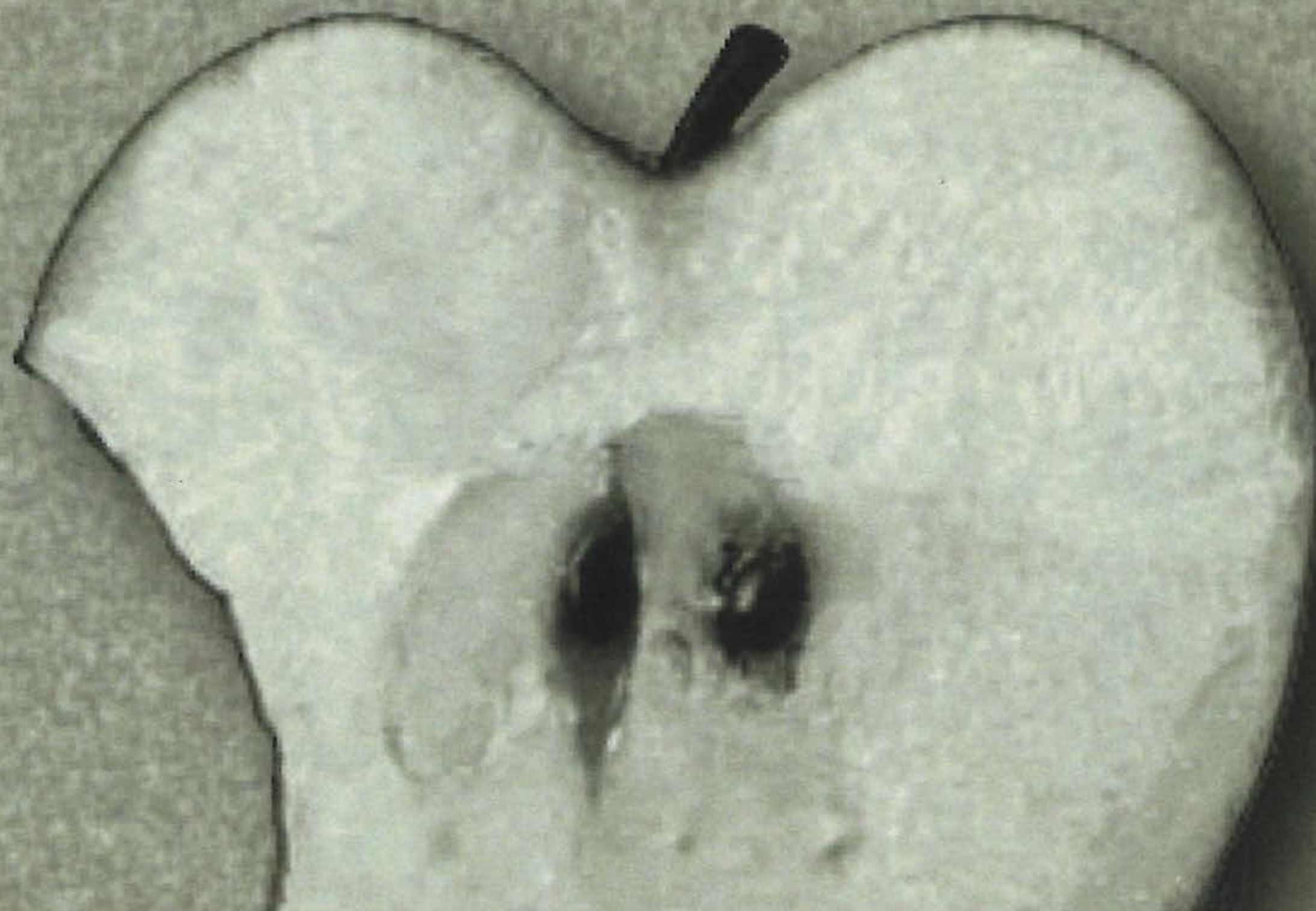


Glad to Be Human

Meditations by

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Ding-a-ling-a-ling!

