

Unwrapping the Present

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Christmas presents come unto us, bidden or unbidden. The UPS driver, heedless of rain sleet snow and the dark of night piles box upon box on our doorstep, bringing us those items from Amazon or Best Buy or L.L. Bean that we didn't even know we couldn't live without.

But I think that beneath this flood of brightly wrapped packages, each year Christmas delivers real presents to each of us, gifts of inestimable worth, gifts we truly can't live without. I want to unwrap this morning some of these real presents of the season.

The first Christmas present is Christmas past, the history of the holiday. We need to keep in mind that at crucial points of the last two centuries, it was Unitarians who stepped forward and championed the celebration. And December celebrations are a layer cake; they have many different ways of happening, and it is thus a fitting embrace for a liberal religion which looks for truth from a variety of sources.

Light has always been a big concern of this time of year in the Northern Hemisphere, because there isn't a lot of it from our chief natural source, the sun. The sun is so important to us that many humans over the ages have worshiped the sun as a god, and the winter solstice was a particularly important time to worship the sun because it was then, when the God seemed in danger of slipping away altogether, that a little worship might persuade him to return.

Thus it was that in the year 274 of the Common Era, the Roman Emperor Aurelian decreed December 25—the solstice on the Julian calendar—as *natalis solis invicti* ("birth of the invincible sun"), a festival honoring the sun god Mithras. In designating December 25 as the date for their Nativity feast, Rome's Christians challenged paganism directly. This is how we come to celebrate the birth of Jesus at this time.

Now let's fast forward to the Seventeenth Century. . . H.L. Mencken defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy!" The Puritans took a dim view of any calendar celebrations, for part of the excesses they were trying to curb in the English church was an excessive celebration of holy days. In England, the puritans never completely succeeded in suppressing Christmas celebrations, but in Puritan Massachusetts for a number of years it was actually illegal to celebrate Christmas.

The Puritans were reacting not only against the excesses of the Christian churches, but also against the excesses of the villages and estates, both in England and in New England. In an agricultural society, December is a time of plenty. The crops are harvested, the beer is brewed. The herds must be culled to allow them to be moved inside for the winter, so a great many animals are slaughtered and their meat must be eaten before it spoils.

But all this plenty in the hands of the gentry only serves to make plain to all the gap between rich and poor. So in the countryside Christmas had become a time of misrule, of social inversion, when the lower classes rose up in a ritual way and demanded food and drink of the gentry. The rituals which were developed around this demand were the wassail song and the mummer's play, both of which will be featured in our Solstice celebration this evening. Gangs of people would go from house to house, offering songs and plays in exchange for providing food, drink or money. It was really a ritual form of extortion.

In the cities, the tradition of hospitality moved to public houses, and it became common for pubs to offer free food and drink on Christmas day. This produced large scenes of public drunkenness, with much gunfire and mayhem. It was this social disorder in both countryside and town which prompted the early Puritans in New England to attempt to ban Christmas celebration altogether.

That softened in later years, but even as late as the turn of the Nineteenth Century in Massachusetts, no one got Christmas off and businesses and schools were open. This neglect of the birthday of Jesus offended both branches of our religious ancestors.

The Universalists celebrated December 25 with church services almost from the beginning of their organization, and they were a leading advocate in the first two decades of the Nineteenth Century to have the day observed as a religious holiday. The Unitarians were not far behind. Though the denomination didn't get organized until 1825, most of the congregational churches in Boston were in Unitarian hands by the turn of the century, and as early as 1800 Unitarians were celebrating Christmas. In 1817, both denominations began a big push in Boston to have the day celebrated with church services and to close down businesses. They succeeded for a couple of years, but then the businesses balked and the churches largely followed suit, so that by the mid 1820's, the religious celebration of Christmas had died out.

But what happened next happened in New York, where a group of wealthy conservatives known as the Knickerbockers got together to fight the drunken rowdy street celebration by inventing a more refined and domestic holiday. Washington Irving installed St. Nicholas, the patron saint of New York City. Clement Clark Moore wrote the poem "The Night Before Christmas." This created the Santa Claus figure, based loosely on the historical St. Nicholas but with very significant differences. St. Nicholas as depicted in Europe almost always wore a bishop's clothes, and was as likely to punish bad children as to reward good ones. In some countries, he had a sidekick named belsnickel who was really scary. These scary aspects were all airbrushed out in the new creation of Santa Claus, and the tradition of gift-giving within the household was emphasized, and particularly giving to children. Childhood itself was being invented by this; prior to the Nineteenth Century, children were considered to be inadequate adults. Now there was a magical time called childhood.

And then across the Atlantic, in a very Unitarian phase of his life, Dickens wrote "A Christmas Carol." This gave a liberal theological underpinning to the modern holiday: Christmas was about generosity of spirit, not about belief or orthodoxy or virgin birth.

So here we have the pagan holiday aimed at bringing the sun back, the rowdy revelry of early modern times, and the domesticated gift-centered Christmas of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. The first Christmas present we have unwrapped in this brief overview is the Christmas past.

The second present is the unexpected. Whatever you think you're going to get for Christmas is not at all what will turn up. Oh sure, the physical present may be completely known – you may have gotten to the place with your loved ones where you actually have picked out the gift they will give you. But the season is not complete unless it hands you something you never anticipated. Like a gorgeous snowstorm shutting down the airports just as your wife and a major participant in the weekend church offerings is five states away, and the power fails.

Surprise is such a wonderful element of the gift. You pick it up and shake it and weigh it in your hands and try to guess what might be inside. And if you haven't guessed it right, how exciting it is to encounter something you haven't been expecting.

