



SIEBENQUELL

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# The Unfolding Story

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There are many ways to tell a story. In the Christmas season we have just celebrated we experience one of the truly beautiful, and also venerable ways of doing so is the building of a crèche.

Francis of Assisi first came up with the idea on Christmas Eve in the year 1223. He built the first crèche in the town of Greccio so that people would have a visual aid to the story that was unfolding on Christmas Eve. It was his gift of storytelling to a people who, for the most part, could not read the story for themselves

During this Christmas season I often reflected on the power of the crèche as a form of storytelling. I watched children stop to look at the crèche, to pause in wonder, or to ask the questions that the scene before their eyes evoked. I observed children for whom it was so important to build a crèche of their own, even though there was no one in the family who shared their interest or delight. As always, I was touched by the power of the crèche to reveal to the children an unfolding story, that made them want to touch and move the figures.

Some of these children were too young to read the story for themselves, so they were fascinated by the creche that told the story to them. Others could easily read the story for themselves, but were never introduced to the possibilities of this story. Some are not even unaware of its existence. The very same culture that ensures that most people escape illiteracy, that makes sure they can read and write, is also responsible for an illiteracy of the heart, an illiteracy of the soul. By immersing people into ceaseless cycles of consumption and suffocating them with endless superficialities that are wrapped in tinsel and chains of light, our culture avoids the stories of depth, meaning, purpose, and destiny.

In the city of Munich there is a school run by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Within its halls you will find a beautiful creche. I have the personal honour of knowing the creche builder. This sister has been setting up the creche for more than 40 years. In this last year, she began on the Monday after the first Sunday of Advent and will continue to work on this creche until February 2. She makes it possible for children in the school, where she sets this creche up, to watch the unfolding of the story. First the stall appears. Later there are wood piles, then some animals and eventually the first characters appear. Later Mary and Joseph arrive on the scene, followed by shepherds, the angels, and the Magi. In the course of the many weeks, some characters move to other places, while others, like the Magi, eventually leave the scene. Sister even continues the story all the way to the flight to Egypt when Mary, Joseph and the child disappear from the scene altogether.

After 40 years of setting up such creches, she began to wonder if it was time to let someone else take over or whether to give up this beautiful custom altogether. I gently, but rather emphatically, told her that of all the things she might want to give up, this should be among the last. It is not as if every person walking past the creche has an alternative that allows them access to this story. In my childhood, the creche exercised a great enchantment over us. This enchantment held sway over us, as we saw a story that we knew unfolding before our eyes. Today this enchantment works just as vigorously, but decidedly differently. The children who stop and gaze in wonder are also enchanted by what they see, but they are fascinated by a story that is new and even foreign to them. For some it is the first and perhaps only encounter they will have with the story of the birth of the child.

Most of all, I encouraged this sister to build a creche again in the coming years, as long as she is able, for the most simple of reasons. This unfolding story still works. It has the power to make people stop. It has the power to make people wonder. It has the power to make people ask questions. And it has the power to allow the hearts of children to pose the questions the adults have ignored for too long.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful compliments I heard about this creche was when a teacher in the school told the creche-builder a story that reveals something about the magnificence and attractiveness of her work. She mentioned to her, that when she let children leave the classroom to take a bathroom break, it took them a lot longer to come back to the classroom, because they always ended up stopping to gaze and wonder at the scene of the birth of Jesus. My brothers and sisters, that is the power of an unfolding story.

I thank God for all the storytellers of the unfolding story, for this sister and all the other creche makers. I thank God for the grandparents who take the time to give this story a place in their home. My heart is full of gratitude for every creative person who finds a way to open eyes and ears to the great unfolding story of God in our midst. I bow my knee to them all.

In many ways, they are the star that leads us to the child.

**Erik Riechers SAC**

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