

# *Taking Stock*

Gail Balden

Last day of 2009. Tomorrow we begin a new year fresh with possibility. We've passed the winter solstice and are heading for the light. Some of us like to hold on to the holiday season a bit longer. The cheery lights aglow in our little towns give comfort in the darkness and hope for a brighter day. The warmth of hearth and home, festivities, family and friends are fresh in our memories. Christmas comes during the darkest time of the year when we seem to need it most. By the beginning of December, the words of Auntie Mame's song were running through my head:

*Grown a little colder,  
Grown a little sadder,  
Grown a little older,  
And I need a little angel  
Sitting on my shoulder,  
Need a little Christmas now.*

December is a month with the widest range of emotions. Not everyone has happy memories of holidays past or enjoys the darkness. Even so, winter can be a time of rest, reflection, renewal. More so than in other seasons, winter brings with it a feeling that anything can happen, so it's best to get ready and take stock.

Statistics indicate that most New Year's resolutions are broken by February. Rather than making a list of what we want to accomplish in the coming year such as become fit, get out of debt, lose weight, or find happiness, perhaps we should try something else. Author Henry David Thoreau encouraged us to focus on living complete lives, lives that encompass joy, adventure, reflection, natural beauty, meaningful work and relaxation. His directive in his book, *Walden* published in 1854 was "to live simply, avoid waste, live below our means and keep a reserve." Those words seem particularly appropriate today over 150 years after he wrote them.

Perhaps this new year we should consider what's really important to us. Maybe it's not having more things but having fewer wants. Many in our small towns already live simply with few extra material goods. Many work a variety of part time jobs to make enough money to get by, and though not considered wealthy in a financial sense, are wealthy in time--time they use to meditate, spend in nature or enjoy creative pursuits. Many of us think seeing a heron on the banks of the Nehalem River or taking a hike on the mountain newly dusted with snow is worth more than a flat screen television. Many choose to not be burdened with debt or material possessions that need care, maintenance and insurance. Many grow their own food or support local food co-ops. Some people simply make their own rules as to how they dress, act and live--not such a bad thing as long as no one else is hurt by their actions. Some folks start over, recognizing that peace in the world begins with them in their own home, and in giving back to community, in giving to those in need. In our small towns where we know each other and need each other, we don't have to wait for the next disaster to strike before we reach out a helping hand and strengthen the ties that bind us.

Thoreau says, "It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful, but it is more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and

medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.”

Conflict rages all about us, and as we take stock at the end of the year, we might be tempted to ask where is the hope? As I close the chapter on this year and head towards the light, I’ll continue to hold onto hope. Buds are forming on my Meyer’s lemon tree; the Christmas cactus is blooming right on schedule; and in the garden, midst frozen stalks, new shoots of Swiss Chard are springing forth. Living with hope—is there any other way?