Now it's not unique in this – other animals learn to associate present stimuli with future events. But we have developed an ability to plan in detail, and this serves us well. It reduced the haphazardness, and gives us some power to bend events to our will. But events frequently have a way of turning out different. From one perspective, the game of life is a contest between the efforts of our minds to tame reality and reality's stubborn refusal to be tamed.

We cannot control everything; a good way to make yourself unhappy is to try. If you can embrace the unexpected, unwrap it eagerly and appreciate it whatever it may bring, you are on the road to nirvana.

A third, and closely related, present is the improbable. The odds against anything

turning out just the way it has turned out are astronomically small. AS I said a few weeks ago, you are the result of the union of one egg cell and one among hundreds of thousands of sperm cells at one moment in the history of your parents; if a different sperm and egg had met, there would not be you. Both of your parents had to survive all the misfortunes that might have killed them to be alive at that point in time, and so did their parents before them. Think of the millions and millions of genetic mutations which had to happen for the human race to have evolved at all. Think of the millions of species that went extinct, evolutionary blind alleys. Think of the improbability of inert chemicals discovering the trick of replicating themselves in that puddle somewhere on the surface of the earth.

When I left Charleston in 1995, I anticipated being in an urban environment, and probably far from the ocean. It is wildly improbable that I would end up in Chatham, Massachusetts, but here I am.

A fourth present is challenge. We often bemoan the complexity of life, and yearn for simpler times, but is that really what we want? Wouldn't it be a dull world if we had no challenges?

I am a minister who lives and dies by the computer. I don't know how my colleagues in days of yore ever prepared or preached sermons. So when the power went out at my house on Friday night, the time I had set aside to write these immortal words, it was a challenge. Instead of pecking away at the computer, I was left staring into the fire I had built, letting great clouds of ideas swirl around inside my head. At least I'll be able to write when I get to the office, I said. Then yesterday, I punched the on button on my office computer, and all I got was a worra-worra-worra like a car trying to start. So I fetch my laptop from my cold house and download a piece of software so that it will work with the printer in my office, and then remember that that printer is almost out of ink.

The gift of challenges. They keep us on our toes. If the first door didn't shut in our face, we wouldn't have the incentive to go looking for the second door. Seek and ye shall find.

And the fifth and final present I want to unwrap this morning is the gift of hope. As this tumultuous year draws to a close I am reminded of Dickens' sentence, "It was the best of times and the worst of times." The US occupation of Iraq has continued its murderous course, though thankfully the level of violence has abated somewhat. Meanwhile the very heart of the capitalist economic system was revealed to have massive blockages and has gone into spasm. Worse yet, we are learning about scams on a scale that boggle the imagination. Remember back in the good old days when all you had to watch out for was the Nigerian doctor on e-mail wanting you to hold some money for him? Now we have governors trying to sell Senate seats, and one of the most respected financiers in the country revealed running a Ponzi scheme which is estimated to have taken investors for 50 Billion Dollars. We have the shocking murder of a high school sophomore on the Cape which was apparently motivated by theft of the \$10,000 in drug proceeds he was carrying. The financial woes of the country don't just stay in the headlines, but seep into our own asset accounts and our jobs.

And yet there is a bright side. I never expected to see in my lifetime the White House occupied by a person of African descent, with an African name to boot. Barack Obama's ascent to the most powerful position on earth can be seen as a milestone in the centuries-old struggle against racial oppression. Dick Fewkes shared this observation with me yesterday: "Rosa Parks sat so that Martin Luther King could walk; Martin Luther King walked so that Barack Obama could run; Barack Obama ran so that our children could fly." Beyond the new president's ethnic heritage, however, is his obvious intelligence, knowledge and judgment about people. I heard him speak at a press conference yesterday and I had the sense that this is someone who gets it, who understands the questions which are being posed by the press and, if he can't answer directly, at least meets the concern which prompts the question.

A President or any kind of leader is only as effective as the people he or she leads. We are in a deep hole, and our President-Elect will not be able to get us out by himself. He will need all the courage, intelligence, heart and sinew of each of us.

We've been here before, deep in the Slough of Despair at Christmastime. In the 1850's Unitarian poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had what might be described as an idyllic life. He was a Harvard professor, lived in a beautiful house on Brattle Street which still stands, and had a lovely wife and children. But at the onset of the Civil War his wife died in a domestic accident; In his diary, the entry for December 25, 1861 reads as follows: A merry Christmas, say the children; but there is no more, for me. Last night the little girls has a pretty Christmas-tree. Two years later, his son was wounded in battle. Longfellow had to travel to Virginia to bring him back.

Longfellow heard the bells of Christmas with their message of "Peace on Earth," and wrote the poem I read earlier, which became a hymn I sang in my childhood. But the hymn omits some of the darker verses of the poem, in which he felt mocked by the Christmas bells:

"Then from each black accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

The poet caved in to hopelessness:

"And in despair I bowed my head;
'There is no peace on earth,' I said;
'For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!'"
But his bitter mood is swept away by the message of the bells:

"Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
'God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!'"

There is hope like a star in the East, my friends, this Christmas season. Whether your conception is God in form of a baby or just good will, hope is something within our grasp. It is tangible, it is as necessary as breathing, it is the light that shines in our darkness, it is the engine of our economic and spiritual recovery. Our religion looks up; we are on a steady ascent, and our energies are marshaled to continue that ascent.

Here I have unwrapped five Christmas presents: Christmas past, the unexpected, the improbable, the challenge and the greatest of the five gifts of the season, the power of hope. As we say in the South, Christmas gif', y'all.
Amen.

Reading: "I heard the bells on Christmas Day"
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
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