

Rebirth of Wonder
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
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The late Peter Raible was one of the great wits of the UU Ministry; he wrote UU parodies of popular songs and published them in a little collection which he called, after the name of the hymnbook popular at the time, Hymns for the Cerebration of Strife. At this time of year, I am fond of quoting his Christmas effort:

God rest ye, Unitarians, let nothing you dismay,
Remember there's no evidence there was a Christmas Day.
When Christ was born is just not known, no matter what they say,
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

Our current Christmas customs came from Persia and from Greece,
From solstice celebrations of the ancient Middle East.
This whole darn Christmas spiel is just another pagan feast.
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

There was no star of Bethlehem, there was no angels' song,
There could not have been wise men for the trip would take too long.
The stories in the Bible are historically wrong,
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

And if you read the newsletter and the sign outside earlier this week, you would have thought this sermon was going to be titled "God Rest You Unitarians." But I have decided that we need to go in another direction this morning. The skepticism of Peter Raible's song is our starting point, but I don't want to end up there.

You see, we have a streak of hard-nosed rationalism and that is a great thing. Doubt is the great path to truth. But we also have an urge for something more, something of mystery, something of wonder. And what I want to say this morning is that it's OK for those two

impulses to exist in the same congregation and even in the same person. No, I don't just want to say it's OK. I want to say it's glorious, and it's the way things are. No matter how hard-nosed we want to project ourselves, we are all creatures of both head and heart.

I want to start out with remembering how our Christmas celebrations came to be, and the role that Unitarians played in bringing that about.

Both our denominations were born in Puritan Massachusetts. 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. A statute of the General court in 1659 imposed a hefty five shilling fine on anyone found celebrating Christmas; though the ban was lifted a few years later, Christmas did not actually become a legal holiday in Massachusetts until 1856.

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 next week. 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.

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 Unitarian 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. The push was only partly successful.

Charles Follen was a German radical who landed in Boston in 1825, began the teaching of German and gymnastics at Harvard, married a Cabot, got friendly with William Ellery Channing, started studying for the Unitarian Ministry and introduced the German custom of using a tree to celebrate Christmas. In 1832, with a new baby son, Follen went out into the woods and cut a tree and decorated it with small toys and dolls and actual candles. An English visitor, Harriet Martineau, gave this account:

"It really looked beautiful; the room seemed in a blaze, and the ornaments were so well hung on that no accident happened, except that one doll's petticoat caught fire. There was a sponge tied to the end of a stick to put out any supernumerary blaze, and no harm ensued. I mounted the steps behind the tree to see the effect of opening the doors. It was delightful. The children poured in, but in a moment every voice was hushed. Their faces were upturned to the blaze, all eyes wide open, all lips parted, all steps arrested."

If you've ever seen a tree decorated with real lit candles, it is truly a wonder to behold. You can imagine the impression it must have made on these children.

While Follen was doing his best to bring some warmth to puritan Massachusetts, a group of wealthy and conservative New Yorkers known as the Knickerbockers were changing the way the holiday was viewed. In the early 1820s the president of the New York Historical Society, John Pintard, started promoting the celebration of St. Nicholas Day, December 6. St. Nicholas was made the patron saint of New York – my daughter lives on St. Nicholas street in Brooklyn — and the custom of visiting houses and giving gifts started then.

St. Nicholas in Europe had been a rather stern figure. He would reward the good kids but he would punish the bad. He had a sidekick named Belsnickel who was shown carrying a whip to get the errant children in shape. Together they were much more concerned with the bad children than the good.

While Pintard may have introduced the figure of St. Nicholas, it was Washington Irving, the lynchpin of the Knickerbockers, who popularized him. Irving's book the Knickerbocker

Tales, mentions St. Nicholas 25 times, including the line where he lays his finger aside of his nose.

And finally Clement Clark Moore, another conservative New York Episcopalian, wrote “A Visit from St. Nicholas” in 1822, which has endured down through the ages since as the definitive origin of the Santa Claus myth.

The purpose in this, according to historian Stephen Nissenbaum¹, was to replace the riotous street celebrations of Christmas with their lower-class drunken revelry and loud “callithumpian” bands, with a domestic celebration centered on the family, children and gift exchange.

