

Guideposts



Is there
one person
in your life who
made Christmas
special for you?

ADELE

BY NED WALDMAN, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

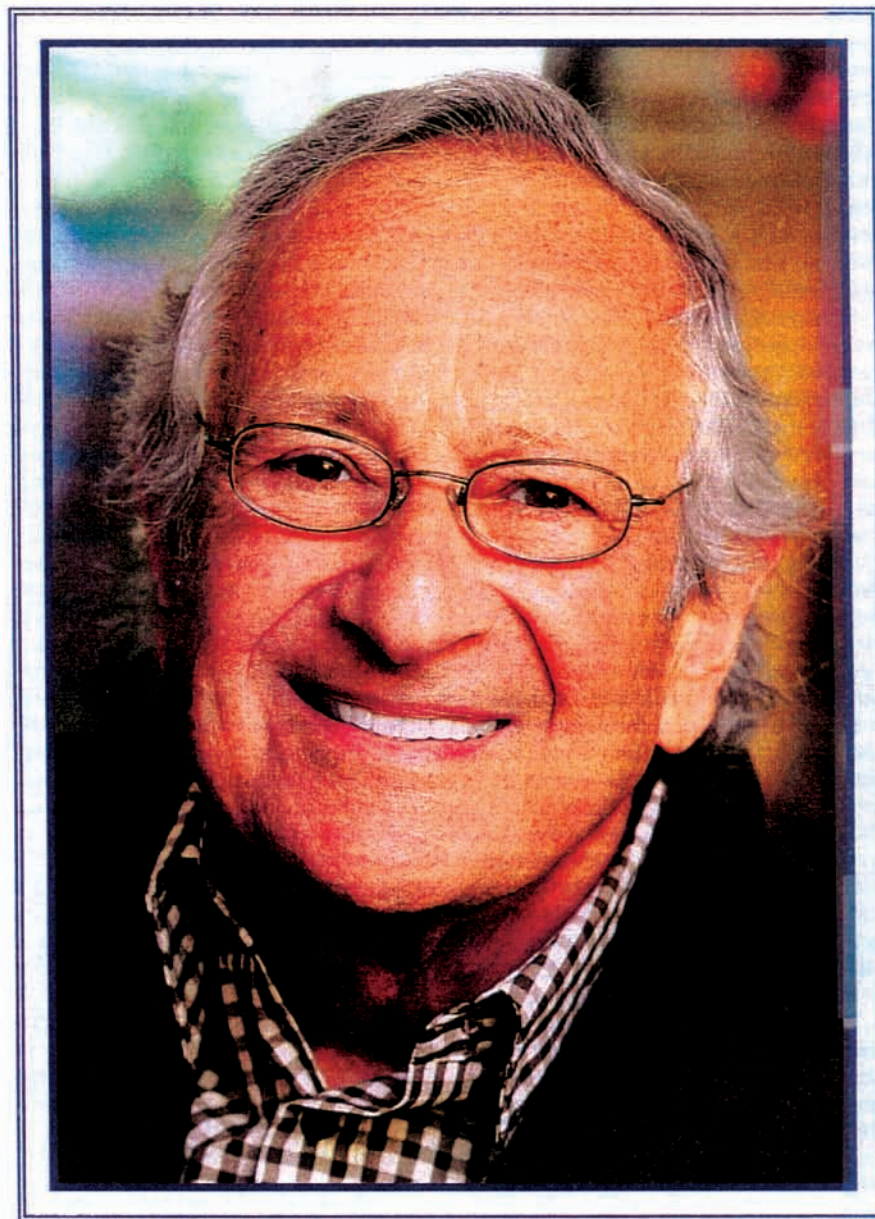
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, I PUBLISHED A LITTLE BOOK BY TOM HEGG CALLED *A Cup of Christmas Tea*. Maybe you've read it. It's a poem about a young man who reluctantly accepts an elderly aunt's holiday invitation. To his surprise, the visit reawakens all the wonderful feelings Christmas had stirred in him as a child—faith, warmth, comfort, the joy of sharing—which he may have lost along the way to adulthood. I only published books that I believed in 100 percent—

books that inspired me, books that touched my heart. When Tom first read *A Cup of Christmas Tea* to me, I broke down and wept. I'm Jewish, and sometimes people are surprised that I could be so moved by a Christmas story, or even relate to it at all. "I know all about Christmas," I told Tom. As a little boy, I had celebrated the holiday with someone I loved dearly. She even made special tea on Christmas Eve. Her name was Adele Molitor and, in a way, she was my mom.

