

So I'm addressing a single Christmas letter to everyone I know. Wow. Let me know if you can't hear me back there over the noise of worlds colliding....

For those of you who may be wondering which planet I'm on now, I'm actually about to leave one strange foreign country for another. That is, I'm winding up my last days of exile in Illinois, in the hopes of finding a land of better drivers and better football teams, and loading my pack for the U.K., where I fully expect to find both. But before all the

Bears fans stop reading, my other reason for going is to do a five-month Discipleship Training School so that I can then go out again with Mercy Ships, this time long-term.



Mercy Ships—for those who haven't seen my pictures from last month!—is a nondenominational relief organization that works to assist the poorest of the world's poor. Ships are used simply because the sea is the most cost-efficient way to deliver an international Christian community of medical staff, well drillers, construction workers, evangelism teams, agriculture instructors, and more to the areas of most desperate need. I spent November working aboard the M/V Caribbean Mercy, the smallest of the three ships. °

The ship had just finished an exhausting outreach in Honduras when I met it in Florida, and the crew was full of amazing stories of God's provision and the great need they saw around them. During the Caribbean Mercy's recent visit to Honduras, Mercy Ships surgeons were able to give sight to over four hundred people who were partially or totally blind from cataracts or other eye problems, and crew doctors matched thousands of pairs of used prescription eyeglasses with people who had never been able to afford them. Many more people had to be turned away because the ship had reached the limit of its resources.

I met some pretty amazing people in my time on the Caribbean Mercy. No one on board any of the ships is paid; in fact, from the captain and the CEO to the deckhands and cooks and accountants and welders and receptionists, each person raises support from home and pays the same amount in crew fees each month. It also never fails to surprise me how people can grow so close to each other so quickly in a Christian community like that. It's difficult and demanding and deeply, wonderfully satisfying all at once. I'm hoping to find a similar situation in my training class on the M/V Africa Mercy, an old cargo ship that was recently donated to Mercy Ships and is currently being refitted in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England.

So that's what I've been up to, and for those of you who sense a sales pitch coming, you're out of luck, cuz this is a Christmas letter. :) If some of you would like to help support me, either for the training school now or with the monthly crew fees later, well, I need it. But what I wanted to do most with this letter was stay in touch with people. And, to ask you to pray hard for me as I work with Mercy Ships. Actually, I'd like to email or mail out regular updates, too, so if you're interested in that, drop me a line. And whatever you do, don't be thinkin' you have to give me money or something in order to get it, all right? Are we understanding each other? Okay, good. And anyway, if you're reading this letter right now, you may safely assume that I would love to hear from you--anytime.

Merry Christmas.

An Advent Meditation by Rose Marie Berger (©2001 Sojourners Magazine)

This is to all who serve on the human front, wearing any mask that will get you home. A word: While we are all dying to get out, there is one who died to get in. Disguised as one of us, this one came creeping over enemy lines, across the DMZ, relying on our infatuation with innocence just long enough to secure the passage. An instant later the yapping jaws snapped shut in a slaughter of all innocents—cutting the tongues off all to silence the one.

This is to you who wake up daily on the front lines of life, in the dystopia of the modern world where each one ticks like a clock or bomb; where young ones cut themselves on the fractured edge of a post-modern morning; where Gens X, Y, and Z trade their parents' headlong linear flight into oblivion for the virtual rush of binary bungee jumping. Just how deep does this rabbit hole go?

And to you broken ones who wander the front lines picking rags and plastic bags; who hoard IRAs and modest portfolios and chances at the Daily Double. And it's to you in the second wave up all night stringing together code to bind up the mainframe, twisting it into a safety net to keep us from breaking our necks in the fall. (Or is it a trip wire and we'll all go together when we go?)

Homo sapiens have evolved. Now we are *Homo sapiens sapiens*. We are two-headed like Eng and Chang the Siamese Twins—but our heads are from different countries with no common tongue. Our symbols flash like broken traffic lights, or fall through our teeth like abandoned cars, condoms, a passed-up penny, only to the level of the collarbone. They lodge there, useless, against the lump in our separate throats.

Busted. It's all busted. "The repairman," repeats the recorded message, "is out of cell phone range."

We weren't conscripts to civilization. We volunteered. Certain that God was on our side, we wielded sword and scythe for the greater good, for the less fortunate. We fought the good fight. We picked up the hitchhiker, sheltered the homeless, and visited the prisoner. We tried to love neighbor, love God, stay within the speed limit, and pay our parking tickets. And yet the Tin Man—who holds high his award for good deeds, a ticking clock in the shape of a heart—is still a golem; only now something keeps him up at night.

Even you nihilist Nephilim riding shotgun on the "civilizing" project with your Glock .40s, AK-47s, or trigger-rigged lap tops; you who let your eyes be plucked out so as not to see a human soul, how's that lifestyle working out? You still spew black spit, rotting from the inside out? Remember when mornings came like a stay from the governor? Now they are another practice mark on the tender flesh of the wrist—foreshadowing death by a thousand cuts. This letter is addressed even to you.

And to you little ones, *anawim*, refugees from our shifting architectures of moral adjustment; you with a leg or arm or child trapped under the collapsed facade of Christendom; you who are relegated to roll-your-own welfare lines who wake every morning in this bloody horror. (Can't someone make that child stop screaming?)

"The advent of Christ in history is not essentially bound up with the development and progress of Christian 'civilization,'" writes Thomas Merton.

A heartbeat. A breath.

In the dark someone is brooding over us. Someone from home has smuggled a word across enemy lines, over the burning barricades, under the iron grate. It says only this: You are not alone.

That light in the east is a signal flare, flashing "Follow me. Follow me. Follow me." On the smoke-laden horizon there is a tiny string of lights, barely perceptible, bobbing. Tapers perhaps, hand-held, and a faint erratic melody. Flesh of my flesh.