



Vicki Greendot Visits the Circle Home

Written by Andrea Kronshage

Illustrated by Jason MacKay

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Dedication: for my Darlings, Tara, Anthony and James –
champions of inclusion

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VICKI THREW HER NAVY

blue scarf around her neck, jammed on her navy blue mittens and ran out of her rainbow house at the end of the polka dot driveway to meet her friend, Josephine Trueblood, at the end of the block. It was so cold her fuzzy pink bow was standing straight up as she ran up to Josephine, hugged her and said: "Let's go! We don't want to be late for the storytelling!"

Josephine nodded happily and said: “This sounds just like the talking circle we have at the First Nations Community Centre where we pass the eagle feather to each other. Did you know, Vicki, that while you hold the feather no one else may speak until you pass it to the next person in the circle?”

Vicki looked at her friend and nodded and said, “I just hope chatty Mr. Samuel Macleod can be a little quieter today in **our** circle!”

The two friends skipped down the long snow-covered sidewalk hand in hand until they got to the Circle Home for the elderly, and then stopped for a moment to look at the beautiful old house outlined in snow with clear lights around the roof and each window and a fire burning brightly in the huge living room.

Vicki explained to Josephine as they stood admiring the cozy, happy-looking home, that her Mumsy and her Poppy came there every week to read to the elderly residents and take them on outings as part of their commitment to the community in which they lived. Mumsy and Poppy had chosen the Circle Home for their volunteer work because all the people that ran Circle Home and lived in it were committed to diversity. Diversity was very, very important to Mumsy and Poppy because they now had eleven very different children and they wanted to help build a world where **everyone** would be accepted and included.

Suddenly the huge oak door on the Circle Home swung wide open and Mr. Jafar al-Kazim was saying, “Come quickly, children, we are waiting to share our December stories with you and it’s my turn to speak first!”

Mr. Jafar al-Kazim was a tall, slender man with elegant hands, a sleek head of white hair and gentle hazel eyes, and he smiled at them as they jumped up the stairs and into the house. He helped them get their mittens and scarves off and gently pushed them into the wonderful big living room where most of the residents had already gathered on the comfortable sofas and chairs set up for them in a big circle.

Vicki and Josephine quickly curled up in the puffy loveseat their elderly friends had left for them and looked expectantly at Mr. Jafar al-Kazim who was carefully helping Mr. Samuel Macleod get his wheelchair into the circle.

Finally, everyone was settled and Mr. Jafar al-Kazim began to speak: "As you know, we meet on the first of every month to share stories of our culture or our religion with each other and our guests. And since this is December, I wanted to share with you the story of the birthday of the Aga Khan - who ascended to the Imamate in 1957 and represents the social conscience of Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims - and to tell you I was lucky enough to have celebrated his birthday a few years ago in Pamirs, Tajikistan."

Immediately Mr. Jafar al-Kazim was peppered with questions about what the Imamate was and where Pamirs, Tajikistan was and what the Ismailis believed in and he answered all of their questions as completely as he could. And when he explained that the Ismailis were committed worldwide to the relief of hardship, pain or ignorance as well as to maintaining human

dignity, everyone stopped speaking for a while and slowly nodded or smiled before he went on to describe the actual celebration he had attended that would recur this year on December 15th. And when he spoke about the singing and

the clapping and the drums and the dancing on that sunny cold day in Pamirs, everyone could almost feel the drumbeats and the snow beneath their feet but there was no doubt they could feel the joy of the celebration of the Aga Khan's birthday.



Mr. Jafar al-Kazim thanked them for their attention and then introduced tiny, little blue-haired Mrs. Phyllis Gertsman with a sweet little voice, who spoke to them about Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Light that will last this year from December 12th to December 19th and how Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and how, after a battle, there was only enough oil to light the temple for one day but the oil burned for eight days, just enough time for more oil to be pressed from olives – it was a great miracle and is celebrated every year by Jewish people all over the world. And Mrs. Phyllis Gertsman told them about the songs and the games (like Dreidel) that the children play, and the wonderful little potato pancakes called latkes and the sweet donuts called sufganiyot that families share during the celebration and finally about the lighting of the Menorah with a candle for each night of Hanukkah and an extra candle called the shamasa or guard, used to light the other candles. When Mrs. Phyllis Gertsman finished speaking with a smile and a kiss blown around the circle, everyone could just about see the candles of the Menorah burning brightly in her eyes.





The next to speak was Mr. Farouk Maawad, a small shy man with lively brown eyes and a wide white smile. Mr. Farouk Maawad spoke to the people in the circle about Al Hijira, the Islamic New Year which would take place this year on December 18th. He explained that the New Year marked the anniversary of the long and difficult journey of the Prophet Mohammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in September of 622 – almost fourteen hundred years ago! He explained that although in recent years, people of his faith had started giving gifts at this time, it was traditionally meant to be a quiet time of prayers, soft music and candlelight, a time to look outside at small ponds or large mountains but most importantly, a time to think about how to be a better person and how to give more charity in the coming year. Everyone smiled gently at Mr. Farouk Maawad when he finished speaking because they knew he worked all year long at being a better person and was always helping others inside and outside of the Circle Home.