You see, my biological mom died when I was just six months old, in 1933. She'd contracted a staph infection. Sadly, penicillin wasn't available in those days. In the depths of despair, my heartbroken father packed up and moved to California, leaving my older brother and me behind in Minnesota. I was too little to have any sense of what was happening to our family, and

GIVING SPIRIT *Ned was orphaned at six months, but not abandoned.*

THOMAS STRAND



certainly too young to have any say. My brother went to live with our aunt. I was entrusted to Adele. She'd been our housekeeper and my nanny, but now made her living ironing blouses for Jeanette Frocks, a local manufacturer. Adele worked hard, but she didn't seem to mind taking on an infant to care for. In fact, she lavished attention on me. Not a single day went by without her saying, "I love you," in her wonderfully sweet but raspy voice.

I can only imagine how unusual it must've seemed: a Catholic woman of German descent raising a Jewish child during World War II. But there were no differences at all between Adele and me. We were a team. I remember being very small and looking up into her gentle, brown eyes. What did I see? Love, of course. Pure, absolute love.

Adele raised me until I was six, and she respected my Jewish heritage. Still, I enjoyed accompanying her once a week to the Basilica of Saint Mary, a magnificent church that's now a Minneapolis landmark. Its grandeur was a stark contrast to the tiny, one room apartment we lived in right in the church's shadow, but it never felt intimidating—only comforting. Hundreds of glowing prayer candles tempered the coolness of all that marble and stone. The vaulted ceilings and high dome amplified every whisper. I felt a sacred sense of quietude there even as dozens of people said their rosaries and Hail Mary's all at once.

After Mass, Adele would put a nickel in the slot to light a candle especially for me. "Heavenly Father," she'd pray, hands clasped, eyes gazing upward, "bless and protect this precious child." There we were, the two of us, a woman and child, before God. Though our religious traditions were different, my faith was strengthened by Adele's example, and by our time to-

gether at the Basilica. When I go to temple, I feel her presence there too.

But nothing brings memories of Adele back to me like Christmastime. Oh, how she loved Christmas, and how she loved for others to share in her joy. Especially me! Since money was so tight, she'd wait till the last possible moment on a Christmas Eve to buy a tree, when the prices had gone down. Invariably, we'd get the skinniest, scraggiest, 50-cent tree you could imagine! But it didn't matter to us if a few branches were missing. We carried it back home through the freezing, snow-covered streets of Minneapolis, dragged it up the stairs and set it up in the corner so you couldn't see its sparest side. Adele went over to the old stove and put up a pot of her special Christmas tea, fragrant with cinnamon and cloves and orange peel.

Once the tea was ready, Adele climbed up on a ladder to get the boxes stacked high in the closet and pass them down to me, where I waited below. In them, Adele kept all kinds of Christmas tree ornaments, and all of them were beautiful to me. But my very favorite was a little plush brown bear. "Go on, Ned," she'd say to me, "put Teddy anywhere on the tree, anywhere you like." I felt like the luckiest

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COMFORT AND JOY Adele and Ned, early 1980s

kid in the whole wide world. We capped off each Christmas Eve listening to the incomparable Kate Smith singing "Silent Night." To this day, it is my favorite song. It's clear to me why those beautiful words, telling the story of a mother and child, so captivated me. I never really knew my mother, but I knew what it was to be loved by a mother—to feel protected and cared for, to feel safe from all the bad things that can happen in this world, to know that I was the center of one woman's life. In Adele's tender care, all was calm, all was bright.

When I was six, my relatives decided

it was time for me to live with my family and learn the traditions of my faith. I didn't want to leave Adele's nest, but I warmed to Aunt Millie very quickly, and soon realized how blessed I was to have two extraordinary, strong women in my life. Adele and Aunt Millie became good friends. They had deep respect for each other, and for each other's faiths.

Even when I grew up and had my own children, I took them to Adele's for Christmas. She was divorced, and never had children of her own. She continued to work very hard and live simply in her small apartment. Since I'd become successful in the book business, I picked out the nicest, fullest tree for her I could find. No more scraggly 50-cent trees! She chided me about it. "Ned, you shouldn't spend so much money! We were always happy with those little trees!" She was right. But she'd given

me so much. How could I not give back? And she continued to give. All those years when we visited for the holidays, she kept a small menorah on the windowsill, lit up for the eight days of Hanukkah. Her spirit was so generous, so inclusive. It had room enough for her faith, and mine.

Adele passed away in 1984. I felt her loss so deeply. But because of her I published a book that went on to sell millions of copies. Did I know Christmas? Oh, yes, I did. And when you know Christmas, no matter what your faith, you want to pass that gift along to everyone so they will know it too. ■