

Blue Christmas

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 17 December 2006
Chip Roush

FIRST READING The Rev. Beth Graham is currently the Associate Vice President of Stewardship and Development of our Unitarian Universalist Association. Her husband, Bill Schulz, was the President of the UUA from 1985-1993, and the Executive Director of Amnesty, International USA after that. This is an adaptation of one of her meditations:

To those who can think only of the color of their eyes when they hear the word "red" --

so raw still is a recent loss for them, I want to say "Merry Christmas." To those on the street corner holding up cardboard signs and holding out hopeful palms I want to say "Merry Christmas."

To those who rail against the insensitivity of their illness for emerging at this point in the calendar year (why, they ask, couldn't it wait just another few weeks?) I want to say "Merry Christmas." To those who stare out of windows all day, remembering years gone by, wondering where the time has gone, wondering when someone might visit them again, wondering how they can still be alive when so many who have peopled their lives are gone from this earth, I want to say "Merry Christmas." To those who cover their bruised bodies so that others won't be able to see the battle wounds of their marriages, or the scars of their family's ways, who try to cover their battered spirits with a numbing silence, I want to say "Merry Christmas." To those whom I have unknowingly hurt this year, through careless words or selfish deeds, I want to say "Merry Christmas." I want to give this greeting. But when I try, my mouth goes dry and the words get stuck in my throat. So I'll simply say this: you linger with me long after I've left you, you stay by my side when I'm no longer by yours. I approach this Christmas Day with you in my heart. May this always be so. For until I can look you in the eye and say with an honest heart, "Merry Christmas" my work in this world is not done. "Merry Christmas," I say, to all who can believe in these words. May we stand with those sisters and brothers who can't. Merry Christmas. Amen.

SECOND READING Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi was a 13th-century poet and theologian. Born in what is now Afghanistan, he was a Sufi—the mystic tradition of Islam. His followers founded the Mevlevi Order, better known as the Whirling Dervishes, upon his death in 1273 CE. One night a man was crying,

Allah! Allah! His lips grew sweet with the praising, until a cynic said,

"So! I have heard you calling out, but have you ever gotten any response?"

The man had no answer to that. He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.

He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls, in a thick, green foliage.

"Why did you stop praising?" "Because I've never heard anything back."

"This longing you express *is* the return message."

The grief you cry out from draws you toward union.

Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its master. That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs no one knows the name of.

Give your life to be one of them.

HOMILY I

"Blue" How many of you have ever experienced a Christmas where you felt sad, or tired, or sick, or out-of-sorts so that you *never did* get all the way into the quote-Christmas-Spirit-unquote? How many have

experienced a “perfect” Christmas, where you felt great, and the decorations and the food and the gifts you gave and the gifts you received and all of your family all felt perfectly wonderful? How many of you feel that the high expectations created by advertising combine with the super-sentimentality of holiday specials and the reactive cynicism of TV sitcoms to distort Christmas so much that it’s almost impossible to know *what* you really feel?

Two weeks ago, we had the chancel filled with the gifts that we were donating to the Women’s Resource Center shelter. Do you remember the huge number of presents, stretching from one side, clear to the other? Before we spread them all over the podia here, they had been stored in my office, because it can be locked, and they would be safer there.

When I came in that morning, I discovered a room FULL of presents. I mean every surface, and virtually all of the floor, was covered with brightly-wrapped packages. In a second, I remembered what they were, but in that first instant, I felt like a four-year-old who had hit the jackpot. It really was a form of ecstasy. Even the realization that these gifts were to be given away did not temper my joy at discovering them. So I do know that I still have one authentic feeling of Christmas: the primal happiness at receiving gifts is strong in me. Beyond that, though, it gets much more confused. I’ve lived through so many Christmases— some good and some painful and most with some aspects of both— that it can be difficult for me to know exactly what I’m saying when I wish someone a “Merry Christmas.”

That four-year-old inside me means “I hope you get lots of toys, and no dumb clothes.” An older version of me would wish for you whatever you wanted, including clothing. Still another version wishes for you the return of light and lightness, for hope amidst despair. But isn’t it a bit presumptuous of me, to wish the counter clerk at Glen’s market “hope amidst despair”? I don’t have any idea what she is feeling, or what his year has been like. Yet I still say “Merry Christmas” as I gather up my groceries.

