

The message of the missing shepherds

By MURIEL JENSEN
For The Daily Astorian

When I was a child in New Bedford, Massachusetts, my parents had a nativity set they'd bought at Woolworth's. (For those of you too young to remember, Woolworth's was a dime store where you could find anything from toys to tableware, a kind of precursor to today's discount stores.)

The stable was made of balsa wood, I think, and the figures were brightly painted plaster.

One of the shepherds had a broken nose and another was missing a hand. Their stares were a little vacant, but my older sister and I imbued them with personalities and placed them on a side table in the living room.



Muriel Jensen

My mother gave me the set when I got married (my sister had entered the convent) and it traveled around with Ron and me from Los Angeles to McMinnville to Boise as Ron followed a career in the newspaper business.

By then we'd adopted a family of three children and they'd added favorite personal things like houses and animals and some pipe-cleaner trees. Packing the set for our move to Astoria in 1976 required two boxes.

Only one of them made it here. I opened an unfamiliar box of similar size and stared in confusion at construction paper and stencils. I imagined a teacher somewhere wondering why she had three plaster shepherds with disabilities and a balsa wood stable. I called the moving company to report that part of our nativity set had been mixed up with what I presumed were teacher's supplies. I guess because none of those things was a very big ticket item, we never heard back.

Ron, the problem-solver, had a brilliant solution. He dug out a set of Lincoln Logs from his childhood (he still has the shoes he wore to play tennis in college) and he and the kids built a stable. It was a masterpiece with a stall for the cows, a pecking spot for the chickens on the flat roof. Shredded yellow paper padded the manger and fed the cows. I spread the wise men to take up space.

Our daughter, then 7, insisted there had to be shepherds.

We went in search of some, but couldn't find separate pieces for sale. That was when I discovered Fontanini figures at a Christmas shop in Portland. They were exquisite, made of break-resistant polymer (great for a house with children) and painted with non-lead-based paint by villagers in a small town in Tuscany called Bagni di Lucca.

I fell in love. The characters had beautifully expressive faces, and no broken noses or missing hands. They were subtly painted and even the camel was magnificent.

Still, they cost more than our budget allowed. On the way out of the store, I spotted a sale table and went to investigate. One of the middle-sized sets without the stable was on



Submitted Photo

Muriel Jensen's nativity scene is cobbled together from many desperate features.



Submitted Photo

sale for half price! I couldn't believe it. It was fate! We made the purchase and as Ron took the box from the clerk, I told her how excited we were to find this, that we were replacing a set with missing pieces.

"You realize," she said, suddenly serious, "that this is half price because it's missing the shepherds."

I looked at Ron in exasperated disbelief, then we laughed and took the set home anyway.

A writer is always looking for motivation, for that telling backstory that helps mold a character and sets him on his path to change. As I moved my mom's old figures to the top

of a small table in the kitchen, and placed my Fontaninis in their Lincoln Logs stable, I wondered about the significance of the absence of shepherds at our nativity.

Did it suggest we had no guidance? That could be true. We tried hard but felt like we were winging it as parents, sometimes with good results, sometimes not.

Did it mean there was no representation of humility in our lives? Well, that wasn't true. When we filed for adoption we'd been prepared to add one child to our lives and got a family of three. We'd had to buy two more of everything. We did know what financial humility meant.

It is easy enough to be so focused on the road ahead that you never look up.

Did we just not see the star or hear the angels sing? I didn't think so. Ron was a born reporter and never missed anything. But it is easy enough to be so focused on the road ahead that you never look up.

Then it occurred to me that maybe the message was that this year, we had to be our own shepherds. Our representation of the nativity didn't have to be perfect today. It was sort of cobbled together, like our lives; two adults trying to make room between them for three children, and those children bonded so tightly together that it was hard for them to open their arms to us. What if letting in someone else diminished their closeness?

So we all just huddled together that Christmas, realizing we were building a family the way we were putting together the creche. We didn't have everything we needed in the way of patience, tolerance, understanding, but hopefully it would come with time. Maybe next year.

And though we didn't have shepherds, we had their message. Roughly translated, if I'm allowed to do that to St. Luke, it's "Don't be afraid, He's here. Give Him glory by being people of peace and show goodwill to everyone."

