “santouns” (small saints, in the local dialect) from Provence. In addition to the biblical players—Jesus’ family, the shepherds, angels, and kings—these Nativity scenes usually include a collection of everyday characters and traditional trades.*

*There is one character you may not immediately recognize but who is essential to any Provençal Nativity. He isn’t bringing any gifts, but his arms are raised and his expression is one of intense surprise and joy. He is Lou Ravi (the delighted one). In Italy, a similar Nativity figure is called Lo Stupito (the astonished one), and their shared characteristic is a strong sense of awe and marvel. They seem empty-handed, but actually, they’re bringing the most beautiful gift of all: their wonder.*

We who know the story of Christmas so well can easily grow familiar with its blessing. Jesus’ birthday becomes a traditional, recurring event much like any other, when in fact, it’s anything but. The truth is: God loves us so much that He came to earth as a human, in the form of His Son, Jesus, so we could get to know Him and learn to trust Him and love Him back. May we always retain *Lou Ravi’*s childlike wonder at this incredible gift!

1. **The Butterfly**



**Quote of the day:**

“So long as the memory of certain beloved friends lives in my heart, I shall say that life is good.” —Helen Keller

**Reflection**:

I read this story from Peter Van Goder in the Activated Magazine and thought it was a fitting story for this time of year as Christmas approaches, especially for those who may have lost loved ones around this time.

*As I was researching material for a short story about an antique dealer who collected rare butterflies, I came across a website1 that revealed a rich resource of stories involving those fascinating creatures.*

*I was amazed at the vast quantity of stories that had been contributed to this one website—hundreds of experiences—and I was struck by how big an impact the tiny butterfly has had on the lives of us mortals throughout the ages! Over 2,000 years ago, the ancient Greeks were already using the transformation of butterflies from pupa to adult as a metaphor of the soul’s resurrection and immortality.*

*A common thread running throughout the accounts I read on the website of butterfly encounters was how these wondrous creatures have comforted people in particularly difficult times in their lives. After reading so many of these stories, I wondered if butterflies could work their magic for me too. I was going through a rough time and especially missing my oldest daughter, who had passed away seven years earlier.*

*One evening, I asked God to send me a butterfly as a sign that she is still with us in spirit, and then forgot about it. However, the next day, as we were packing our equipment and loading up after a show in a distant rural area, a colorful butterfly persisted in fluttering by me the entire time. Then later as I was commenting on this to my friend while we were stopped at a traffic light, another butterfly passed in front of our windshield, as if to say, I am still with you.*

*But the most remarkable butterfly encounter occurred on Christmas Day. As our family was gathered around the tree, opening presents and enjoying one another’s companionship, a butterfly floated into the room and rested near the light. It stayed with us all day and all that night. The next morning it was gone, as if it had completed its mission. We were encouraged and thankful for its visit, feeling this was a sign to remind us of her at this special time.*

*Of course, our encouragement and comfort should not be dependent on such signs, but we can nonetheless appreciate them when they occur. God’s Word promises that if we ask, we will receive. If you need comfort or direction in your life, God can send messengers to your aid in a variety of forms—with or without wings.*

I hope this story was a comfort to you as it was to me.

\*\*

1. **The Salt Dough Model**



**Quote of the day:**

"May Peace be your gift at Christmas and your blessing all year through!” – Author Unknown

**Reflection:**

A few years ago, a very talented friend of mine spent untold hours building a wonderfully intricate Christmas model out of salt dough. The centerpiece was the stable, but the scene stretched well beyond that, deep into Bethlehem and the surrounding countryside.

The buildings were painted, the streets were strewn with very fine gravel, there was moss in the gardens and on the hills, and the village was alive with mansions, hovels, shops, inns, and a multitude of people (and stray cats) milling about.

It was fascinating. The scene gave a view not just of what was happening in the stable but also what might have been going on in the rest of town that night. It brought to life how, apart from the shepherds who saw and heard a choir of angels singing and praising God, most people were likely going about their business without a clue.

