

**Fourth Sunday of Christmas**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**December 23, 2007**  
**Bruce A. Bode & Carolyn Latteier**

**Lighting the Chalice** (in unison)

We light this chalice  
For the renewal of faith,  
The wonder of hope,  
The beauty of love,  
And the gift of joy.

**Call to Worship**

This is a resplendent new day in this Christmas season that has been given to us.  
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.  
And let us count our many blessings:  
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,  
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.  
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.  
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love that bind us together, giving  
dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: On this fourth Sunday of the Christmas season, we gather as a congregation  
to light a candle to joy.

CONGREGATION: Your joy is your sorrow unmasked, and the same well from which  
your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

MINISTER: How else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being the more  
joy you can contain.

CONGREGATION: When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you will find it  
is only that which has given you sorrow that is now giving you joy.

MINISTER: And when you are sorrowful, look again into your heart, and you will see  
that you are weeping for what has been your delight.

CONGREGATION: It is said that the world sprang into being from joy, and that the soul  
is here for its own joy!

MINISTER: Is it beyond thee to be glad with the gladness of this rhythm, to be tossed  
and lost and broken in the whirl of this fearful joy?

CONGREGATION: The great sea has set me in motion, set me adrift, moving me like a weed in a river.

MINISTER: The sky and the strong wind have moved the spirit inside me till I am carried away trembling with joy.

CONGREGATION: Joy to the world! Let heaven and nature sing!

(Adapted from Rumi, Kahlil Gibran, Uvavnuk (Inuit shaman), and Radindranath Tagore)

### **The Candle of Joy**

Okay, children, we are getting real close now. Christmas is only two days away. And Christmas Eve is tomorrow night. That is when we light the Christmas candle itself, the highest candle in our Christmas candelabra.

But before we do that, you will notice there is one other candle yet to light – and that is the red candle. It's the same color as the banner that was hung up this week, and so now, as you see, the whole front wall of our sanctuary is full of color. Plus, we have all the other wonderful paintings on the sidewalls that add liveliness and loveliness to our Christmas season.

This beautiful red banner has the word “JOY” written on it. And so this Sunday we light a candle to Joy.

What is it that brings joy to you? You can't always tell, can you, when you will be joyful?

And it doesn't really work for someone to say to you, “Now, I want you to be joyful. I see that you are not being very joyful. I want you to be more joyful. YOU BE JOYFUL!”

That doesn't really work, does it? Joy is not something that can be commanded or demanded of a person.

Actually, sometimes we find ourselves being joyful without expecting it. Joy just sneaks up on us and surprises us. That's why we sometimes said say that we are “surprised by joy.”

Well, it's quite a wonderful thing that there can be such a thing as joy in the world. All the banners and bells and lights of the Christmas season are a celebration of the joy that is in the world.

And so on this Sunday just before Christmas, we light a candle to Joy. Irina Lyons (9:15) Molly Brown (11:15), will you please light the fourth Candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Joy.

## **Meditation & Period of Silence**

Christmas and all the other celebrations and festivities at this time of the year are related to the rhythms of nature ... and to the winter solstice, which took place a day and a half ago on December 21 at 10:08 p.m. That was the time at which our life-giving source the sun began to make its slow turn back to us; or, I might better say, this was the time at which we in the northern hemisphere of the earth began to tilt back toward the sun.

To honor the natural life of which we are a part and to recognize the winter solstice, I'd like to read two short poems. The first is one I received in a Christmas card a few days ago, a poem by Wallace Stevens titled, "The Snow Man." It's not so much about the return of light and warmth, but about paying attention to the realities of winter itself.

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;  
And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter  
Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,  
Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place  
For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

And then the second reading is related more directly to the time of this winter solstice. It's a poem I found on the web a couple of days ago, and with it the following note from the person who posted it:

"I just received a copy of this poem this year via email in a solicitation from Copper Canyon Press, a small press located in Port Townsend, Washington that specializes in publishing exquisite editions of poetry, both in English and in translation."

The short poem is by Norwegian poet, Rolf Jacobsen, who, living in Norway, is certainly acquainted with the quality of light present in the vast darkness at this time of the year. It's titled, "Just Delicate Needles":

It's so delicate, the light.  
And there's so little of it. The dark  
is huge.  
Just delicate needles, the light,

in an endless night.  
And it has such a long way to go  
through such desolate space.  
So let's be gentle with it.  
Cherish it.  
So it will come again in the morning.  
We hope.

(“Just Delicate Needles,” Rolf Jacobsen; tr., Robert Hedin, Copper Canyon Press)

Let us enter into a brief time of silent meditation.