A few years ago, in a class I was leading, we listed some of the things that the phrase “I love you” can mean. Our list included:

I think you are wonderful, and I want to journey through life together

You make me feel better about myself

Please buy me that I apologize

I’m going to hang up the phone now, and I want to say “good-bye” nicely

I like you a lot

I want to love you

I no longer really love you, but I cannot tell you that yet

I want to have sex with you

You just said “I love you” to me, and I feel obligated to reciprocate

Thank you

I don’t really know what love is, but this is the best anyone has ever treated me

Please do the thing I’m about to ask you to do I made up a similar list for the phrase “Merry Christmas”
Sometimes, when they say that, people mean:

I wish you joy and peace in your life

I listen to Fox News, and I dare you to say anything but “Merry Christmas” back

Have a fun and restful, happy holiday

I know you, but I cannot remember your name

Thank you for buying that

I didn’t see you until we almost collided, and now I have to say something

I hope for a tip from you

We haven't seen each other, or even communicated, since last year, and I'm glad

to reconnect, even if it's brief I don't feel very Christmas-y, but I desperately want to fit in

And that last one gave rise to another list: how we *hear* the phrase. Some days, when somebody wishes us a merry Christmas, we may take them at their word: we may hear them wishing us a joyful, peaceful holiday. However, depending upon the circumstance, we can interpret it quite differently. It doesn't even really matter how the other person intended it, we may still read other meanings into it. We may hear "I'm just being polite; this is the socially appropriate thing to say." Sometimes we could interpret it as "I'm so happy that I'm going to annoy everyone around me." Perhaps, if we are not particularly happy ourselves, we might hear in someone's greeting an undertone of "I'm happy—and you're not" or even "I belong in joyful, successful, *normal* America, and you do not."

Without raising hands, just ask yourselves— have you ever resented someone, because they were more cheerful than you? Have you ever felt even more sad, because somebody else's happiness reminded you of what you were *not* feeling yourself?

The Christmas season can often give rise to such emotions. One of Emily Dickinson's poems begins, To fight aloud is very brave, But gallanter, I know, Who charge within the bosom, The cavalry of woe.

As someone who occasionally does battle with a cavalry of woe inside, I feel great compassion for that struggle. It is not a moral failing, though it sometimes feels like it, when the rest of the world seems relentlessly happy and energetic.

But there are more of us than we may think. Because it is such an internal battle, we don't really recognize our fellows in the fight. Even those of us attuned to the hoofbeat sound of that cavalry of woe—and most of those who have never heard that march within their breast— do not realize how many of us are waging a silent struggle.

In the hopes that we will be strengthened, if we know we are not alone, and in the interest of promoting compassion for all of our brothers and sisters in the world, however happy or un- they look, I offer a list of people for whom this Christmas might be described as "blue":

some veterans of, and some still fighting, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan— especially those with post-traumatic stress disorder some families and friends of those who have died in those wars some people who are out-of-work or under-employed some of those for whom this is the first Christmas without a significant loved one some people trying to sort out the complicated logistics (and emotions) of blended families some folks with seasonal affective disorder, for whom darkness is like poison some who miss somebody special, who died, or moved away, or simply doesn't call some people who want somebody special, but haven't found her or him yet some whose families are dysfunctional some whose families are violent some who are homeless some folks who have internalized much-too-high expectations for the season some who are battling sickness or disease some who are imprisoned some people who struggle for any of a thousand other reasons and some for whom there is no particular "cause" to which to point, but who feel depressed now, anyway.

To any and all, for whom this is a blue Christmas, we hold you tenderly in our hearts. Echoing Beth Graham, in our first reading, we say

to the extent you can believe it,

we say, "Merry Christmas";

to the extent you cannot,

we stand with you, with compassion.

In fact, I invite the congregation to do just that. Let's say it, together. If you need to hear these phrases, then prepare to soak it in. If you can say it, to others and/or to yourself, please join in speaking. Your first line is "we say, 'merry Christmas'" Repeat that. Your second line is "we stand with you, with compassion" Again.

Okay; let's do it: to the extent you can believe it,

we say, 'Merry Christmas' and to the extent you cannot,
we stand with you, with compassion" {Once more?}

So may we be.

