

“Christmas Through the Years: A Personal Journey”
Fourth Sunday of Christmas
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
December 20, 2009
Rev. Bruce Bode & Sarah Hull, speakers

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.

Opening Words

This is indeed a beautiful day in this festival season that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad, and let us count our many, 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 all the blessings of this season – for lights and bells and songs.
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: Joy comes from faith confirmed, hope restored, and love renewed.

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

CONGREGATION: But sometimes we stifle our joy; sometimes we let the sorrow of the world negate the joy of the world.

MINISTER: But sorrow need not cancel our joy. Joy and sorrow can exist together in the same life and in the same world, often at but a hair's breadth apart.

CONGREGATION: Joy, like sorrow, has its own reality and its own means of expression.

MINISTER: May Christmas be a season to let our natural joy come out.

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

Lighting the Candle of Joy

Well, children, this is the week! The week when we celebrate Christmas, which is this Friday.

And Christmas Eve is the evening before Christmas – this Thursday evening. That's 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 bright colors – the purple of faith, the green of hope, the blue of love, and now the red of joy. The 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?

Joy is not something that you have much control over. It's something that happens to you. Sometimes it just sneaks up on you, and, for no particular reason, you feel joyful. Maybe you're just happy to be alive.

But joy is a great thing in the world. As we read earlier in our Responsive Reading, some say that this world sprang into being from joy! That's sounds pretty good to me.

So, Molly Brown (9:15), Opal Bednarik (11:15), would you please light the fourth Candle of the Christmas season, the Candle of Joy.

Lighting the Hanukkah Candles

Last Sunday, on December 13, in addition to lighting the Third Candle of Christmas, we also lit the first three candles of the Hanukkah menorah to honor the Jewish heritage within our Unitarian Universalist faith as well as individuals of Jewish heritage and spiritual practice within this congregation.

Each day of this past week in Jewish homes another candle in the menorah was lit, completing the lighting of all eight candles on Friday evening.

And now Nan Toby Tyrrell and Paul Becker, who began our ceremony last Sunday, will complete the lighting of the candles this week, saying the blessings in both Hebrew and English.

Winter Solstice Reflection and Reading
by Dennis Reynolds

Tomorrow afternoon, December 21st, at about 4:00 p.m., the earth will reach the point in its annual cycle where its axial tilt is at its greatest angle away from the sun.

The solstice, this moment, in the cycle of this planet we call home, has been acknowledged and celebrated throughout human history. The Romans called it "Sol Invetus;" to the Celts, it was "Alban Arthan;" Mahayana Buddhists call it "Dong Zhi;" to the Hopis and Zunis it is "Soyal;" and to many Northern Europeans and their descendants it is "Yule" or "Yuletide."

Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King Unitarian Universalist Seminary offers us a contemporary spin on this ancient celebration.

WINTER SOLSTICE

Perhaps for a moment,
The keyboards will stop clicking,
The wheels stop rolling,
The computers desist from computing,

And a hush will fall over the city.

For an instant, in the stillness,
The chiming of the celestial spheres will be heard

As earth hangs poised in the crystalline darkness,
And then gracefully tilts.

Let there be a season when holiness is heard,
And the splendor of living is revealed.
Stunned to stillness by beauty,
We remember who we are and why we are here.

There are inexplicable mysteries.
We are not alone.

In the universe there moves a Wild One
Whose gestures alter earth's axis toward love.
In the immense darkness
Everything spins with joy.

The cosmos enfolds us.
We are caught in a web of stars,
Cradled in a swaying embrace,

Rocked by the holy night,
Babes of the universe.
Let this be the time we wake to life,
Like spring wakes,
In the moment of winter solstice.

**“Christmas through the Years: A Personal Journey”
by Sarah Hull**

A month or so ago, I received a call from Bruce inviting me to share the pulpit with him on this, the 4th Sunday of Advent....the last Sunday before Christmas. The prospect simultaneously excited and terrified me. What could I talk about? My Christmas history has been neither traditional, nor constant. Should the emphasis be on joy, or more generally, on the holiday itself, and my personal journey and experience of Christmas through the years.

As I was thinking about what that journey has looked like in my life, I did one of the things I love to do.....went online, and did some research on the origins of Christmas celebrations. Perhaps this was an attempt to avoid jumping into personal memories, which I admit are fraught with a mixture of feelings. But even so, I was surprised by some of the things I learned. For instance, did you know that for the first 200 years of this country’s existence, in the New England settlements, people did not celebrate Christmas? In fact, it was illegal to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681. And would you believe that in the early 1800s when a movement began to celebrate Christmas, that it was led first by the Universalists, with the Unitarians following close behind?

