

Peace on Earth

That phrase has been around a long, long time. Real peace eludes us, always has, but we still talk about it, write about it, even sing about it, especially this time of year.

“Pray for peace, people everywhere,” wrote composer Noël Ragney during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. As the world held its breath, Ragney took to the sidewalks of New York, where babies in their strollers touched his heart:

“Said the night wind to the little lamb, ‘Do you see what I see?’”

Ragney’s wife and partner, Gloria Shayne, put his words to music, and a year later Bing Crosby made their song a hit. *“Do You Hear What I Hear?”* wasn’t written especially for the holidays, but that’s the thing about this season: our deepest longings rise to the top, and we start humming songs of joy. Comfort. Goodness. Light.

On Christmas Day 1863, inspiration came to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow while his son lay wounded, badly wounded, from the American Civil War. *“I heard the bells,”* the poet wrote. *“Their old familiar carols play, And wild and sweet the words repeat, Of peace on earth, good will to men.”*

I’m grateful to Longfellow, and I think we should forgive his gender bias. After all, isn’t forgiveness the key? Isn’t that where peace begins?

Consider the butterfly effect. One flap of a wing in Cambridge is enough to stir the breeze in Tel Aviv. Scientists believe it, so why shouldn’t we all? And why should it not be true for the human heart as much as for the weather? If you and I forgive, if we pause amid the fa la la to think and sing of peace, who knows what we might bring to pass?

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.”

Among all the people of the world, fully one in seven suffered war this year. For the rest of us, living our snug lives, what gift can we possibly bring? Maybe not much, but surely this:

Every time we hear one of those old familiar tunes, let’s pause on the sidewalk, roll down the car window, stop right there in the pharmacy aisle, and sing. Sing loud. Cause a stir. With a voice as big as the sea, announce our belief that, this time of year especially, anything, absolutely anything, is possible.

