

## *Two (or more) Homes for the Holidays*

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The only way to survive the holidays is to celebrate them well. The problem for me has always been to understand what "well" means. —Junella Hanson

It is not the diversity of opinions (which cannot be avoided), but the refusal of toleration to those that are of different opinions that has produced all the bustles and wars, that have been in the Christian world. —John Locke

### **WELCOME**

Will you close your eyes and bring your focus to a shared vision? We gather today ... and by “gather” I mean we pull ourselves together ... we pull ourselves together because we are stretched, stretched in so many directions. // Let’s take this opportunity to re-integrate all of our pieces. We’ve been stretching to be generous; stretching to be in many places at once; stretching to be creative, sociable, and cheerful ... beautiful aspirations.

Still ... let’s take this opportunity ... not to pull back from these inspired intentions ... but to recognize the wholeness of ourselves ... the integrity of this ONE consciousness in which we participate. // For it is within this one consciousness, this one history, this one people ... into which we simultaneously dissolve and coalesce in our goodwill.

Bell: In this spirit we light our chalice

**GATHERING SONG**      *Come Sing a Song with Me*      #346

### **MILESTONES**

Joy and woe are woven fine within this shimmering fabric of life. It’s important to be able to look out over the entire tapestry of our joys and sorrows ... but then it can be valuable at times, while they are fresh, to zero in on something particularly poignant. Some life experience that is calling to us ... insisting to us: there is a lesson here, just for you.

So we share our joys and sorrows in our efforts to understand. If you would like to share, or simply light a candle in silence to acknowledge that which is too much for words ... then line up one either side here ...

What is the “right” cultural response when someone shares a deep piece of themselves? I don’t know. Just this once: let’s try focused silent goodwill. Then afterward, at coffee hour, do take the opportunity to share in more detail, and with applause, hugs, laughter.

I don’t know if this will work but let’s give it a try

[sharing]

And as we light one more candle, we extend our prayers and good wishes today to

All who have a song they cannot sing,  
All who have a burden they cannot bear  
All who live in chains they cannot break  
All who wander homeless and cannot return

Our prayers and good wishes extend to  
Those who are sick, and to those who tend them;  
Those who wait for loved ones, and those who wait in vain  
Those who live in hunger  
And those who will not share their bread  
Those who are misunderstood  
And those who misunderstand

Our prayers and good wishes extend  
To those whose words of love are locked within their own hearts  
And To those who yearn to hear the words of love.

May we make a way through the shadows that we encounter alone, and the shadows we encounter together. Amen

**MUSICAL MEDITATION**      *Homeward Bound*      Paul Simon

**SILENCE (3:00)**

**REFLECTIONS** - Paul Beckel

I heard the bells Tuesday morning. Or at least it sounded like bells. First it was a thud. Then gentle tinkling filled the air.

*And Jane in her pjs and I in my cap,  
Had just gotten up from a long winter's nap.*

*When out on the parking lot there arose such a clatter, I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.*

Throwing open the shades I saw the remnants of half a dozen long fluorescent lamps scattering in the wintry wind. It was actually kind of pretty, if I squinted. The swirling, blustering white powder seemed just right.

And the sound was pleasantly intermittent. As gusts of wind passed in broken waves, it was as if some cosmic conductor was alternately whipping up the tumbling garbage can percussion section, then the quiet contrast of whistling around each window, and then again the tinkling tinkling tubes scattering gently but relentlessly on their way.

So this is Christmastime in the Northwest. Awwww... I wanna go home!

But where would that be?

Here in the midst of a festival season we hear both human and cosmic voices calling us to “Be of good cheer! Enjoy nature’s frosty beauty! Experience the love of God which has come into our midst in human form!” All of these sound kind of nice.

And the voices continue: “Go home. Experience the love through your family. Give. And receive. And be strengthened there—to carry love out into the world!”

It makes sense: Be grounded, somewhere, like from some base camp. Some place or some people or some solid worldview from which, then, we might expand.

But where, or what is home? Who is this “Family” through whom I’m supposed to experience God’s love // or human compassion // or the goodness of the universe?

It’s easy enough to define family, in theory, as those people we love and choose to spend our lives with. But then we have to deal with the reality—of our biological families or legal families...who we may or may not like. And we have to deal with the reality that those we do love may be too far away, physically, to spend our lives with ... or they may no longer be living.

So, in all likelihood, we have: “family” that we want to spend time with, and “family” that we don’t want to spend time with, and “family” that we’d like to spend time with but can’t. We have at least two homes for the holidays, and probably more.

I suspect that there are those among us who will attempt to have multiple holiday dinners this year—perhaps at the homes of two or three sets of in-laws, grandparents, or neighbors. Is it double pleasure or double pressure to anticipate multiple large meals, multiple bottles of wine, multiple desserts? [And multiple scoldings for not arriving on time?]

And how many are going to two or more work-related holiday parties this year? Several school functions? Or, God Forbid! two religious services?

Perhaps there was a time (but there probably wasn’t, really) when because people tended to marry within their own cultural group, and stay within limited geographical boundaries, that in-laws and partners and children all shared the same holiday traditions, the same religious language and rituals. Perhaps there was a time of such Peace on Earth!

Or, perhaps, it is now, when we are more open about our differences, and we are less likely to bury our dissent if we don’t find meaning in a tradition.... Perhaps NOW is a time when we can move toward that mystical goal! Peace.

