

Unplugging the Christmas Machine
First Unitarian Church of Calgary
Rev. Fran Dearman, November 22nd, 2009

We live in interesting times.

Being aware of Solstice and the turning of the year is part of how we live in time. The holiday season is our response to being aware of this living in time, and it can be a lot of fun. It can also be a bah-humbug time, as we come aware that this year's reality will never come up to our romanticized ideals. We can make this season a time for discerning our true values and returning to a seasonal celebration that is authentic, fulfilling, and meaningful.

Now, some of our seasonal celebrations are thousands of years old. Winter solstice could be an anxious and fearful time. Ancient peoples responded with elaborate ceremonies. Huge fires were kindled on hilltops to imitate the light and warmth of the retreating sun, hoping to lure the sun back once again. And every year it seemed to work!

Many of our Christmas decorations come to us from these ancient celebrations. The flames of our candles echo the great fires on the hilltops, luring back the life-giving sun with their own light and warmth. The circles of yuletide wreaths echo the wheel of the turning seasons. The colours of the season—red, green, and white—echo the foliage with which we decorate our homes, evergreen with leaves and life, red, green and white like holly, ivy, and mistletoe. And may our lives be evergreen with love and hope and meaning.

Stories of an extraordinary birth of a child of wonder also converge with the winter solstice in many cultures, including Egyptian, Persian, Greek, and Roman traditions. Our winter festivals place us within a great chain of tradition, linking us with generations of humankind before us. Like them, we celebrate the promise of the return of light and warmth, the promise of new life and new hope, and the present and enduring warmth of human community.

One of the old, old traditions of the season, one that I particularly enjoy is the time when the world is turned upside down, what the Romans hailed as Saturnalia and Medieval times as the Lord of Misrule.

When I was serving as third mate onboard a merchant ship, at sea on Christmas Day, after supper the first mate sent me forward to cover his watch in the wheelhouse, because it would be the first mate and the chief engineer who washed the dishes that night, while the cooks put their feet up, and the Newfoundland watchman played the squeeze box, and the crew sang all the songs they knew.

Another time, ashore with my Naval Reserve Unit in Victoria, we officers took off our gold-braided jackets and put on frilly aprons to serve Christmas dinner to the ship's company. The youngest of the ordinary seamen traded jackets with the grizzled Captain and sat beside him at head table, and a good time was had by all.

Christmas can be fun. The hustle and bustle can carry us through the gathering dark and the encroaching cold. The fun and the frolic can dance us around the rim of the existential void.

And yet. And yet the hustle and bustle in our times seems somehow out of joint. What are we to make of a festival so manic that a man is trampled to death as he opens the door to sale day at Walmart? What are we to make of a festival season that begins with two men shooting each other to death at Toys R Us? These events actually happened, one year ago, in New York and California. Good grief! Some holiday. One wonders. One wonders about a lot.

One of my favourite memories of Christmas past is getting home late Christmas Eve. There would be cocoa and long talks by the light of the Christmas tree, remembering the past, and dreaming the future. Wondering.

Christmas is a time for memories, for questions, for wondering. What about Santa Claus, children ask? How shall the adult respond?

As long ago as December 1896 [Robinson p. 74] Good Housekeeping magazine engaged that question. Tell the stories, they replied. But tell them, always, as stories—as myths and fairy tales. Let the child engage the story in his own time, in her own way. Tell the truth, tell the story, and remember that for children, as for all of us, there is a deep truth at the heart of a fairy tale.

There are other, troubling questions. How does one explain to a child, or to oneself, about economic downturn? What's a pink slip? What's a pension fund? What's recovery, when your own job has disappeared?

Have you ever woken up with a bubble of panic that you carry around with you all day? Like a carpenter nudging a spirit level, have you ever trod carefully through the day, keeping that bubble within bounds, keeping the panic in perspective?

We remember the Great War. We remember the Great Depression. We remember Dieppe and Viet Nam. We remember polio, and typhoid, and smallpox. Some of us here carry the scars from the smallpox inoculation, about the size of a quarter, maybe high on your left shoulder? And some do not. We no longer inoculate against smallpox. The risk of inoculation is now greater than the likelihood of the disease. Outside of the laboratory, smallpox is gone, history, eradicated.

Recession and depression are terrifying words. And they are still with us. Their consequences at the individual level can be devastating. People we know may lose their houses. People we know have lost their jobs. How do we tell this story?

We tell it. We acknowledge it. We see it for what it is. We need not revel in catastrophic detail, imagining the worst. We need not deny it, either. We can put it in perspective. We can tell our children, and ourselves, the truth. We can acknowledge adult anxieties, so the children can know it's not their fault. We can relieve them, and ourselves, from the burden of an unnamed fear. We can name the fear, and face it. We can let our children help with solutions.

Together we can take time to affirm the good, and appreciate what we do hold that we do value. Together we can seek out realistic perspectives, and hope.

Even without the shadow of recession, we do know that our world is in a time of real change, and must change. The weight of responsible scientific opinion is very clear. The climate is changing radically, and more quickly than anticipated, as a consequence of human activity since industrialization. The globe is warming, the change is life-threatening, and we need to respond with real change. Now.

And what does that mean at Christmas?

The challenge of climate change calls for a radical response on our part. Now. Part of that response is a religious engagement. In worship, in ethics, in values, in word and deed, we need to reshape our story, if we are to survive.

The Christmas stories take us back to nature, back to the realities of snow and cold and darkness, back to a homeless family finding shelter in a stable, among the animals, because there was no room at the inn. Human, oxen, cattle and dove, we're all in this together.