MUSIC "There will be rest and sure stars shining over the rooftops crowned with snow." To the extent we can believe it, the promise of rest and the beauty of snowscapes are potential blessings of this midwinter time. The poet Sara Teasdale, born in St. Louis in 1884, wrote these words. {*There Will Be Rest*}

HOMILY II

"Christmas" Even if we mean every word of "to the extent you can believe it, we wish you a 'Merry Christmas' and to the extent you cannot, we stand with you, with compassion" it is still an awfully cumbersome greeting

How can we be sensitive to the needs of our fellow humans, without spending all of our time and energy trying to anticipate every possible situation? First, it helps to remember that everybody's feelings are her or his own responsibility. If I say "Merry Christmas" to a Jewish person, or a Muslim or a Buddhist, or even a dyed-in-the-wool Atheist, then his feelings are his own concern. He can choose to be offended, or amused, or he might even appreciate the gesture, if not its specific content.

If I say "happy holidays" to someone who has come to believe that her soul and my soul and indeed, all of Christendom is endangered by such a phrase, she is responsible for her own reaction. I have not "made" her feel anything.

On the other hand, we can try to live with compassion and integrity, and attempt to behave in ways that are appropriate to the situation. If I have been waiting in line for several minutes, and I have seen other well-meaning people get yelled at by the woman who wants to hear only "merry Christmas" then I can choose *not* to say "happy holidays" when it is my turn at the counter.

If I am *inside* a synagogue, talking to a person with a "Temple Beth Shalom" T-shirt on, then perhaps I could decide to wish him a Happy Hanukkah.

If I am having a good day, and I cheerfully wish someone a merry Christmas, and she rolls her eyes at me, or snaps, "same to you, buddy" or even if she bursts into tears— none of those responses are my fault. I might choose to respond with compassion and dignity, especially if she is crying, but that would be my choice. I am not obligated in any way by her emotional process. And, if someone joyfully sings out a full verse of "Deck the Halls" as a greeting to me, and if I just don't have the emotional energy to respond in kind, but give him a nod and a "hello" instead, it is not my problem if he allows that to diminish his own joyful mood.

This is not just about feeling "merry" in December or not; it's dealing with our multicultural, multi-class, multi-emotional everyday experience. It's living in community with others and not imagining, or requiring, that their experience is the same as ours; nor is it judging our responses, expecting them to be the same as all of theirs.

We're all seeking "rest and sure stars shining." We're all doing the best we can, navigating by whatever stars we can see at the time.

All of us live in worlds of our own devising, creating and adapting our responses to the multi-faceted society we share.

If we are each sufficiently guided by the sure stars in our experience, and if we are open—at least a little—to navigational advice from others, then it will be easier to find the crystal of peace above us, and within us and between and among us all.

The true spirit of Christmas is about finding that crystalline peace. The spirit of Christmas, or of any of the midwinter holidays of light, is the return of light in darkness, the birth of hope in the midst of despair, and the creation of peace in the middle of strife. Just as we need the cold to fully appreciate warmth, our sorrow can ground and deepen our joy. Rumi's guide of souls, in our second reading, says, "This longing you express *is* Allah's return message... The grief you cry out from draws you toward union." Just as the

presence of shadows implies the existence of a source of light, our feelings of sorrow and disconnection bear witness to the existence somewhere of comfort and wholeness and gladness.

It does not make it *enjoyable*, by any means, but it might make it more bearable, knowing that the symptoms of our agony imply the possibility of release.

The full text of Emily Dickinson's poem is:

To fight aloud is very brave, But gallanter, I know, Who charge within the bosom, The cavalry of woe.

Who win, and nations do not see, Who fall, and none observe, Whose dying eyes no country Regards with patriot love. We trust, in plumed procession, For such the angels go, Rank after rank, with even feet And uniforms of snow.

Ms. Dickinson wrote in the middle of the 19th century. She believed in, hoped for, and needed herself a procession of angels sent to rescue us from our woe.

Today, in the 21st century, I think that we have ourselves, and to whatever extent possible, each other. I believe in, and hope for, and need myself the Spirit of Life pulsing in us all. We do rally to each others' support, but we do not go rank by rank, with even feet, nor with matching uniforms. We show up with many diverse outfits, arriving from many different locations.

Some days, we may fight the cavalry of woe from deep within our solitary fortress of pillows; some days, we may feel so good that we can ride out to the aid of others.

Sometimes the skirmishes are relatively rare; sometimes there is a battle every day. Sometimes the best defense is the ammunition of medication, a controlled-release dosage that creates a no-fly zone within the battlefields of our breasts.

And all of us belong in the resistance movement, supporting each other as we can.

Christmas is a metaphorical time of light, and warmth, and joy and hope and peace. If you can believe in these words, to whatever extent you are able to feel and appreciate them, I wish you a Merry Christmas.

So may we be.