Let us dream of Peace....

But then just when we try to snuggle down for that long winter's nap, we feel a nudge beneath the covers! Someone else is crawling in beside us. New people pouring into our lives, and our homes: my sister-in-law's new boyfriend, your father's new wife, the nephew we hadn't seen for years who moved back home. New immigrants from the Midwest, California, Canada, Mexico, and places beyond.

The family expands; the family tree splits into intricate and lovely patterns; the pressure mounts... to expand the circle... to BE WITH more and more people.

And it may feel great—sharing the covers. And, we may eventually find a limit to our time or our money or our energy required to stay connected.

Why do we keep putting ourselves through this? How do we survive it? We might tell ourselves that it's a good spiritual discipline to continue relating to those with whom we find ourselves at odds, that it's a good spiritual discipline to broaden our experience, that it's a good spiritual discipline to put our principle of tolerance into practice.

As Unitarian Universalists who celebrate tolerance, in theory, we might feel a little stretched in this season when we come across members of the family we just can't tolerate, or choose not to tolerate. It might be a good spiritual discipline to just lay down our defenses, lay down our weapons, and just listen and learn and appreciate.

Or it might not.

Rev. Don Wheat, a realist, writes: "There are those people who seem to have the ability to draw out the worst in us. It's not that they seek to do it, but there is some kind of chemistry that causes them to do it. And we do it ourselves. As much as we resolve to bring out the good in others, we sometimes find ourselves bringing out their worst. [I've concluded that] there are some places we should not go, some people we should not be with. We must put ourselves in the presence of those who love life, of those who find the same things funny, of those who do not take themselves too seriously...."

Seriously. Can we really tolerate everyone and everything? I think not. And to those who say that tolerance isn't enough, that we need to go beyond tolerance...to respect, and love, and to engage in creative interchange... to those people I say, "Spend a holiday with MY family!"

So perhaps we should just stay away, then. Perhaps we could simplify our lives, and regain our sanity, just by keeping our distance from those people and situations that seem unhealthy or unproductive. Right?

Forgive me for presenting another side to this: Family therapist Edwin Friedman sees it differently. Friedman says no, we can't get away with placing physical distance between ourselves and family members with whom we are emotionally fused. Friedman says that staying away can only solve a problem temporarily, or transfer our unresolved anxiety to another family system.

Go home, or stay away?  
Which of these two approaches is correct?

And which holiday tradition is correct? Which should we teach our children? the Santa Xmas, the Jesus Xmas, Solstice, Hanukkah, Festivus, Posada...

And which parent or child will you fly-in this year? Which Christmas pageant or holiday tournament will you skip so you can attend another?

And will you come to another damned church function on Christmas eve, or will you finally find some quality time with your partner?

Tough questions.

But remember, it's always been like this on Christmas. Mary and Joseph had to leave their home in Nazareth to go register in the land of Joseph's ancestors, to Bethlehem. And the baby too was uprooted, even from his humble home in the stable, and exiled to Egypt to escape the death threat of Herod.

Look, if we're conscious, we're not going to beat the situation where we feel torn in many directions. We're not going to eliminate the pressure to share the covers or widen the circle. So maybe we should just lay down our expectations, lay down our defenses, lay down our weapons, and go with the flow down by the riverside.

That's a stretch for me. When I walk down to the river at this time of year I expect to find something solid on which I can walk, ski, or even drive on. What I'm accustomed to this time of year is singing hymn number 346 (as we did earlier) either skipping verse three, or singing it with befuddlement. "Come walk in rain with me," it says. In the winter?! I never understood what that meant before. But my eyes have been opened—to a new beauty!

### **REFLECTIONS** - Cat McIntyre

What often enters my thoughts this season is the need to balance my obligations with my sense of joy and love. My sense of obligation comes from everyone's expectations and my job in performing old and new traditions. I want to balance that my obligation with real enjoyment of the opportunities this season offers to express my love and caring for family and friends.

I love the hours spent together with family. But all that loving takes energy. Sometimes I need a break to recharge, and even reflect. So maybe I retreat behind a closed door to "wrap a few packages. Or amidst all the unwrapping on Christmas morning, just go into the bathroom for a few minutes, sit down and take a deep breath.

My sister-in-law is wonderfully attuned to when we're tiring. She will say, Okay now, let's take a break and eat something. We can return to opening present after. She reminds us all that it's okay, and even important, to pause during the feverish activity, take care of our routine needs, and just enjoy being.

We're going to take a break now while the ushers offer the baskets, then bring them up to the front. While the offering gives you a chance to contribute--express your generosity of spirit., it is also completely okay to just let the basket pass.

The Christmas song Amber is going to play now (*I'll be Home for Christmas*) is especially dear to me. I spent many Christmases overseas. One of the first was in Nepal, which is not a Christian country. So there weren't a lot of familiar rituals, and my family was far away. I was staying in a low-budget hotel, built of concrete. The place had no soundproofing, and the acoustics were like singing in a tunnel or Carnegie Hall. I sang this song while I was washing my clothes in the bathroom sink, and I cried.

**SHARING O'GIFTS**      *I'll Be Home for Christmas*

**SENDING SONG**      *Gonna Lay Down my Sword and Shield*      #162