When I was a child, the day after Thanksgiving was steeped in ritual. Every year my family would travel to Chicago for the holiday festivities. Our tour was always the same: We'd tromp up and down Michigan Ave., admiring store windows with animated mechanical dolls that served as actors for the narrated holiday story. We would wait in line for two hours to sit under the three-story tree at Marshall Fields and enjoy a formal lunch, and sit on Santa's lap to discuss the finer points of our list. Then on to the Berghoff for dinner.

The day always held magic, mostly because of my dime-laden mittens. In the morning, my dad would give my sister and me each a handful of dimes, which I kept in my mittens so I could tinker with them as we walked in anticipation of finding another one of "them"—Salvation Army Christmas buckets. At almost every corner familiar red cans awaited. I marveled in watching my dimes swirl their way to the quarter-sized slot and plunk in to rest amid other dime-sized donations. At the time, I knew nothing about Salvation Army theology, only that they worked for the homeless and destitute. They became my symbol of generosity for the season, albeit bucket-sized.

As an adult, I often felt an odd pull to ring the bell myself. One year I gave in. I called up the lieutenant at the local Salvation Army and asked enthusiastically if they were in need of help. They were. I was given two assignments. I couldn't wait to get my hands on that little tinkly bell.

The first assignment was a busy street corner with a bookstore and coffee shop on either side. I rang my ding-a-lingy bell in ten-degree weather with glee, stamping my feet periodically to stay warm. My smart bucket swung slightly in the breeze. It was an experience just as I had hoped: people asked me if I was warm enough, a couple bought me coffee, many smiled and simply wished me "Happy Holidays" as they passed. I marveled at the parade of dime donors and the familiar "plunk" of change that followed.

The second assignment was at a mall across from JC Penney's. Once again eager, I itched to start my ring-a-dinging. The lieutenant arrived to set up my bucket. My hands reached for the bell. No bell. He explained, "The mall owners have complained, no bells, only this." He handed me a sign.

The sign was attached to a long dowel. On the top of the dowel, two pieces of paper were stapled together over the center of the stick. One side read "DING," the other "DONG." Instead of ringing, I now had to flip a sign that read "DING-DONG." My little bucket instantly lost its ting-a-ling. My enthusiasm waned. I flipped in silent

motion. It seemed absurd, but I went to work. People pushed past each other, mired in that Christmas hubbub that leans toward frustration, not joy. Then they'd spot me. Their faces would contort, scrunching up into laughter and that uncomfortable feeling when you're embarrassed and humored by someone at the same time. They would often throw in some dimes and say "Happy Holidays," barely able to stifle an awkward yet justifiable smirk. I fought hard not to feel like the sign was projecting my mental state to the mall community.

For four hours I flipped—the sign, that is. Ten minutes before I was to quit, this fellow in black cowboy boots and a ten-gallon hat walked up to me and laughed. He was full out chuckles, bent over, hysterically laughing. I stood taller, flipping my sign with increased vigor. I couldn't tell where he was going with this. When he finally stood up for air, his eyes were smiling, so I hoped for no malicious intent. But I also was ready to kick him in the shins for his reaction to me and my now stupid sign.

Then he said, "I must say, I've never seen a sign like that before. Anybody that stands with a sign that says 'Ding-Dong' must be duly rewarded." He reached into his back pocket and retrieved his wallet. Crisp bills lay neatly in uniform order. He ran through the fives, tens, and twenties, and got to a row of fifties. He pulled one out. A fifty. He neatly folded the bill and squeezed it into the bucket designed for coin donors. Nodding, he smiled right into my eyes and muttered, "Well, I never." Then

he continued on through the mall with laughter that hung captive in the air like lingering pipe smoke.

I, on the other hand, began to turn that sign with a renewed vigor. I looked at each passerby with a new attitude, whether they snickered or smiled, donated or not. I now felt strangely in awe of my DING-DONG sign. I was unabashedly proud that I was stupid enough to stand in a mall tenaciously flipping a sign, waiting for humor and generosity to awaken someone's humdrum spirit. Waiting for it to finally dawn on me that my gifts of generosity and time needed to lose their pretenses in order for any true generosity to occur. Waiting, just to discover, that this season can still thrill and surprise. Waiting for magic, only to find that red buckets held it all the time. Even without the ding-a-ling.