Indeed, in a sense childhood as we now understand it did not exist before this. Children were considered incomplete adults, and the idea was to get them through this terrible time as quickly as possible with a stern moral instruction for their souls and the ever-ready threat of punishment.

The knickerbockers were actually of English, not Dutch, descent, and Episcopalian in religion rather than Reformed. They were politically conservative – in a previous generation they had been quietly sympathetic to the British. They were anti-Jefferson, and felt themselves to belong to a patrician class under siege. In that light, says Nissenbaum,

“their invention of Santa Claus was part of what we can now see as a lager, ultimately quite serious cultural enterprise: forging a pseudo-Dutch identity for New York, a placid “folk” identity that could provide a cultural counterweight to the commercial bustle and democratic “misrule” of early Nineteenth Century New York.²”

In Nineteenth Century Massachusetts, though, it was the liberals who celebrated a domestic Christmas. In Concord Congregational families adhered to the old Puritan custom whereby Christmas was not observed, but in the Unitarian Thoreau household, gifts were exchanged. And as late as 1856, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow could still remark, “We are in a transition state about Christmas here in New England. The old Puritan feeling prevents it from being a cheerful hearty holiday; though every year makes it more so.”³

¹Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* New York: Alfred A Knopf 1996

²Battle for Christmas p 65.

³The Follens and the Christmas Tree by Randall Conrad, Follen Church Society,

And the other piece the Nineteenth Century contributes to our modern Christmas is Dicken's "A Christmas Carol." While Dickens was born and died an Anglican, he came to New England in the 1830s and palled around with Unitarians like Emerson and Longfellow and on returning to England became a regular fixture in a Unitarian church in London, and it was at this time of his life that he wrote "A Christmas Carol." The sentiments in this speech of Scrooge's nephew which I quoted last year, are typical of Unitarian thought:

"There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say," returned the nephew. "Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round -- apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that -- as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

So New York Episcopalians created Santa and made the holiday domestic, but Unitarians 200 years ago showed that you could celebrate the holiday without embracing the Jesus of the Nicene creed. What we celebrate, what we have always celebrated, is the ethos Jesus taught, not the sacrifice of the son of God, not the Messiahship prophesied hundreds of years before. If the world is to be saved through Jesus, it will be through his life, not his birth nor his death. It will be saved by actually living what he taught, by loving our enemies, by turning the other cheek, by embracing the worth and dignity of every person.

The Nineteenth Century domesticated the holiday, made gift-giving a key part of it, and put children and Santa Claus in the center. This has not all been positive. The great rise in commercialism, the dependence of many forms of retail business on Christmas purchases, the relentless rum-pa-pom-pom of the shopping mall all have their origin in these development.

But there is a good side to it too. By introducing a child-friendly god-like figure of beneficence, a jolly old elf, our Nineteenth Century forebears put the wonder into this holiday.

There is a spiritual theory that I have heard a lot throughout my life, that children are born

<http://www.follen.org/?q=FollenChristmasTreeHistory>

open to and connected with the world, instinctively, and that in the course of their education and the formation of their reasoning powers, they become more and more detached from this innate spiritual connection. As adults, we become completely alienated from the spirit, imprisoned in the fortress of words and logic and reason we have built in our minds. We learn early on to seek reasons for things, to offer explanations. We are rewarded when we can explain things. So we live in the assumption that everything can be explained.

For a child everything is new, and a lot of it is scary, but there are also unexpected delights. Initially Christmas is one of them, but as the child learns more, he or she begins to expect a certain magic in Christmas. And sure enough, the presents are there on Christmas morning, and the milk has been drunk and the cookie has been eaten. And as the child's logical mind grows, he or she begins to turn a skeptical eye on Santa Claus, but this creates a crisis of faith. If he or she stops believing in Santa Claus, will Santa Claus stop believing in him and pass his house by?

The reason I think Christmas appeals to so many Unitarian Universalists is that most of us want a little wonder in our lives. Like Lawrence Ferlinghetti, we are awaiting a rebirth of wonder. We won't go back to believing in Santa Claus. Many of us won't go back to believing in God. But we want to catch something of the child's outlook on the world.