**“Fierce Joy”**  
**by Carolyn Latteier**

In 1991 my husband, Richard, underwent surgery to remove an acoustic neuroma, a benign tumor growing among the three delicate nerves in the inner ear. We'd been married for five years. He went into the hospital a big healthy man, with a big smile and a big head of wavy brown hair. He came out shaven-headed, pale, wasted, deaf in one ear, paralyzed on one side of his face and with one eye sewed shut so that it wouldn't hang open and dry out. He doesn't remember much about that time, but I do. I was one of the most difficult and most profound periods of my life.

When you go into surgery, they tell you about all the side effects and you think, those are not going to happen to me. In Richard's case, they happened. While the surgeons were dissecting away the tumor, they destroyed both his hearing and his balance nerves. His facial nerve they left badly damaged, hanging on by a thread. After a week or ten days, he came home in bad shape, and he did not improve. Instead, he seemed to be fading, day by day. I was worried. I called his neurologist office in Seattle. The man was on vacation. His nurse-assistant was dismissive of my concerns. The next day, even more worried, I called the hospital. The resident in charge did not call me back. In the end, I managed to get my husband in the car and drive him to our local emergency room, where he was quickly diagnosed with raging meningitis, a bacterial brain infection causing pressure on his brain. They whisked him off to Seattle in a helicopter. I was pretty shook up. My mother and step-father drove me to the city. There, after waiting for a long time, a nurse led me to a darkened room, pointed to a diminished figure lying under a sheet on a gurney and said, “You've got five minutes with your husband.”

I said, “That can't be my husband. My husband is a big man.”

It was Richard, though; I saw when I got closer. He was wrapped a hospital sheet and only vaguely aware of what was going on.

We were in some kind of temporary holding place with a couple of unused gurneys and medical machines. It was quiet in there, but with the fear and confusion whirling around me, it felt as if we were in a storm, a hurricane, high winds blowing at us, the waters rising, a flood, threatening to pull us apart.

By nature, I am a bargaining person, and the two of us had done a lot of bargaining, mostly initiated by me. “I’ll cook if you do the dishes. I’ll sew the button on your shirt if you bring in a load of firewood.” So, in my desperation to keep my husband from drifting away, I hit on a bargain. I held on to his hand and made my offer: “Richard, if you’ll hang on and stay alive, I’ll take you on a trip to Hawaii.”

I can’t know what went through his mind – did he imagine palm trees, a tropical beach, hula girls with grass skirts and coconut shell brassieres? I don’t know. But I do know that he got it. I could tell by the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice that he totally got the bargain and he understood that there was only one way he was going to get to Hawaii. “OK,” he said. “I’ll stay alive.”

My husband was in Intensive Care for a month. It was a grim ordeal. To relieve the pressure on his brain, they drilled a hole in his head and inserted a tube to drain off the cerebral spinal fluid. He was not free to move. He was hooked up to multiple machines.

I came back to Port Townsend to take care of the house and animals and keep up with my work. But every Friday I would drive into Seattle, go straight to Richard’s hospital room, and he would be gone. They could only leave the drain in for a week without it becoming infected. Friday was the day they would take him back to surgery, drill a new hole in his head and insert a new tube.

Those Fridays, when Richard was finally wheeled back into the room, groggy and headachy, I guess he was glad to see me, but it was hard to tell. In order to protect himself from this gruesome situation, he had shut down his emotions. His expression was rigid, made more so by the paralysis and the one eye sewed shut. With all the pressure on his brain and the drugs, he was imagining that he had become interlocked with the machine. He stared at the clock on the opposite wall and had the impression it was controlling his life.

I would stay with him all weekend. We talked a bit. But it didn’t feel like he was really there.

At home during the weekdays, I was pretty lonely. I was upset about what was happening to him, the pain, the disfigurement, and the indignity. I had misgivings about the care he was receiving. Too often when I was with him, I’d discovered some basic thing that wasn’t being taken care of. I didn’t trust his doctors and I wished I could move him to a different hospital. I consulted our local neurologists; there used to be one practicing in Port Townsend. He was sympathetic. He made a few phone calls and inquiries, but ultimately he told me that, in Richard’s condition, it was better to leave him where he was.

In addition to my immediate concerns, I was worried about the future. I no longer thought my husband would die, but I was afraid he’d be disabled. In our young marriage, Richard had always been the big, strong one. When we went hiking, he knew the way and he carried most of the weight. He had been an upbeat person. When I got too

serious, he'd kid me out of it. He had a lot of body heat. When I got cold, he'd put an arm around me and warm me up. Now, maybe he would not be the same man. Maybe he wouldn't be the strong one any more. Maybe I'd be taking care of him for the rest of our lives.

The whole thing – the fact that this had happened to him, to us, was unacceptable. I am a problem solver, and I could not solve this problem. I had a hard time sleeping at night. I lay awake struggling and churning, fighting in my mind against what was happening, trying to beat my way out of this box.