The winter festivals take us back to nature, back to light and dark, feasting and forgiveness, and the world turned upside down. I challenge you, this Christmas, to make some new tradition that engages the realities of nature, and climate change, and do something, do some one thing, to turn the world upside down.

I invite you to give that some thought. I would love to hear what you decide. And while we are saving the world, we might also give some thought to what we truly want out of Christmas this year.

Fortunately, much thought has already been addressed to this question, and field tested in workshops over decades, workshops called "Unplug the Christmas Machine", by the team of Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli. Available in a library near you. Perhaps you are already familiar with their work? Perhaps you have already participated in a workshop modelled on their teaching? Can we have a show of hands? Am I preaching to the converted here?

Robinson and Staeheli tell us that over time we have, to some extent, as a society, moderated our excessive seasonal consumption of rich food and alcohol. However, over time, seasonal spending has not diminished. If anything, it's gone up. In fact, currently, many businesses count on Christmas spending for their annual profit margin. An economy driven by war and Christmas. Somehow this does not seem healthy.

The advertising plays into our romantic fantasies: happy families, gracious and kind; enough money, enough time; time for fun, warm times, safe times; times when we will be truly loved. We want to believe; we are vulnerable in this desire, and easily manipulated by guilt and doubt.

And why would we not want these things? Love and acceptance: these are our heart's desire. But warmth and safety and love and acceptance and happy families, gracious and kind, these are not to be acquired in the marketplace, buying and selling. Where will our heart's desire be found?

Robinson and Staeheli invite you to take the pledge. Here it is, the Christmas pledge: Believing in the true spirit of Christmas, I commit myself to: remember those people who truly need my gifts; express my love in more direct ways than gifts; examine my holiday activities in the light of my deepest values; be a peacemaker within my circle of family and friends; and rededicate myself to my spiritual growth. It's a five step program.

How do we get there? Well, we begin by recognizing that folks have different hopes for Christmas. We need a range of possibilities. We need the freedom to define for ourselves what our role is to be.

We need to make time for closeness and sharing. We need a time of relaxed calm—relaxed calm. We need to consider our roles and how they will change, as we grow from child to adult, from receiver to provider. We need to consider how others we are close to will cherish their own memories from their families of origin, which may well differ from our own.

Robinson and Staeheli looked closely at what children really want from Christmas. They found that children want four things: children want a relaxed and loving time with the family; children want realistic expectations about gifts; children want an evenly paced series of events with the family through the holiday season; children want reliable family traditions.

Children want love and acceptance, as do we all. Children want to know that they are a priority with their parents, that they are more important than the busyness of the festive season. Children will want to be empowered to do stuff, and not just receive. Children want assurance that they are loved, they want the security to grow, learn, and be happy in their environment. You can't buy that at Walmart.

Perhaps the best gift one can give, to a child, to a friend, or to one's inner child perhaps, is to go for a walk together, or to sit with one another. One family I know would always go for a walk together on Boxing Day, around a certain lake; that was their reliable family tradition.

Some of these traditions are hidden rituals; you might have to ask, to find out.

What do you remember, from your own childhood, or adult years? The way things are done, the way events are spaced out? The special place for a decoration? A much loved if slightly battered ornament for the tree?

Me, I fly home to Victoria on Christmas Eve, most years. That has become very special to me. Christmas morning it's my job to make scrambled eggs, before we open gifts. A few days later we will go to Nanaimo to visit my aunt and cousins, and watch the pantomime staged by their local theatre group each year. On New Year's Day, I walk around the waterfront, and look for

roses. And there's this tree ornament, a reindeer. This poor reindeer is down to three legs and one antler, but I love it anyway.

Christmas leads us into the past. We could get lost there. There will come times when we need to think more about establishing new traditions, perhaps even something we enjoy. We could think about doing something for others, which is a great way to find some perspective on one's own challenges. A shield of new traditions can protect us from the ghosts of Christmas Past. We could be intentional about this, and not just fall into whatever happens. We could take responsibility for accepting who we are, where we are; we could plan ahead; we could seek out balance; we could schedule down time, if that's what we need; we could schedule some meaningful activity—or some frantic fun—if that's what we need. We could examine our values, and try to bring our activities closer to our values.

By the way, announcing at your mother's dinner table on Christmas day, as a huge turkey with sausage and onion stuffing is carried in from the kitchen, may not be the best time to share the news that, as your contribution to the reduction of global warming you've decided to go vegetarian. Timing is everything. You might consider giving the cook a few months to get used to the idea.

So, what are our values? Peace, at home and in the world? Enjoying time with family and friends? A beautiful home? Church activities? Spiritual life? Music? Exchanging gifts? Parties, entertaining, visits? Reconnecting with relatives and friends? Doing something for others? Perhaps just simple down time for rest and renewal?

I would invite you to think about that, and then think about what you might do to make that real, in all the messiness and incompleteness and imperfection of human life. Think about one small thing that you can do. Peace on earth? Good will to all persons? I invite you to contemplate some one small thing that is within your power to do, this Christmas.

In conclusion, Christmas and the holiday season can be a lot of fun. Winter solstice has been a special time since humans first noticed the turning wheel of the seasons. Each age of humanity faces its own challenges. The challenges, in our time, include the seduction of the marketplace, an engagement with radical environmental change, and the cyclical realities of a global economy. We've seen worse. We'll see better.

We can talk to one another about our fears and anxieties, and listen to one another as we put our concerns into perspective, and together seek out a better way. We can resist the hollow promises of a commercialized holiday. We can seek out and make real the activities that accord with our true values. And we might even have fun while we do it.

Merry Christmas. Joyeux Noel.

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