But enough of that social history, and on to my personal history with Christmas. During my growing up years, I attended Church and Sunday School at the Church of Christ which was located just a few houses away from our home. The story of Jesus that I was taught captured my imagination. I embraced the message of compassion and love which permeates his teachings, and when I was 9 years old, I made the decision to be baptized. While I no longer consider myself “Christian” in the way we generally think of it as it is expressed in Protestant and Catholic churches, my personal faith does rest on the foundation of the teachings of the one called Jesus, or as I prefer, Yeshua. Thus, when I think about Christmas, it always includes the awareness that this holiday is for me, first and foremost, a celebration of his birth.

I grew up in a small Ohio town, the youngest of 6 children. From an early age, I sensed that Christmas brought with it a certain tension between my parents. It was clear that my Dad would have preferred no, or very little, Christmas celebration. Mom, on the other hand, was a devout Christian. The responsibility for the making of Christmas, by that I mean the tree, the presents, decorations, etc., fell to Mom and my older sisters, and there was often a sense that they were operating somewhat in secret in the face of my Dad’s unspoken disapproval. Mom told me that Dad’s attitude came from a childhood in which there were no celebrations of any holidays, including birthdays and Christmas.

From my perspective as a young child whose primary focus was on presents, I often found quite disappointing the contrast between our Christmas and the ones I observed in the homes of my young friends. The crisp \$5 bill in the envelope placed on the tree by Dad did not satisfy the desire of a little girl for toys and presents.

My sister, Helen, in collusion with my mother created perhaps the most memorable of my early Christmases. The year was 1942. The country was at war. I had just turned 6, and was beginning to seriously question the Santa Claus story. Christmas was approaching, and I could see no preparations at home.....no decorations,.....no tree,.....It seems that I was told that there would be no Christmas celebration because of the war. In any case, when I went to bed on Christmas Eve, there was no sign of Christmas anywhere in our home. Sometime later, I awoke and heard what seemed to be a lot of noise and activity coming from downstairs. I crept partway down the steps until I could see through the banister, and watched as my sister and Mother put up a tree, and got out the gifts. I felt quite special that they had gone to such lengths to make this wonderful Christmas surprise, and it was a very sweet way to discover the truth about Santa Claus.

During my High School and College years, the highlight of our Christmas celebrations were the wonderful family reunions when my older brothers and sisters, all of whom were married now with children, would come home. The house would be full. I was charged with entertaining the 'kids' and keeping them 'in line'. My 3 sisters and Mom would be in the kitchen, and my Dad and brothers would be doing whatever it was that men did when they got together before the onset of TV football.....sometimes that would be hunting, and they would return with wild rabbits to skin and clean.

The emphasis during those years was on the family reunion. Those of us who wished to attend church services did so, while others stayed home.

When I was 16, I picked up a brochure about Catholicism at the home of a friend. In this brochure, it was stated that the Catholic Church was founded by Jesus, and that the Apostle Peter was the first Pope. I was intrigued and set out to determine if that were true. I went first to the dictionary, and sure enough, the dictionary said that the Catholic Church was the first of those churches that call themselves "Christian." Then, I read in my King James version of the Bible the verse in which Jesus says to Peter, "You are the rock upon which I will build my Church." Well, that was enough for me. My teenage reasoning bought it hook, line, and sinker! I was thrilled at the prospect of actually belonging to the church started by Jesus. Following my graduation from college, I was instructed in Catholicism, and was baptized.....again.....just in case the first one didn't take.

One of the tenets of the Catholic Church has to do with one's vocation in life. According to Catholic doctrine, each person has a specific vocation. The three possible vocations are Married, Single in the world, or the Religious Life. By this time, I had clear evidence that I was not going to be married. As a very young child, I was totally convinced that I was a boy. And then, after Mom finally convinced me I was a girl, along comes Puberty.

There was no 'boy crazy' phase for me; it was the girls I was attracted to. My understanding of Catholic doctrine was, and still is, that it is okay to be homosexual, however, it is not okay to be sexually active. Professed sisters take vows of poverty, chastity & obedience. I felt very deeply that all the circumstances of my life supported my belief that I had a "Call" to the Religious Life. And so, in September, 1961, I entered the convent of the Dominican Sisters at St Mary of the Springs, in Columbus, Ohio.