Then it was Mr. Samuel Macleod's turn to speak - he with a big tummy, a booming voice, a bald head and a kindly heart. He leaned forward in his wheelchair with great excitement as he described to the group of friends the fact that as someone who celebrates Wicca, the religion devoted to nature, his big holiday, Yule, was approaching on December 21st this year. Yule occurs on the day when the nights get shorter and the days longer. He talked about the apples and oranges spiced with cloves and cinnamon given to the children who dreamt about wood sprites as they slept, about wassailing (singing) around the pine trees with huge bonfires and about singing and dancing and drinking spiced cider to celebrate the rebirth of the Oak King and the return of spring. And finally, Mr. Samuel Macleod told them about taking a fresh pine log and spicing it with cinnamon and cloves and lighting it in the fireplace with a bit of last year's Yule log to signify the continuation of life. By the time he was finished speaking, everyone could almost smell the fresh pine and cinnamon and cloves!





Then the proud and oh so beautiful Mrs. Loka Omole stood to speak about Kwanzaa and what it meant to her as a young black woman when Maulana Karenga (formerly Ron Everett, who was the fourteenth son of a Baptist minister) introduced Kwanzaa in 1966 as a uniquely African American alternative to Christmas that starts each year on the 26th of December and signifies a new

beginning. In her proud, mellow voice Mrs. Loka Omole spoke of the lighting of the Kinara, a candle holder, the remembrance of the seven principles of Kwanzaa, how she and all of her friends would have feasts called karamu to share good food and libation, listen to songs and stories of their African ancestors, and dance to throbbing drums all the while dressed in their red, green and black Kaftans, Dashikis and Kufis. She also spoke about the fact that Kwanzaa was a time to give gifts to children, but that no matter what else you might give a child, you must give them a book to symbolize continuous learning and another gift symbolizing their African heritage – this was an important part of the philosophy of Kwanzaa and the principles of individual and collective accountability developed by Maulana Karenga. And just like Mr. Jafar al-Kazim before her, Mrs. Loka Omole was peppered with questions and actually had the whole circle clapping a song with her before she turned with a sparkle in her eyes and said that part of the Kwanzaa philosophy was to be inclusive, so in her home, as a wife and mother, she had always insisted that Christmas and Kwanzaa were both celebrated joyously in December.

And just as the youthful Reverend Thomas Morgan was about to speak about Christmas, he dropped his napkin on the floor – because they were all munching on chocolate chip cookies and hot chocolate as they shared stories - and Vicki quickly jumped off of the loveseat to pick it up for him because he was blind in his beautiful big blue eyes and couldn't see where it fell. Reverend Thomas Morgan thanked Vicki and then cleared his throat to tell a beautiful story about the birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem when the North Star lit the sky so brightly because of Jesus' birth it frightened shepherds tending their flocks! And he told them about how Christians the world over celebrated Jesus' birthday with trees and candles and gifts and carols and family gatherings – and he even told them how he sometimes worried that people were so involved in celebrating Christmas, that they actually forgot about the baby Jesus in that cold manger in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago and what his birth really meant to the world.





Vicki nodded enthusiastically when Reverend Thomas Morgan said this and explained to the circle of friends: “That’s exactly why we have some customs from all different beliefs in our house at Christmas, and because Mumsy and Poppy want us to remember to help others!...so we don’t put any lights on our tree till Christmas Eve and then we light the real candles our Uncle Gunter sends us from Germany and sing carols together and Poppy stands by the tree in his tuxedo with a pail of water and a fire extinguisher! And then on Christmas morning, our whole family goes down to the Salvation Army and serves Christmas dinner to a lot of folks that don’t have as much as we do – some of them don’t even have homes – before we come home and make our own Christmas dinner. And I’m still too little to actually serve dinner at the Salvation Army so I get to hand out the socks and the oranges and the candy canes and wish everyone a Merry Christmas as they leave.”

And Vicki was so enthusiastic about her little story that her fuzzy pink bow was bobbing up and down on her head and everyone in the circle, including the Reverend Thomas Morgan, was smiling at her.

Just then, Mr. Jafar al-Kazim spoke to say that it was eight o'clock and time for the circle to end for this month at which point Vicki jumped off of the loveseat and ran around the circle hugging everyone and thanking them for their stories. Then she and Josephine put on their mittens and scarves and ran out of the door yelling "good night" merrily and skipped back up the snow-covered sidewalk until suddenly Josephine yanked Vicki's hand and Vicki turned towards her friend.

"What is it, Josephine?" she asked.

"Vicki, I just wanted to say thank you for including me tonight. It was so wonderful learning about different people and their customs that my heart is very happy!" Josephine said with a huge smile.

Vicki nodded and hugged her friend again and said: "That's exactly why I go to visit the Circle Home every month, because I learn so much about the wonderful diversity of people it makes me want to learn more!" and off they skipped into the softly falling snow.

The end.



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