In some respects, that’s how things still are. It’s easy to find ourselves going through Christmas without experiencing it to the full. Even while enjoying the holiday spirit and festivities, it’s possible to let the deeper meaning of the season pass us by. Unbeknownst to most of Bethlehem’s inhabitants on the night of the first Christmas, something marvelous was happening in their midst, and something wonderful can happen this season in each of our lives as well, if we open our hearts to it. It may not be something flashy or huge, and if we’re not careful we might miss it, but I believe that Christmas is a magical time, and I’m looking forward to what it has in store. I hope you are too.

\*\*

1. Repainting the Angel



**Quote of the Day:**

"Christmas waves a magic wand over the world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.” — Norman Vincent Peale

**Reflection:**

This Christmas story was adapted from a story by Wilfred Peterson and appears in *The Wonder of Christmas*, a gift book available from www.auroraproduction.com.

*The statuette of an angel watching over a couple children had been placed on a neglected back shelf in an antique shop. It was covered with soot and dust, lost amidst the clutter of jars, dishes, and ornaments. A man browsing through the shop discovered the figurine and had an inspiration: He would rescue it from oblivion, restore it, and give it a place of honor among his Christmas decorations.*

*At home in his basement workshop, the man covered the angel and the child with glistening white paint. Then he painted the wings of the angel and the hair of the little boy with sparkling gold. Each brush stroke worked magic. The old, grime-covered statuette vanished, and a shining, new one appeared. The statuette was transformed before his eyes into a thing of radiant beauty.*

*As the man painted, he thought, “Isn’t this what happens to people at Christmas? They come to the end of the year dust-covered from the struggle. And then Christmas inspires them to repaint their nature with love and joy and peace.”*

*The art of repainting the angel! This is our lifelong task: to never stay down in the dust and the dirt, but, heroically, to rise again after each fall. We need never lose our ideals, dreams, and purposes. We can always make them gleam again with the glory of renewed hope.*

This story reminds me how life takes on a special glow at Christmas. It starts with the wonder of a little baby who came carrying a message of love and hope. For those in families, it continues with the happiness and camaraderie of celebrating together with loved ones. For all people, alone or with others, it is completed when we contemplate what Jesus has done for us and thank Him for the blessings He has given.

Christmas is special because we enjoy not only what God has done for the whole world, but also for us personally. He has “repainted” us with new qualities that we couldn’t have given ourselves. He has put His love inside us. He has given us peace, as the angels promised. He has forgiven all our sins and failures, and now He accepts us as His children. He lets us feel the joy that knowing Him brings. We are transformed by Christmas.

\*\*

1. **Music Washes the Soul**



**Quote for the day:**

“Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.” — Berthold Auerbach

**Reflection:**

This story has been adapted from several sources, including a fable by Leo Tolstoy and a German folktale.

*The wife of a poor merchant died leaving him with five children, ranging from age six to fifteen. The older children assumed many of the household chores—cooking, cleaning, and helping the younger children. When the merchant came home at night, he always brought a bag of groceries, food for the next day. After he set the bag on the table, he hugged each child. Before they ate, he read from the scriptures, and prayed. Many nights, before bed, the children begged their father to sing with them. He frequently played his guitar and sang quiet folk tunes.*

*The first Christmas after his wife died the merchant said to his children, "This year there is not enough money to buy presents in the store. Instead, we'll all draw names, and you will make a present for one of your brothers or sisters. My gift to you will be a fine Christmas meal and a special song that I am writing. We will learn it in the weeks before Christmas and sing it in church on Christmas Eve."*

*True to his word, the father wrote a wonderful song of joy for the children, and began to teach it to them three weeks before the night of the Nativity. The children loved the song so much they sang it with great gusto and volume. A rich man, who lived above the family, hated Christmas and hated music even more. Night after night he listened to the children sing the new Christmas song. It irritated him so much that he developed a plan to silence the singing.*

*Several days before Christmas he knocked on the door. "I have come to make you an offer," he said to the father, who listened carefully with his children standing behind him. "I will give you 100 gold coins if you promise not to sing for three months."*

*The father looked at the children. "That is more money than I can make in two years," he cried. "We will be able to buy presents for everyone in the entire family." The children cheered as the father accepted the bag of money, and the rich man's terms. That night they began to plan silently how they would spend the money. The next evenings, after they ate, they sat quietly, reading and thinking. On the fourth night, one of the younger children said, "I'd rather have music than any stupid present. This isn't worth it."*