I want to share with you my experience of Christmas in the Convent. It lives in my memory as such a sweet joy-filled expression of this Holy Day. The commercialism and need to buy presents was gone. The Professed Sisters had taken a vow of poverty and were engaged in making gifts. We Postulants were each given \$2.00 to spend at a craft fair, which was held on the grounds of St Mary's. Would you believe that I came back from that shopping trip with a quarter left over? Our choir made up of the Novices and Postulants prepared special Christmas music for the Mass, and for this day we sang from the Choir Loft high above in the back of the chapel. I have always found the ritual of the Mass to be moving and beautiful, and the Christmas Mass with the decorations, and special music was a highlight. We enjoyed a feast of traditional foods and desserts. In the afternoon, we had visits from members of our individual families. The love expressed among us, and the joy felt, is difficult to describe. As I think about it, it never ceases to bring a surge of emotion.

Dr. Seuss, in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," says:

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes, or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.

It was this Christmas in the Convent that gave me a taste of what that "little bit more" could be like. I missed it very much for a very long time.

At the end of February following this Christmas, the Mother Superior made the decision that as the only unmarried daughter of my parents I was needed at home. Both my parents had serious health issues. Dad had been paralyzed for some years by strokes, and Mom's chronic high blood pressure had spiked out of control, making it necessary for her to be hospitalized for a time. The decision of my Superior was very difficult for me to accept. I truly loved living in the community of sisters in the Convent. Somehow or other, the decision to send me home got hooked up in my mind with my doubts about whether it was really okay to be lesbian, and I concluded that God did not want me. This, of course, underlined in a big way my inner sense that I was irreparably flawed. Healing this major misunderstanding about who I am, who God is, etc., has been a large part of my life's search and my spiritual journey.

For about 20 years, I went through the motions of living....working....serial relationships....doing my best to ignore religion or any active pursuit of spirituality.....living with a constant sense of fear and anxiety. At that time, I had no interest in other religions. If I were to be Christian, it had to be Catholic. Catholic doctrine barred active homosexuals from the Sacraments, so I stopped going to any Church.

Christmas during that time often seemed to bring more pain than joy. I found a quote on-line by Carol Nelson which says “Christmas is a time when you get homesick....even when you are home.” I was homesick lots of Christmases during that time.

In 1980, I moved to Mendocino with my then partner. I suppose you could say we were part of the “back to the land” movement in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. We moved into a cabin on five acres of meadow and forest at the top of a ridge. My partner, Kit, wanted very much to have a child. I agreed to be with her in this adventure and made the commitment to co-parent a child with her. Our daughter, Danae, is now 27.

I love being a Mom. I especially loved being a Mom at Christmas. Remembering how, as a child, things were tense, and presents sparse, I had a great time indulging both my inner and my outer child with lots of ‘stuff’. Watching her joy as she tore into unwrapping the presents filled me with joy. For many years, my focus was on Danae and what would make for a happy Christmas for her.

Christmas celebrations, as we know them, usually have one or more of several components: celebration of the fact of the birth of Jesus, a family gathering, celebration in union with a larger community, the giving of gifts to loved ones, and to charities.

Even as these things are happening, there can be also a sense of something missing. Kate L. Boshier seems to describe exactly that feeling. She says:

“Isn’t it funny that at Christmas something in you gets so lonely for – I don’t know what exactly, but it’s something that you don’t mind so much not having at other times.”

The Christmas Season does seem to bring an increase in loving expressions which include the family gatherings, but which are also very much present in the greater community. There seems to be more goodwill, more willingness to overlook our differences, more optimism, and yes, more joy. We just seem to have more compassion, and it is easier to be kind.

As I have been remembering these past Christmases, and looking at those memories with a more analytical eye, I have been trying to figure out why some seemed so sweet and joyful, while others were more fraught. The Christmas that I spent in the convent shines in my memory with a sweetness and light that I can hardly speak about without poignant tears. On the other hand, I don’t even remember many of the Christmases of what I

consider the dark years after the convent when it seemed that I was just wandering with no compass.

I have spoken to you before, in my Credo, of my belief in the teachings of the Course in Miracles, which says that there are really only two emotions, love and fear. And further, the Course tells us we are teachers to one another and to “teach only love, for that is what you are.” This I believe is the core teaching of Jesus.