In the end, I had to give up. There was no way out. I had to surrender to what life was doing to us. Giving in didn't change how bad I felt. It didn't change the insecurity, the feeling that the rug had been pulled out from under me. But somehow, it let me feel the pain in a way that was deeper, sparer, and more unhindered. It was as if there was nothing standing between me and what was. I was living right up against my life and my fate. All the padding and filters, all the "what ifs" and "maybes" were out of the picture. It still hurt. I was still lonely. Richard was still getting a raw deal, but that was the deal we had, and I accepted it.

Then one Friday, I drove to the hospital and found Richard in his room. He wasn't back in surgery. Incredibly, the swelling in his brain had stopped; the infection was subsiding. They didn't need to do put another hole in his skull. He told me that an old friend had visited him that week and brought a small tape recorder and a set of tapes, classical music that was supposed to comfort and heal. He had listened to the music over and over again. His one good eye filled with moisture when he talked about how beautiful the music was. His rigid expression was gone. His face looked soft and human again.

My husband had first gone in to the hospital in October. It was the middle of November, when I took him home for good. He wasn't all better, not by a long shot. He was dizzy and suffered dreadful headaches. His face was still paralyzed and as far as we knew, it always would be. He had lost muscle. He balance was off. I didn't know what the outcome would be. I was prepared for life with a husband who never really got better.

But pretty soon, he started working at recovering. He was back at the office in a week, even though he still looked like a ghost. He worked on his balance, because he wanted to climb mountains again.

Then came an amazing moment that I think about every Christmas, because it happened just about this time, 16 years ago. We had a Christmas tree up and I remember the colored lights were reflecting around the room. Richard said, "I think I just moved my cheek."

I turned on all the lights and looked at him closely. There, at the corner of his mouth, on the paralyzed side of his face, I saw a tiny movement. It was just the smallest flicker, but we both knew what it meant. His facial nerve was re-growing. His face was coming back to life.

When I think back on Richard's long hospitalization, I remember it as a dark time, but not gray and depressed. It was true black, like a moonless night sky, lit up by a few brilliant moments of fierce joy.

I remember the storm-tossed moment when I met Richard in the hospital and made that bargain: a life for a trip to Hawaii.

I remember the Friday when he did not have to go back to surgery and I saw the tears in his one good eye, and knew he could allow himself to feel again, and he was finally getting better.

I remember the Christmas miracle – his stiff, dead face coming back to life.

They were all moments of fierce joy.

Later, when Richard was all better, I kept my end of the bargain I'd made. We took off in an airplane and landed on the island of Oahu. We got out of the plane and air was full of the scent of flowers. It was a fine moment, not a fierce joy of the same life-changing quality, but still, it was pretty nice.

**“Animal Joy”**  
**by Bruce Bode**

This is now my fourth Christmas season with you. On this Sunday four years ago I told the children a story that came from my childhood.

The story related to the small farm I grew up on in Lynden, Washington, which is located about twelve miles north of Bellingham. And our farm was even further north, just two miles from the Canadian border and about three miles from the border crossing at Aldergrove. (Often, it's a faster route into Canada, if the Blaine border crossing is busy.)

The farm I grew up on was a very small dairy farm, just 15 acres, quite in contrast to most farms in that area now, and even then it was a very small farm. For a couple of years we had about ten cows and heifers, and would ship what milk we had to the local dairy in heavy, metal milk cans we would wheel out to the side of the gravel road for the milk truck to pick up. But most of the time, we had only one or two cows, just enough to provide milk for our family.

My father earned the primary income for our family as a postman, initially as a walking postman in the town of Lynden. He would walk about 17 or 18 miles every day delivering mail to the good citizens of Lynden, a town about the same size as Port Townsend.

My father was known as the “whistling mailman” because everywhere he walked on his route, he would whistle. And at this time of the year, no doubt, he would be whistling

Christmas carols. When I told this story to the children four Christmases ago, I demonstrated how he would whistle a Christmas carol, but I will spare you that ordeal, for whistling is not a talent I inherited from my father.

So the main source of our family's income was earned by my father as a postman, but, at least for a time, our family also earned money by selling the milk from the cows that we kept on our farm. This meant a fairly long day for my father: getting up early in the morning to feed and milk the cows, and then later in the evening, the same drill.

But this story is not about my father; it's about the cows on our farm. And during the spring and summer and fall of the year these cows that lived on our farm had a very pleasant life. There was plenty of green grass in the fields for them to eat, some delicious clover, and a little grove of cedar trees for them to stand under for shade when it sometimes got hot in July and August

There was also there was a big block of salt that our cows could lick for taste. And, as I told the children four years ago, cows love salt – not pepper so much – but they do love salt.

