

The Real Jubilee

SPIRIT | You could regard the changing of the millennium as a world-class party. Or you could do what they do in Leviticus.

BY WAYNE MULLER

ONE MORNING I WENT TO VISIT my friend Paul, who was dying of an abdominal cancer that was beyond treatment. I sat down quietly beside him on his bed. "I feel ready to go," Paul said, finally. His voice was sad, a deep ache softened with a reluctant peace. "But I wish I had ten more years," he added, "free of this illness. Then I would live as I have always wanted."

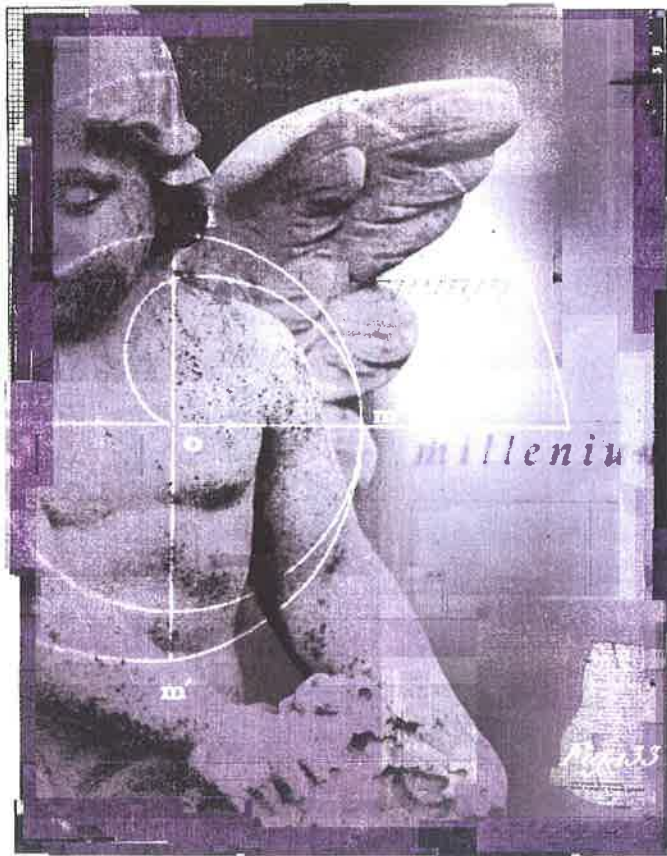
"What if I could give you those ten years?" I asked. "What would you do?" Paul responded instantly and clearly: "I would be kind. I would give things away, surprise children with sweets and presents. The best moments of my life were when I was generous."

In the face of his death, Paul saw his life more clearly. Most of us, distracted by the rush and pressure of busy days, avoid the most basic questions: How shall I live? Who or what is most important or precious in my life? What gift can I offer my family and community? Sadly, many of us wait until some disaster—divorce, a loss of employment, a grave illness, the death of a loved one—forces us to examine our life.

There is a wonderful Old Testament tradition that can serve even better as a catalyst for self-examination. It's called Jubilee, and it is the biblical source for a word that has come to mean simply communal celebration. Those are not its roots, however.

The Book of Leviticus counsels people to set aside every seventh year to observe a Sabbath, a year of rest for the

land and its people. Further, it declares every seventh Sabbath year—every 50th year—as a year of Jubilee. During Jubilee the community set aside its normal activities, took a good look at the accumulation of inequity or injustice and tried to set it right. Traditionally this involved forgiving debts, returning confiscated lands, freeing slaves and



generally helping the poor.

Jubilee reminds us that everything we have—our money, our possessions, our loved ones, even our very lives—are merely temporary gifts, on loan from God. Our riches, investments, homes and lands pass through our lives as music through a flute, fleeting blessings we are given to enjoy but never to fully possess. "The land shall not be sold forever," says the God of Leviticus, "for the land is mine, for you are strangers and

sojourners with me."

For the past few years the Pope has urged people around the world to use the millennial Jubilee as an opportunity to look at the world, see what it has become, and try to set it right. "Some nations, especially the poorer ones, are oppressed by a debt so huge that repayment is practically impossible. There can be no real progress without cooperation between the peoples of every language, race, nationality and religion," he said.

Since 1997 Catholic churches worldwide—supported by groups as diverse as the African Conference of Churches, the Latin American Catholic Bishops and the Islamic Society of America—have been holding meetings and discussion groups in their communities, educating themselves on the plight of the poor and heeding the call of Jubilee to come to the aid of those most in need of care.

In June Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and other religious groups presented the G8 in Cologne with over 17 million signatures, garnered from these small faithful groups. They requested that the G8 support the Jubilee by lifting the burden of debt from the poorest countries. After the meeting, they agreed to double the amount of money available for debt

reduction in the year 2000.

What if we use the millennium as a personal Jubilee? Why not use this millennial interlude to reflect upon the direction of our lives, count our many blessings and consider what we might be able to contribute to the healing of our families, our communities and the world? After all, it's much nicer to do it now than to wait for death or disaster to make us wish we had done it long before.