Two weeks ago our choir sang “Some Children See Him,” a hymn that points out that we as individuals ‘see’ Jesus as we see ourselves, white, brown, Asian, etc. The hymn ends with the words, “‘Tis Love that’s born tonight.”

Francis C. Farley says about Christmas:

“Instead of being a time of unusual behavior, Christmas is perhaps the only time in the year when people can obey their natural impulses and express their true sentiments without feeling self-conscious and, perhaps, foolish. Christmas, in short, is about the only chance a man has to be himself.”

I take that to mean that in this season it seems easier for us to express our true nature of love.

A seven-year old named Bobby is purported to have said, “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”

I have concluded that my experience of joy or pain during this time of the year is directly related to how much I am able to give expression to the Love I am, and how willing I am to receive the love that flows to me. Perhaps one of the reasons the Christmas celebration in the convent seemed so wonderful is that many of the demands of the world which distract us and seem to keep us from recognizing the love that surrounds us were not present there.

I have stated to Bruce, and others of you, that here within this Fellowship, I feel that I have found a spiritual home...one that I have been looking for most of my adult life.....probably since I left the convent. We are Christian, we are Jewish, we are recovering Catholics, we are Buddhists, we are atheists, and agnostics, we are humanists...Have I forgotten anyone? You get the idea. And what I see is that most of all, we are Love. The expression of love within this Fellowship is palpable. I am very grateful to be a part of it. It makes this season wonderful and joy filled, and better yet, it seems, as well, to extend Christmas throughout the year.

Many years ago, I wrote some hymns. In closing, I offer one that I call, “Sing of My Love.”

Sing of My Love that your joy may be full.
Is the message I hear in my heart.

Sing of My Love that its clear light may be
The beacon that guides all on earth back to me.
The time for suffering and sadness is past.
The time for healing is here.
Love is the force that connects to the Source;
That frees us from fear and attack.
So, let your Love's light shine out to me,
And I'll beam all my love right back.

Merry Christmas!!

**“Christmas through the Years: A Personal Journey”
by Bruce Bode**

Introduction

This is now my 62nd Christmas season. And, as I look back on my life, I think how different my life would be if there were no Christmas seasons in it.

What if, as Sarah Hull had mentioned, like the early colonies of our country, there was no celebration of Christmas? How different our culture would be! How different my individual life would be!

For me, as I suspect for many of you, the Christmas season is the real center of the year, the emotional hinge and pivot-point, with the year building towards Christmas and then subsiding after it.

And so while there are a number of other festival days that punctuate and mark a calendar year – New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, Easter, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving – all of them with meanings and memories in my life – none of them come close to the anticipation of Christmas or the value, meanings, and memories of Christmas in my life.

Christmas as a child and youngster

As a child and youngster, the Christmas season is filled with memories of family, made most special by my mother, who made certain that her children would receive gifts matched to their interests.

It was also a time for gathering with relatives, with which I am abundantly blessed on both sides of my family. My extended family is a throwback to the time when family farms were much more present in our society and one had large families to support those farms.

Both of my parents grew up on farms in Lynden, Washington and lived almost all of their lives in Lynden. Lynden is about twelve miles north of Bellingham and about four miles from the Canadian border with a population about the size of Port Townsend.

My father was part of a family of eleven children, most of whom stayed in the Lynden area; and my mother, part of a family of fourteen children, most of whom also stayed in the Lynden area.

At Christmas, we would typically have parties on both sides of my family. And, as you can imagine, these gatherings could not be easily held in anyone's house; rather, we typically would use the social hall of one of the churches or a local grange.

My most vivid memories are of Christmas parties on my father's side of the family, which were made most special by my dear Aunt Gertie. Aunt Gertie, who was the oldest of the eleven children and who never married or had a family of her own, worked in Seattle at a job she didn't particularly care for. But what she largely lived for and worked for was tending to the families of her ten brothers and sisters.

This was made most apparent at our Bode Christmas parties. The center of these parties was when all the children gathered around Aunt Gertie and she would hand out presents to each of her nephews and nieces. The joy upon her face as she handed out these gifts is etched in my mind to this day.

Each child – and, as you can imagine, there were a good many children with ten brothers and sisters – would receive a gift from Aunt Gertie, carefully selected for age and aptitude.

