

**Unitarian Church of Calgary, December 13th, 2009, Yuletide Choir Concert**  
**Homily on “Joy, Depth and Return”**  
**Rev. Fran Dearman**

“Most everyone has sung in a choir, if only the “Happy Birthday” choir. When singing with others, you can feel the whole group in your tissues. The harmonies are so palpable, the togetherness is uplifting. The social and spiritual ideals are sparked into real time. We discover ourselves inhaling and exhaling within the same harmonious nature - humanity organized by sound.”

W.A. Mathieu, “The Musical Life”

Our opening words were written by W.A. Mathieu. He said, “When singing with others, you can feel the whole group in your tissues. The harmonies are so palpable, the togetherness is uplifting..... We discover ourselves inhaling and exhaling within the same harmonious nature - humanity organized by sound.” Singing together brings us joy: a vivid emotion of pleasure or extreme gladness.

Recently I have had the joy of reading two new books. The first is Stephen Nissenbaum’s book, “The Battle for Christmas: A social and cultural history of Christmas that shows how it was transformed from an unruly carnival season into the quintessential American family holiday”.

If I understand Nissenbaum correctly, the original and authentic Christmas social observances, from the times when most people still worked on the land, were often rowdy and crude, with a lot of feasting and drinking and social excess. Kind of like Hallowe’en, with the wassail and carolling wakes being more like trick or treat than genteel visitation.

If I follow Nissenbaum correctly, our modern sense of Christmas, especially the part with all the presents, is a nineteenth century revisionist marketing triumph. Much of what we might consider the traditional Christmas is scarcely a hundred years old, and was created for folks who had left their close-knit rural communities for the loneliness of a large city.

So when Dickens wrote the “Christmas Carol” he was not so much describing a tradition as creating the tradition. And in the spirit of transparency and full disclosure, let us note here that Unitarians have been deeply invested in the Christmas creation process. Charles Dickens, author of the “Christmas Carol”, was a British Unitarian. Edmund Hamilton Sears, author of the carol “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”, was a Unitarian minister who served parishes in Massachusetts. The author of “Jingle Bells” was also a Unitarian, but I let that pass.

Getting back to collective joy, I recently read Barbara Ehrenreich’s book, “Dancing in the Streets”. Ehrenreich’s theme is that we humans have a long tradition of generating collective joy through singing and dancing together in the public spaces. Over the years, says Ehrenreich, we have suppressed activities inspiring collective joy, and we have suppressed the levelling of social classes and boundaries that accompanies public joy. We have largely driven ecstatic dance and song out of our churches and religious festivals.

Sometimes the collective joy of public song and dance survives in events of carnival, as in Rio and New Orleans. Ecstasy, the standing outside of oneself, and the levelling effect of carnival occasionally re-surface in public events, such as rock concerts, the Grey Cup, or the Gay Pride Parade—essentially anywhere where folks can dress up and paint their faces and maybe mock authority a little.

The winter holidays have the potential to invite collective joy. We sing together, maybe dance a little, and perhaps feel a little more connected to our neighbours.

One of the interesting observations I found in Ehrenreich's book is that there is a depth of practice and preparation that goes into inviting the spirit of collective joy or even outright ecstatic possession into one's life; spontaneity has to be planned. Carnival costumes have to be planned. Cakes and cookies take time to bake. Gay Pride banners take time to sew. Christmas carols take hours of rehearsal to float effortlessly, joyfully, into the air.

Accordingly, our opportunities for collective joy, while they might seem spontaneous, are in fact intentional, and carefully planned. We choose to pursue collective joy. And the collective nature of this joy returns us to a sense of wholeness, and reminds us we are not alone.

So somewhere in our preparations for the winter holiday, we have the power to choose some preparation for a moment of joy which we will share with others. We do not wait to be swept away, like the heroine of a Harlequin romance novel. We choose, and we prepare, and we are ready when the moment arrives.

I urge you to prepare accordingly, to plan for a time and place when joy will be yours, and I wish you joy, singularly and collectively, in the midwinter break.

May it be so.

### **Bibliography:**

Concise Oxford Dictionary: joy: a vivid emotion of pleasure or extreme gladness.

Barbara Ehrenreich, "Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy", 2006. Her theme is the millennia-old "suppression of communal rituals and festivities" (p. 136), expressed through communal singing and dancing and the spirit of carnival, and what is lost when we suppress our instincts for collective joy. Suppression of collective joy, she argues, bolsters hierarchies by suppressing egalitarian and communitarian impulses. And part of the price we pay as individuals, she argues, is excessive isolation of self, leading to melancholy and depression. For Ehrenreich, the enthusiasms of rock concerts and sports events can help teach us how to find our way back to collective joy.

Stephen Nissenbaum, "The Battle for Christmas: A social and cultural history of Christmas that shows how it was transformed from an unruly carnival season into the quintessential American family holiday", 1996.