

Grace notes: Rediscovering hope and goodness

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

It brings back goodness for me,” my friend said when, after the midnight service, I sought her out to wish her a blessed Christmas. She was sharing her joy in singing with the choir on Christmas Eve.

I had urged her to sing a few years earlier, when she was struggling with tremendous grief about things that her child had done. I thought that singing carols, hymns and songs such as “O Holy Night” and the “Hallelujah Chorus” would be life-affirming for her.

Now, a few years later, because of our friendship and our mutual awareness of the sorrow that had marked her life, our Christmas greetings conveyed a rich and deep resonance. So did her comment about singing, communicated with a broad, infectious smile and a twinkle in her eye.

My friend’s words and countenance conveyed a beautiful sense of the renewing gifts of Christmas: the joy of the music, the announcement of Jesus’ birth, the rediscovery of a holy night in the midst of the world’s pain and suffering. Even more, she offered a reminder that this renewing gift comes on the far side of human sorrow and suffering. Hers is a costly awareness: she knows that the babe in the manger at Christmas is none other than the crucified and risen Christ of Easter. Whether it is Christmas Eve or Easter morning, it is the same for all of us. Our focus on God’s love in Christ brings back goodness to us.

By contrast, Israel Levis, the main character in Oscar Hijuelos’s *A Simple Habana Melody*, has lost a sense of the world’s goodness. Indeed, the subtitle of the novel, *Back When the World Was Good*, identifies the seemingly irredeemable sadness that marks Levis’s older years. For much of Levis’s life, the world was very good. He was a successful songwriter and celebrity in Cuba during the early decades of the 20th century, and one of his songs became an international sensation.

But in the early 1930s political turmoil developed in Cuba. The new regime attacked the arts and artists, and one of Levis's close friends and musical colleagues was assassinated. As a result, Levis moved to France. But France turned out not to be a safe haven either. When the Nazis invaded Paris, Levis was mistaken for a Jew because of his first name (Israel). As a practicing Roman Catholic, Levis had not imagined that his life was in jeopardy until it was too late. He was deported to Buchenwald.

Somehow he survived the concentration camp and the Nazi era and returned to Cuba after World War II. But instead of being a carefree, joyful source of beautiful music, Levis was now haunted by melancholy. He no longer wanted to write or play music, and his famous song, "Rosas Puras" (Pretty Roses), seems to have been written by a Levis in another life, or even by someone else.

It is all too easy to lose a sense of the world's goodness. When our dreams are shattered, or our hopes are battered, our optimism often is simultaneously eclipsed. In the face of overwhelming suffering, persistent sorrow or systemic evil, we often discover that our doubts about the world's goodness become entrenched convictions. We become embittered, cynical or marked by a deep sadness.

The narrator describes Levis in his older years: "How to step forward into the future was something that perplexed him—he had been sapped of his creative energies by his last years in Europe. Buchenwald. He waited interminably for hours at a time, bored and feeling useless, until that point when he would get up from his chair and uncap a bottle of brandy, sipping until he got drunk and a desire to sleep came over him, sometimes retiring to bed at three in the afternoon." Hijuelos leaves us wondering whether Israel Levis ever rediscovered a sense that the world could be good. My friend rediscovered goodness on Christmas Eve. What makes the difference? The difference is rediscovering hope when the world offers little or no evidence for optimism.

My friend rediscovered hope in words that encompass joys as well as griefs, hopes as well as fears, triumphs as well as tragedies. As the carol puts it, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." Israel Levis's music, while it offered respite from pain, did not provide a rediscovery of hope.

Perhaps that is because the rediscovery of hope involves more than music alone can do. For my friend, it is bound up with the texture of relationships through which the

music is sung. Her rediscovery of joy includes gathering to sing together as a choir, offering a gift to the congregation and to each other. It is music that is sung and lived in community that allows us to rediscover a sense of goodness in the world.

Could it be that the music of Christmas carols and the relationships forged as we worship together are indispensable means not only of rediscovering hope and goodness, but also of discovering God's presence activated in the world? In one of his "Meditations of the Heart," Howard Thurman characterizes human life as being sustained by "others unknown to us whose paths led them down our street or by our house at the moment that we needed the light they could give." He then goes on to note the interdependencies by which we offer this sustenance to one another, and his conclusion offers a beautiful description of rediscovering the world's goodness: "It is the way of life; it is one of the means by which God activates Himself in the texture of human life and human experience."