I recall how this big block of salt would be worn down by the large, rough tongues of our cows. Sometimes as a boy, seeing the pleasure the cows got from licking the block of salt, I would also feel that I should lick the block of salt ... which I did, and can report that the taste of cow-salt is quite good.

Also, there was plenty of water for our cows to drink. We had a water tank made out of the remains of an old silo, just about three feet high, lined with black pitch to keep the water from leaking out. Sometimes my brother and I would catch small fish out of the stream that ran in front of our house when it dried up, and we would put those small fish in the water tank and then fish for them as they grew larger.

And, again, as I told the children, the cows had to watch that they didn't swallow the fish when they were drinking water, for I have never known any cows that liked to eat fish.

And every morning and every night we would call the cows to come to the barn for milking. Here's how I told the children we would call the cows: We would say, "Come, Boss; come, Boss." And when the cows would hear us, they would hurry to the barn, even running sometimes, because they knew there would be grain in the manger for them to eat. Otherwise they might have taken their good, sweet time, or even made us come after them in the fields, since they it was no great pleasure to them to come all the way to the barn.

So this is how things went in the spring and summer and fall. As I say, it was a very pleasant way to live your life as a cow. I'm sure, if could speak, they would describe it as an "idyllic life."

The winter, however, was a different story. As it got colder in that part of the country – and it seemed in those long ago years that the winters were colder – the grass would die. And when it got really cold, it was necessary for the cows to stay in the barn all the time. In the barn we would feed them hay and grain and silage, and sometimes pour some delicious molasses on the silage or hay to add taste.

And our barn wasn't big like the modern loafing sheds of today where the cows can wander about freely and talk to whomever they want. No, our cows had to stand or lie down in one place all winter long with their necks locked in, what are called, "stanchions" – big iron bars that fit closely around the cows' necks so they couldn't pull their heads out and get loose. These stanchions kept the cows in one place, sometimes for weeks at a time, or even months at a time – not the most pleasant way to spend one's time.

And sometimes, even though the cows were in the barn, it would be bitterly cold. I can remember a few times where the water in their individual water cups would freeze. Then we would have to bring hot water from the milk parlor to thaw out their watering cups so they could drink.

But mostly during those winter days and winter nights, it wasn't the cold that was so bothersome, but simply the boredom and inactivity. I think our cows just got bored out of their minds – and restless because they couldn't move about freely.

As I told the children, sometimes we would feel sorry for them and try to do what we could for them, like talking to them or rubbing their heads. But during the long winter months of December, January, February, and even into March, there wasn't much we could do. It wasn't possible to let them outside. It was too cold and too muddy.

Well, finally, then the weather would get warmer. And when it did, on the very first day possible, we would open the barn doors and we would open the stanchions from around the cows' necks and out they would go.

Now, you had to watch it when you were opening their stanchions, because when our cows saw that they were going to be free at last, they would pull and jerk at their stanchions, almost breaking them. If you weren't careful, you could get your fingers badly pinched trying to open these stanchions.

But when they got outside, what a time they had! Even the older cows would run and jump and kick up their heels, swish their tails, and butt each other in play. I can tell you, it was, indeed, a very great day for our cows!

And so it is that during the Christmas season when we light a candle to joy, and when I think of joy, this is one of the images that comes to my mind: I think of our cows leaping and jumping and frolicking in the fields after a long winter's stay in the barn.

Thus, I think joy is something we share with other creatures. Other creatures may not have a spoken word for “joy” like we do; but the joy, for example, of a dog seeing his or her human companion and the joy of the human individual seeing his or her animal companion – that joy is of one piece.

I think joy is primarily of and from the body; it emerges from the animal body. It’s a reality that is more than human reality – and more than something that belongs only to the upper level of the human brain.

Deep in the recesses of nature, joy is waiting to break forth. Are not the blossoms and flowers in springtime an expression of the joy of creation? Is the butterfly not joyful to emerge from its cocoon?

Okay, maybe that’s too much. But as a youngster, I saw our cows frolic with joy in the fields on our small farm, and I’ve never forgotten it.

Every time I think of it, my heart leaps a little with joy. And I know what the words from the Christmas carol mean when we sing, “Joy to the world ... and heaven and nature sing.”

### **Benediction**

And now may the faith we nourish here  
And the memories we gather here  
Give us hope for the future.  
May the love that we share here  
And the companionship we feel here  
Strengthen us and bring joy to our hearts.  
And may the blessings of this season rest upon us,  
This day and forevermore. Amen.

### **Extinguishing of Chalice**

And now we extinguish our chalice  
But not the light of truth,  
The warmth of community,  
Or the fire of commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: The above are manuscript versions of the meditations given by Carolyn Latteier and The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on the Fourth Sunday of the Christmas Season, December 23, 2007. The spoken messages, available on audio cassette, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from these manuscript versions.)