Merry Christmas from the Jensen/Baker family.

Astoria resident Muriel Jensen has published more than 70 books and novellas.

The Donald Trump Days of Christmas

By GAIL COLLINS
New York Times News Service

Happy holidays!

I say this with some trepidation, because Donald Trump has vowed that when he is president, "We're all going to be saying 'Merry Christmas' again."

That was a while ago, during his war on the Starbucks coffee cup design. So very much water has run under the Trumpian bridge since then.

But I'm still trying to figure out exactly how a universal "Merry Christmas" mission would be accomplished. Would there be a "holiday" gag order? Seasonal salutation checks at the border?

This is supposed to be a down period for presidential campaigning, since most of the population is focused on celebrating you-know-what with friends and families. But Trump has given us such a not-normal year that people will be drinking eggnog by the fire and discussing the proper use of the word "schlonged."

The happiest holiday parties should be with Team Clinton, which clearly believes that going to war with Trump is good for her cause and that having Trump as the Republican nominee would be even better.

Their current fight began when Hillary, in the last Democratic debate, said ISIS was "going to people showing videos of Donald Trump insulting Islam and Muslims in order to recruit more radical jihadists." There is actually no specific evidence this is happening, although it certainly seems probable.

For the sake of perfect accuracy, Clinton should have said that ISIS "is bound to start going." We would dwell on imperfect verb choice longer if PolitiFact hadn't just announced that out of 77 Trump statements it looked into, 76 percent were rated Mostly False, False or Pants on Fire.

The Trump campaign is a new phenomenon. He mainly flies around on his planes, speaks at big rallies and calls into radio and TV news talk shows. Trump brags about his lack of interest in fundraising, but he doesn't seem to be spending much of his own money, either. This is a guy whose great keys to fortune were inheriting real estate and putting his name on things that other people often paid for. Maybe he figures he can become president just by branding it.

After the Hillary diatribes, Trump told a howling audience



Gail Collins

this week that he hates journalists, and he appeared to be mulling the idea of killing some of them. To be fair, he did conclude by announcing he wouldn't do that.

For which I presume we're supposed to be grateful.

Once, long ago, I was the subject of Trumpian ire — I had referred to him as a "thousandaire" — and his response was to send me a copy of the column with a couple of insults written over my picture and a note in which he misspelled the word "too." So really, he's not all that threatening. As long as he remains a private citizen, the worst he can do is to throw up an ugly apartment building or hotel in your neighborhood.

But the president thing is no longer a joke. You may have noticed that the competition is starting to fall away. This week Sen. Lindsey Graham threw in the towel, or, in polite political-speak, "suspended his candidacy." Carly Fiorina, Rand Paul and John Kasich seem likely to be consigned to the loser's section when the Republicans have their next debate.

That brings us down to six people, one of which is Ben Carson, who's fading fast. Also Jeb Bush,

THE TRUMP DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

On the seventh day of Christmas, he gave to you and me ...
Seven Mexican rapists
Six terrorist refugees
Thousands of Muslims partying on 9/11!
Four "loser" opponents
Hillary-bathroom sniping
Two birther rants
And a bromance with Vladimir Putin.

This is, if nothing else, a campaign where the insults are meeting a new norm.

who was last seen wandering around New Hampshire, reminding people how many times he's been there. At this point in the political cycle, if you're a desperate candidate you go somewhere cold and try to get the population to fall in love with you just because they've had so many opportunities to shake your trembling, frostbitten hand.

Ted Cruz is doing something along that line in Iowa, where he's ahead. But he's also moved into a clear second place in the polls, terrifying the party establishment and many Republican billionaire donors, who regard Cruz as an obnoxious self-pro-

moting egomaniac. There is nothing the oligarch class hates more than egomaniacs.

The big donors appear to be particularly fond of Sen. Marco Rubio, the attractive, 44-year-old Floridian who has done very well in the debates. The other candidates find Rubio's popularity irritating, particularly since he hasn't been campaigning all that hard. Or doing anything else, it appears. Trump called Rubio a sweaty underachiever "with no money, zero." This is, if nothing else, a campaign where the insults are meeting a new norm. Thanks almost entirely to the front-runner.



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