

Christmas in July
Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
July 29, 2018

Good Morning and welcome to Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. All who come in a spirit of good will are welcome here.

I'm Jeff Copeland and I'm pleased to be your celebrant this morning. I've been attending BUF since my wife, Liz, and I moved here to Bellingham in the spring of 2017. We were previously members of Northlake UU Church in Kirkland, where I last served as chair of the membership committee. We were also founding members of Live Oak Unitarian Church in Austin, Texas.

This morning's service has an intentionally vague title and many of you have asked me about it over the past month. Think about our celebrations at the winter solstice. We've got the origin stories, like the miracle of the oil in the lamp at the temple, and the wise men visiting the manger. We've got traditional celebrations like the fires we set on the hillsides at Juul to harken the return of the sun and Saturnalia. We've also got our popular stories: A Christmas Carol, Elf, Miracle on 34th Street, and that Christmas classic that is Liz's favorite, Die Hard.

But here's the thing: All of those – the stories, the traditions, the holidays – are fundamentally about hope and building community. And in this on-going season of tension and distrust, when we all seem to have Seasonal Affective Disorder even though it's the height of summer, don't you think we need a little hope and community?

So here are questions to think about: How do you keep hopeful and engaged? We are each on a hero's journey of building our communities – not just this one. Why are you tempted to reject the quest of that journey?

At the end of the service, we'll have some time for feedback and sharing of ideas. We're all tempted to say "I can't do anything about the deterioration" so you don't, which only makes it worse, and then you say "it's gotten worse, so I can't do anything" which leads to a death spiral. As David Brin observes, "Cyclically, we find ourselves mired in dogma instead of pragmatism, intransigent hatred instead of negotiation, nostalgia and romanticism instead of a belief that we can craft a better tomorrow."

Let's help each other figure out how to climb out of that spiral and craft that better tomorrow.

[Message]

Close your eyes for a moment. It's winter. The days are getting shorter. We're about to come to the winter solstice.

Think about all the holidays your ancestors knew for that time of year. Have it? Go ahead and open your eyes.

There are the celebrations for the solstice itself. If we were Celts we'd be rolling flaming pine wreaths down the hill. Druids? We'd be waiting for the late sunrise at Stonehenge. Vikings? We'd be burning the Jul log to harken the return of the sun.

We could be celebrating Hanukkah, lighting the menorah and remembering the miracle of the oil that lasted eight days in the temple.

We could be ancient Romans, feasting at Saturnalia, staying drunk into January. (That's why the Roman year started in March: November and December are Latin for the *ninth* and *tenth* months. You can't add up IX plus XVII plus LX ... carry the V ... to close the books when you're still hung over.)

But then there's the birth of Jesus, with the wise men visiting the manger. And the modern Christmas stories and traditions with family gatherings.

All of those ... *all of them* ... are about hope – hope that the sun will return, hope that Saturn will bless our crops next year, hope that the lamp will stay lit, hope that the messiah has come.

But they're also about community. We gather together in community to mark that annual milestone, and we celebrate the community that we've built and maintained through the year. We are here in the temple to worship together. We have given our gifts of frankincense and myrrh. We have seen the sunrise of the next, longer day. We light candles here in the sanctuary and sing "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht." We have decked the halls with boughs of holly. Fa-la-la-la-la... la-la-la-la.

And yet, we're living in difficult times. I'm waking up every morning and when I open the newspaper, I feel like I'm suffering from seasonal affective disorder even in the middle of summer. Or a giant Saturnalia hangover. My outrage is huge – the news stories Rick Steele read about the attacks on our LGBTQ brothers and sisters at the Pride service, the mass shootings, the Russian hackers, lions and tiger, and bears, oh, my!

Maybe the solution is to figure out how to hold onto that solstice spirit, that sense of community. Maybe we can figure it out together.

All community building involves everyone. And we begin that community, that holiday spirit in our families. What are our traditions around the winter holidays? A lot of our family traditions are about the stories we tell, the stories we revisit, the stories we share with each other.

We read *A Christmas Carol*, which pretty much defines our modern Anglo-American Christmas. We read comic science fiction author Connie Willis's array of Christmas stories, "All Seated on the Ground", about aliens who only respond when the church choir sings, or "Epiphany", about three strangers searching for a miracle in the winter snow. We read "A Gift of the Magi", which may be the only O. Henry story any of us remember.

Each of them is about community in some way. And all community-building involves everyone.

Of course, in this modern media age there are also the movies we watch. We want Ralphie to get his Red Rider BB gun in *A Christmas Story*. We cheer when the bags of mail are carried into the courtroom in *A Miracle on 34th Street*.

In the Copeland household, we must have a double feature: *It's a Wonderful Life* for me to counter cynicism, and *Die Hard* for Liz to counter shopping at the mall.

For me, it's not truly Christmas until Harry Bailey raises a toast to "my big brother George, the richest man in town." All the tears, all the time.

On the other hand, for Liz, it's not truly Christmas until Hans Gruber has fallen off Nakatomi Plaza and she can viscerally shed the latent frustrations of the season. Gruber becomes the poor victim in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" for Liz.

So let's talk a little bit about those two movies, which we've watched back-to-back in the Copeland household about thirty times.

Allow me to begin by reviewing the plots for those of you who aren't familiar with one or the other movie.