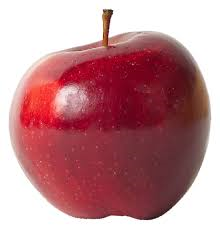
*One by one, the children agreed. So the father walked into the bedroom, retrieved the sack of money, and walked up the flight of stairs to return the bag to its owner. "We have discovered that there is something more important than money," he said. "I am sorry that our singing irritates you, but it fills us with joy. Our family can't imagine Christmas, or life itself, without music. When we sing we celebrate the best news that has ever been given poor people, that God so loved the world that he became one of us, living as a human being."*

*When the merchant rejoined his children he said, "We will learn to sing with greater feeling and less volume. In our joy we don't want to irritate our neighbor. What do you say to that?"*

*The oldest child spoke for them all, "We say let the music begin."*

\*\*

1. **The Christmas Apple**



**Quote of the Day:**

"Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.” — Cicero

**Reflection:**

Here’s a sweet Christmas story from Anna Perlini. Ana is a co-founder of Per un Mondo Migliore

(http://www.perunmondomigliore.org/), a humanitarian organization active in the former Yugoslavia since 1995.

*Christmas 1984 was our family’s third Christmas away from Europe. The remote village in eastern India where we had moved to help as volunteers, had become a second home. After some initial difficulty in adjusting to such a different climate and culture, we soon came to appreciate the wonderful people we lived around and to embrace the new sights, sounds, tastes, and fragrances. I began to especially look forward to shopping at our local market, which seemed to have a year-round selection of fabulous juicy fruits—mangos, bananas, lichees, papayas, jackfruits, limes, and others. It was on one of those trips to the market that we happened to see a stand that was selling, at an exorbitant price, some beautiful apples. We were told that these had arrived from the far north of the country, which explained the price tag.*

*Memories from my childhood surged, and of course, Christmas is a time when memories seem to carry special potency. My eldest daughter was accompanying me that day and put my feelings into words: “It would be so nice to have an apple for Christmas.” That’s how the idea for our family’s Christmas surprise came about. My husband and I spent an evening wrapping small cardboard boxes filled with cookies, nuts…and one big, red apple!*

*On Christmas morning, the kids opened their boxes and jumped up and down at the sight of those apples! I think we parents had just as much fun watching them and, since we also got a Christmas box, savoring our own precious apple.*

*We returned to Europe a number of years ago and have since had plenty of apples, but our entire family still cherishes the fond memory of that one “poor” Christmas when we experienced that “rich” feeling of thankfulness for a simple apple.*

May we always find a simple, humble reason to be grateful—not just at Christmas, but in every

celebration and event all year-round.

\*\*

1. **The Christmas Geese**



**Quote of the day:**

"The message of Christmas is that the visible material world is bound to the invisible spiritual world.” — Author unknown

**Reflection:**

I came across this wonderful Christmas story that I thought you might enjoy.

*There was once a man who didn’t believe in God, and he didn’t hesitate to let others know how he felt about religion and religious holidays, like Christmas. His wife, however, did believe, and she raised their children to also have faith in God and Jesus, despite her husband’s disparaging comments.*

*One snowy Christmas Eve, his wife was taking their children to a Christmas Eve church service in the farm community in which they lived. She asked him to come, but he refused. “That story is nonsense!” he said. “Why would God lower Himself to come to earth as a man? That’s ridiculous!”*

*So his wife and children left, and he stayed home. A while later, the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blizzard. As the man looked out the window, all he saw was a blinding snowstorm. He sat down to relax in front of the blaze in the fireplace. A short while later, he heard a loud thump. Something had hit the window—then another thump. He looked out but couldn’t see more than a few feet ahead. When the storm let up a little, he ventured outside to see what could have been beating on his window. In the field near his house, he saw a flock of wild geese.*

*Apparently, they had been flying south for the winter when they got caught in the snowstorm and couldn’t go on. They were lost and stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter. They just flapped their wings and flew around the field in low circles, blindly and aimlessly. A couple of them had flown into his window, it seemed.*