Jesus once said that his followers needed to become like little children to enter the Kingdom of God. Certain strains of Buddhism recommend that the seeker adopt Beginners Mind. Embracing what our Nineteenth Century forebears set up, we seek the spirit of the child at this time of year.

Next week at this time, we will have actual children in this sanctuary, and I hope that you can all come and bring your friends and drink in their enthusiasm and wonder at the holidays they will be celebrating in song and dance. The great paradoxical symbol of Christmas is God, the most powerful being in the universe, the maker of all, as an infant, the most powerless and vulnerable creature; while we as rationalists live with tidings of reason and fact, we can contemplate the notion of God as a child with wonder and maybe even a little joy. God rest you, Unitarians, let us all, at all our ages, undergo a rebirth of wonder; it is never too late to take delight in what is around us!

To close these reflections, I invite you to read with me the beautiful and apt words of Margaret Starkey found at number 663 in our hymnbook.

With mounds of greenery, the brightest ornaments, we bring high summer to our rooms, as if to spite the somberness of winter come.

In time of want, when life is boarding up against the next uncertain spring, we celebrate and give of what we have away.

All creatures bend to rules, even the stars constrained.
There is a blessed madness in the human need to go against the grain of cold and scarcity.

We make a holiday, the rituals varied as the hopes of humanity,
The reasons as obscure as ancient solar festivals, as clear as joy on one small face.

Amen.

Reading

I Am Waiting

By Lawrence Ferlinghetti

I am waiting for my case to come up
and I am waiting
for a rebirth of wonder
and I am waiting for someone
to really discover America
and wail
and I am waiting
for the discovery
Of a new symbolic western frontier
and I am waiting
for the American Eagle
to really spread its wings
and straighten up and fly right
and I am waiting for the Age of Anxiety
to drop dead
and I am waiting
for the war to be fought
which will make the world safe
for anarchy
and I am waiting for the final withering away
of all governments
and I am perpetually awaiting

a rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the second coming
And I am waiting
For a religious revival
To sweep thru the state of Arizona
And I am waiting
For the grapes of wrath to stored
And I am waiting
For them to prove
That God is really American
And I am waiting
To see God on television
Piped into church altars
If they can find
The right channel
To tune it in on
And I am waiting
for the last supper to be served again
and a strange new appetizer
and I am perpetually awaiting
a rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for my number to be called
and I am waiting
for the Salvation Army to take over
and I am waiting
for the meek to be blessed
and inherit the earth
without taxes
and I am waiting
for forests and animals
to reclaim the earth as theirs
and I am waiting
for a way to be devised

to destroy all nationalisms
without killing anybody
and I am waiting
for linnets and planets to fall like rain
and I am waiting for lovers and weepers
to lie down together again
in a new rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the great divide to be crossed
and I anxiously waiting
For the secret of eternal life to be discovered
By an obscure practitioner
and I am waiting
for the storms of life
to be over
and I am waiting to set sail for happiness
and I am waiting
for a reconstructed Mayflower
to reach America
with its picture story and TV rights
sold in advance to the natives
and I am waiting
for the lost music to sound again
in the Lost Continent
in a new rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the day
that maketh all things clear
and I am waiting for retribution
for what America did to Tom Sawyer
and I am waiting
for the American Boy
to take off Beauty's clothes
and get on top of her
and I am waiting

for Alice in Wonderland
to retransmit to me
her total dream of innocence
and I am waiting
for Childe Roland to come
to the final darkest tower
and I am waiting for Aphrodite
to grow live arms
at a final disarmament conference
in a new rebirth of wonder

I am waiting
to get some intimations
of immortality
by recollecting my early childhood
and I am waiting
for the green mornings to come again
for some strains of unpremeditated art
to shake my typewriter
and I am waiting to write
the great indelible poem
and I am waiting
for the last long rapture
and I am perpetually waiting
for the fleeting lovers on the Grecian Urn
to catch each other at last
and embrace
and I am awaiting
perpetually and forever
a renaissance of wonder