

Friends of Hospice Tree-lighting
Dec. 3, 2000
Neal Ross Atkinson, PRF1/2000

Good evening, shalom.

My name is Neal Ross Atkinson; those of you who read the Index-Tribune may know me as Neal Ross. I wrote the piece about tonight's event which appeared in Friday's paper, and I first want to thank Kathy Benziger and the Benziger family for allowing me to tell their story and share it with all of you.

I also belong to Sonoma's Congregation Shir Shalom, where I occasionally lead services, teach religious school, and perform various other duties as a lay leader within the Jewish community.

Now, you don't often see many Jews at a Xmas tree lighting. There's a good reason for that... But I want to take us beyond the level of differences, and into the bigger picture: the commonalities which link us all together tonight.

One of my favorite movies is the drama, "Excalibur," about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. An early scene shows the knights gathering on a hilltop after winning the huge battle which unified the land and established Arthur's kingship. They're all carrying on, laughing and talking, until Merlin the Magician tells them to shut up and pay attention.

"Remember this moment, for you are joined by it!" he tells the knights. "Savor it, that you may say in the future, I was there, that night, with Arthur. For it is the doom of men that they forget."

We are all here tonight because we love someone who isn't here any more. Someone whose presence, like the lights of this tree, illuminated our little corner of the universe in a way that we'll always remember; someone whose departure made that universe colder and greyer than if they'd never been here at all.

These people connected us to light and to life in different ways and through different relationships: mother or father, brother or sister, son or daughter, wife or husband. Each of them taught us something, made us laugh or cry, aggravated us or soothed us, and fit into our lives like pieces of a fragile and complicated jigsaw puzzle. And when they left, that puzzle became a little harder to figure out in the ensuing darkness.

Light and darkness are universal symbols, especially at this time of year. Whatever the specific reason behind it -- a pagan Yule log or hilltop bonfire, a Hannukah menorah or Kwanzaa lamp, or even the lights of a Xmas tree -- we huddle against the coldly lengthening night to remind ourselves that spring and summer still exist, and warmth and life will return again.

That universal symbolism is specifically reflected in our ceremony tonight. Just as humanity lights a defiant torch against oncoming winter, we kindle this tree in the Plaza tonight to remember the warmth of those who've illumined our lives -- against the relentless shadow of their loss, and ours.

Like the knights on the hilltop with Merlin, let's pause a moment and take a breath. In fact, let's take three -- three deep, slow breaths...

Now let's look around: at each other... at this tree... at this moment, right here in front of and around us.

This night brings us together with people we may never have met, but who understand, even in a small way, what we have each gone through. We are bound by this, even as we are bound to those we loved and will always love. Their memories will light this tree tonight -- even as their memories light our hearts forever.