It's a Wonderful Life was the first movie Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart made together after the second World War. You could argue that Capra's *Meet John Doe*

is a better Christmas movie. You'd be wrong. This one's about a small town family-run savings and loan – back when that distinction made sense. George Bailey is trying to protect his town, his community, from the rapacious commercial banker, Mr Potter. As George puts it, he's protecting the people who do "most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community." When George's uncle loses \$8000, George takes the blame and his guardian angel gives him the gift of seeing what life would be like if he'd never been born. This can be a little depressing to watch: it's Potter who finds the missing \$8000 and doesn't return it.

Die Hard is about a New York cop who is visiting his estranged wife for Christmas and joins her at her company Christmas party. Terrorists are unexpected guests. You could argue that *Die Hard* isn't a Christmas movie, but you'd have to argue with Liz about that one. John McClane, acting behind the scenes, yelling "yippee kay ay!", has to protect the folks attending the Christmas party, meanwhile doing damage to the building and to the First Unitarian principle. The head terrorist accuses him of being "another orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he's John Wayne." Except that he's acting out of his institutional culture which is screaming "save the community, save the hostages!"

Tip O'Neill used to say that all politics is local. Well, so is community building. And all community-building involves everyone. In Bedford Falls, George's wife Mary rallies the town to come to help George. At Nakatomi Plaza, John's wife, her boss and her colleague Ellis all do what they can to resist the hostages, protecting the community.

All community-building involves everyone. We volunteer here at BUF. We help at our kid's schools. We knock on doors to support candidates. We twirl our umbrellas as we march in the Pride parade. Our children gather in front of city hall to protest gun violence, building their own community. And we gather in a protective circle around them.

All community-building involves everyone. Which brings me to some ways in which we encourage community-building by simple actions.

In his excellent book *Originals*, Adam Grant discusses an experiment he did. Signs above sinks in a hospital where he worked read "Hand hygiene prevents you from catching disease." When those signs were changed to "Hand hygiene prevents *patients* from catching diseases," hand washing rates went up by 10 percent and soap consumption went up by 45 percent.

What was the difference? "I'm a doctor, I'm in the hospital all the time, and I don't get sick." Versus, "I don't want to be the doctor who made my patients sick." I'm

now thinking about how the action makes me view myself and how it protects my community of patients.

Grant generalizes this to suggesting that we take down those signs that say "Don't Drink and Drive" and replace them with signs that say "Don't be a drunk driver." It's not just what I do, it's my view of myself. Am I a drunk? No!

To put it another way, we have the rule stated by the actor Wil Wheaton, as a guide to polite interactions. We can render it marginally more politely from Wheaton's original phrasing into Yiddish as "don't be a putz."

And how does that bring us back to community building? Oddly, through the Holocaust.

Again, in *Originals*, Grant discusses the work done by Samuel and Pearl Oliner, who studied non-Jews who saved Jews during the Holocaust. The folks who did the saving were remarkably similar to their neighbors – similar occupations, education, economic status, religious upbringing. What made the difference? The way their parents communicated.

When the rescuers were asked how their parents disciplined them, the most common word used was "explained". The parent didn't say "you're a bad person," but rather, "you've done something wrong." And then went a step further to help the child understand why this was a bad thing for *other people*. "It hurts Sophie's feelings if you take her doll." Children who understand the "why" are more empathetic, and less likely to hurt their fellows. They understand the value of taking care of each other, the value of helping their community, and that all community-building involves everyone.

It's as simple as teaching our children to treat everyone with empathy and to respect their feelings: "don't be a putz."

And if community-building involves everyone, then Civility is vital. It's really, really tempting to strike back rather than turn the other cheek, but as the wise man said, if we believe in an eye for an eye, we all end up blind. Think about it for a moment. What higher ground can we stand on if we've climbed into the mud? If we have sacrificed our empathy, stopped building community, stopped treating each other as human beings, stopped having respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, who will be there to think about our feelings when the crunch comes? As Martin Neimöller observed, "First they came for the communists..."

We can model good behavior. Such a simple change. Such a profound impact.

We can disagree without being disagreeable. I will continue to say the Pledge of Allegiance because I believe it's a statement of hope, not fact. I have friends who refuse. I honor football players who are risking their jobs by refusing to stand for the national anthem.

Similarly, we don't have to tell the President's press secretary we won't serve her dinner. The gay waiter can serve her dinner, but take a moment to introduce his husband the sous chef. "Hey, lady, we're real people. Take a moment to think about that, please."

My daughter did an amazing thing when she was in middle school. There was a substitute gym teacher for a couple of days while the regular one was on jury duty. One of those old-school coaches who thought it was just peachy to smack the girls in class on the butt. Of course, I had words with the principal. But I also offered to write Allie a note to excuse her from gym. She wanted none of it: "I need to be there to help protect the other girls. I'll just tell him 'no'." She had empathy. She was building community. And she was going to be polite about it.

And here's where I'm calling myself out. I've spent the last 20 minutes talking, but I'm between community building projects and I need some more. So come the fall, you may find me on your front porch talking up a particular candidate, or joining you at a phone bank. It's time for me to stop being frustrated about politics and do something about it. Unitarian-Universalist blogger Doug Muder suggests that we don't obsess about things we can't control or worry about long-term outcomes, but do what we can each day to make things better. In a few minutes, I hope you'll be inspired to share how you're building and strengthening not this just community but other ones.

As I final thought, I want to come back to Rod Hayne's view of 1968 from a few weeks ago. One of the images he missed was the photo from *Life* magazine of the young lady putting the daisy in the barrel of the soldier's gun. "I'm not going to throw things. I'm not going to yell. I'm giving you a flower."

Let us go forth and hope we can do at least as well in molding our future.

Salaam. Shalom. Pax. And amen.