

Christmas Pageant

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We're almost ready for the Christmas pageant. Every year, on Christmas Eve, neighbours gather at a local farm. We sing carols, meet shepherds and wise men and end up in the big lower barn. There an intrepid couple sits with their baby in sweet, fresh straw, watched over by the animals in their stalls – cows and sheep, goats, two shaggy Clydesdales, and Dusty the donkey.

The pageant used to be organized by the minister of St. Peter's Anglican Church. But he was transferred out of town, and the event was abandoned for a year. My neighbour Mary Martin and I met that year on a Christmas day walk, and we bemoaned our loss. Both of us so loved the pageant, I because I was sometimes alone on Christmas Eve, when my children were with their father; Mary just because she loved it. Why don't we do it? she suggested, and there, just like Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, we decided to put on a show in a barn.

Our first challenge each autumn is to find a hefty new baby with parents willing to spend Christmas Eve sitting in an unheated barn. Our first year's baby boy was so perfect that a few people around here still call him Jesus, though his name is Wylie and he's now five. Last year the pageant had already started and I was frantic - the holy family had not arrived! Luckily Joseph had a cell phone, and called to say they were on their way.

My daughter likes to tell people she's the star, which means she walks ahead of the crowd, holding one up on a long twinkling pole. Several neighbourhood boys, including my son, have been forced through the years to play the wise men, though it was never easy to get them to stand on a picnic table with dishcloths on their heads. My boy especially, when he grew to six foot six, looked strange with his huge Nike's sticking way out from under his velveteen cloak. One year the third wise man had to take temporary leave from his job at the local beer store. He sprinted to the farm, said his line, sang "We Three Kings" with the crowd, and sprinted back to work. This year all the boys have refused to do it again; they'll be given other jobs, though they don't know that yet. We're having trouble finding Wise Men - something our pageant, and the world, have in common.

Local people are devoted to the event, though it has grown so, over the years, that the size of the crowd is a problem; some now complain that they can't see, and they can't hear. They say it goes too fast, or, when it's really cold out, it goes too slowly. We dream of proper outdoor lights or a sound system; Mary Martin longs for a real camel. There was talk once of the farm being affiliated with the city zoo, and we thought, well, at least we'll have our camel.

I should explain something about this unusual farm – it's smack in the heart of downtown Toronto, a serene oasis where farm creatures are on display, doing what they do. Mostly, when you visit, you get to smell animals and watch them chewing, and there's nothing, in the middle of a crazy city day, more restful and reassuring than that.

During last year's pageant, we knew that something was going on because the head farmer, Hakim, was there. Afterwards, when the crowds had gone home, Hakim emerged from the pig and chicken barn to tell us that Mathilda had just given birth. She's a big black sow whose ears grow forward like blinkers over her eyes. While we were celebrating a nativity in one barn, Mathilda held her own in another. Hakim allowed us to peer through the window, to admire five bouncing Christmas piglets with ears like blinkers.

People have asked me what I'm doing in the barn, producing this pageant. They know that culturally I'm half Jewish, and religiously, I'm completely unaffiliated. I do not believe in the baby Jesus, son of God. I guess ... I've always been sorry that I don't have a formal religious belief to pass on to my children. I wish I could give them a creed, something solid and sustaining to turn to, especially in times of grief and pain. But perhaps I have. I do believe in the power and glory of the newly born, whether with round pink noses or snuffling bristly ones. I believe to the depths of my soul in neighbourhood; in community; in coming together at important times to sing in celebration.

And, with the help of our yearly communal event, I think my children believe in those things too.