Nor were these minor gifts – and I can only imagine what percentage of my Aunt's modest income was spent on these gifts. For example, one year when I was small, I received a toy barn made out of bright green and brown metal, complete, as I recall, with farm animals and implements.

This gift particularly sticks in my memory because that year I also received a sturdily constructed *wooden* barn from my parents that my father himself had built. Apparently, he and his sister had not compared notes when considering gifts.

As I was a young child, I could not appreciate the value of the wooden barn that my father had built, and so I spent much of that Christmas season playing with my Aunt's bright, shiny metal barn, paying no attention at all to the wooden barn that my father must have spent many hours constructing. Years later, my mother told me that my father had to swallow a bit as he witnessed my exclusive interest in the metal barn rather than the wooden one. Sorry, Dad.

One gift from my father that I did appreciate, however – and this must have been one that I received was I was eight, nine, or ten years old – was a hockey game with revolving metal hockey players that could slap at the hockey puck – a marble – and send it whizzing toward the opponent's goal. This was a game with which I could soon compete on an equal footing with my father, and so we spent many a happy hour over the years vigorously engaged slapping the hockey puck around.

Christmas in adult years

And now my memories of the Christmas season move to the time that I became an associate minister at a large, religiously liberal, independent, cathedral-like church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I worked for twenty-two years before serving Unitarian congregations.

Up to that time of my life, Christmas had not only been a family time, it had also been a church time, that centrally-important time of the church year when we celebrated the birth of the Emmanuel, the Savior of the world.

And now what could such a celebration be in a liberal congregation where the literalness of such an understanding was no longer held to?

Well, I was soon to learn under the tutorship of Dr. Duncan Littlefair, whose name you may recognize from some of the responsive readings I use in this season of the year. Dr. Littlefair, some 35 years older than I, was the senior minister who gave me my chance in the liberal ministry and was my primary mentor and model in the ministry.

From him I learned the possibilities of the Christmas season. He saw this festival season as an opportunity for liberal religion to really shine – to speak to and to celebrate those universal qualities of the heart and spirit that not only make us most human but which will also keep us most human.

Duncan once confided to me, saying, “If the liberal church had only the Christmas season, and if it celebrated it as it could and should be celebrated, it would validate its existence on that basis alone.”

And so for him, the figures of Santa Claus and the Christ-child served as images for the human heart, soul, and spirit – Santa Claus, that grand figure of generosity and goodness, more for children; the Christ-child, an image of our deepest human potential, more for adults. And he had not much patience with those on either the religious right or left who, from their different perspectives, would point out that Santa Claus or the Christ-child are “not real.”

Not real? What images could be more real in embodying the truths of the heart and the imagination?

And so I learned from Littlefair that Christmas was not a single day, but a whole season – a season of attending to, living out of, and celebrating humanity’s highest hopes and deepest dreams; a season for exploring the qualities of faith, hope, love, and joy.

And I learned from Littlefair how to take Christmas mythologically and poetically rather than historically and literally – to work with it in the same way that Charles Dickens worked with Christmas in his book, “A Christmas Carol.” Christmas was a time when

the “Scrooge” in us is given another chance to blossom and bloom.

So the Christmas season at Fountain Street Church became *the* season of the year – a great festival time of celebration. Members of other congregations would visit our church at Christmas Eve because we were keen to celebrate the deep and universal spirit of Christmas.

A joke on our staff related to a person from another congregation who attended our Christmas Eve service one year, and, finding it terribly crowded, was overheard to say in disgust, “If I knew it was going to be so crowded here, I would have gone to my own church.”

There are so many memories of Christmas that crowd my mind from those years. I have a whole store of good feeling about the Christmas season that I bring with me here to Port Townsend and to this congregation.

And so no “bah, humbug” for me in relation to Christmas. Christmas is about celebrating the wonder, glory, delight, beauty, and possibility of human life. It’s about gathering with family and friends and letting them know in the best way we can that we’re glad that they are a part of our life and that we can share it with them.

As English poet John Keats said, “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of the imagination.”

To me, that’s what Christmas is centrally about – the celebration of the emotions of the heart and the truth of the imagination.

* **Closing Hymn #254** – “Sing We Now of Christmas,” verses 1-3.

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

We extinguish this 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: This is a manuscript version of the service of Rev. Bruce Bode, Sarah Hull, and Dennis Reynolds given at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on the Fourth Sunday of Christmas, December 20, 2009. The spoken message may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)