*The man felt sorry for the geese and wanted to help them. The barn would be a great place for them to stay, he thought. It’s warm and safe. They could spend the night there and wait out the storm. So he walked over to the barn and opened the doors wide, then watched and waited, hoping they would notice the open barn and go inside. But the geese just fluttered around aimlessly and didn’t seem to notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them. The man tried to get their attention, but that just scared them farther away.*

*He went into the house and came out with some bread, broke it up, and made a breadcrumb trail leading to the barn. They still didn’t catch on. Now he was getting frustrated. He got behind them and tried to shoo them toward the barn, but they only got more scared and scattered in every direction except toward the barn. Nothing he did could get them to go into the barn where they would be warm and safe. “Why don’t they follow me?!” he exclaimed. “Can’t they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm?”*

*He thought for a moment and realized that they just wouldn’t follow a human. “If only I were a goose, then I could save them,” he said out loud. Then he had an idea. He went into the barn, got one of his own geese, and carried it in his arms as he circled around behind the flock of wild geese. When he released it, his goose flew through the flock and straight into the barn. One by one, the wild geese followed it to safety.*

*The man stood still and silent as the words he had spoken a few minutes earlier replayed in his mind: “If only I were a goose, then I could save them!” Then he thought about what he had said to his wife earlier.*

*“Why would God want to be like us? That’s ridiculous!” Suddenly it all made sense. That is what God had done. We were like the wild geese— blind, lost, confused, dying. So God had His Son become like us, so He could show us the way and save us. That was the meaning of Christmas, he realized. As the winds and blinding snow died down, his soul became quiet and pondered this wonderful thought. Suddenly he understood what Christmas was all about, why Christ had come. Years of doubt and disbelief vanished like the passing storm. He fell to his knees in the snow and prayed his first prayer: “Thank You, God, for coming in human form to get me out of the storm!”*

1. **Happy New Year**



**Quote of the day**:

“Life is a journey.” — Pope Francis

**Reflection:**

We often refer to life as a journey. Here is a cute allegory for the New Year.

*The Boarding on Flight 2017 has been announced. Hope you have checked in only the best souvenirs from 2016 in your luggage. The BAD and SAD moments if carried, must be thrown away in the garbage on arrival. The flight will be for 12 months long. So, loosen your seat belts, jingle and mingle.*

*The stopovers will be:*

* *Health*
* *Love*
* *Joy*
* *Harmony*
* *Well-being*
* *Peace*

*Refueling will be at:*

* *Giving*
* *Sharing*
* *Caring*

*The Captain (God) offers you the following menu which will be served during the flight.*

* *Cocktail of Friendship*
* *Appetizer of Health*
* *Plate of Prosperity*
* *Bowl of Excellent News*
* *Salad of Success*
* *Cake of Happiness*

*Remember, you will enjoy the journey better if you talk, share, smile and laugh together. Sitting silent and sullen will make the flight seem longer.*

*Wishing you and your family an enjoyable trip on board flight 2017.*

Before the Flight 2016 ends, allow me to thank all you amazing friends who made 2016 beautiful. I pray that you all be blessed with an awesome *year ahead.* Coach Dana

*\*\**

9. **Resolutions**

****

**Quote of the Day:**

“The average person means well, but they set their goals too high. They [try] it two or three times and say, ‘This is too tough.’ And they quit.” — Jack LaLanne

**Reflection:**

Making resolutions at the start of a new year is an ancient and well-established tradition. Apparently, the early Babylonians’ most popular resolution was to return borrowed farm equipment. The month of January, (when the New Year is celebrated in most parts of the world), is named after the Roman god Janus. Janus had two faces, enabling him to look back on the past year and forward to the next. He was the god of beginnings.

We make resolutions, but often do not seem well equipped enough to keep them. One reason we have a difficult time changing old bad habits and forming new ones is that sometimes our expectations are too extreme. Instead of making some gradual permanent lifestyle changes, we want instant success.

We’re conditioned to want quick results, whereas in reality, it often takes work over an extended period of time to achieve anything worthwhile. Carlo DiClemente, chairman of the psychology department at the University of Maryland, suggests setting realistic goals and making daily progress to achieve them. Armed with the right goals, the desire, and the persistence, you can form a new good habit this year. You can become the master—rather than the victim—of circumstances.