

Singing in a Winter Wonderland by Karin Holm Randall

As our theme this month we are focusing on *appreciating the moment* and *giving to others*. How better to appreciate this time of year than to immerse ourselves in music like we are doing this evening? Music has always been an important expression of the human spirit and for Unitarian Universalists embracing the music of Christmas has been a way that many of us tap in to all the good feelings of this time of year and focus on the universal message of this season: enjoying the moment and giving to others! We are blessed to have talented and dedicated musicians among our group to allow us to be 🎵 “Singing in a Winter Wonderland.” Yes, I changed the title of the sermon to Singing rather than Walking for this very reason!

Speaking of winter wonderlands, while we do not currently have the snow here in Geneva, you all know very well that a winter wonderland is just a short trip away into the Jura or the Salève or farther afield to the plethora of Swiss or French alps. Switzerland is known for its amazing winter landscapes which should be easy to appreciate. For me, however, the appreciation of the cold, ice, and snow that goes along with the winterscapes did not come naturally.

You see, I grew up in Florida and spent my formative childhood years among palm trees, sand, and the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, so appreciating winter wonderlands has been a taste I have had to acquire over my adulthood. Yet as a girl living in the warm climate of Florida, snow was associated with Christmas, which I loved. The Christmas images of our culture were dominated by the northern latitude and western cultural views and did not match my reality. My little sister and I became very concerned one year when our child-logic brains set off alarm bells that we may not get a visit from Santa because we had no chimney in our Floridian home! That was easily remedied with a

cardboard fireplace artfully created by my parents to ensure Santa's safe arrival (he was "magic," so he could use the "magic chimney!") However this reassurance turned into feelings of betrayal, and a loss of belief in magic a few years later when I found out the real scoop on Santa.

But what I want to get into now is appreciating the magic of Christmas or even just Winter and extending this magic to reach out to others. But how exactly to do this when not everyone celebrates like we do? Every year in our household we debate what to put on our Christmas cards. When I wish people Happy Holidays I want to include more than just Christmas wishes. I want to give my well wishes to ALL my family and friends – not just to the Christians in our circles – but also to some of my nearest and dearest who are various combinations of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, agnostic, atheist, humanists of every kind, and/or Unitarian Universalists, of course.

So, you might suggest why not use "Happy Holidays," which should be a neutral option? Well, I have *problems* with the notion of "Happy Holidays," since these days in December are not even that *holy* or important to many religions. Neither is "Season's Greetings" correct – which season? Winter? -- because in the hot regions (like Florida) and southern hemisphere of our planet, seasonal aspects or "wintertime cold and lack of light" are not an issue in December. I can't seem to get away from the dominant northern western Christian culture for my year-end outreach. I guess Unitarian pastor Edmond Sears came closest to a politically correct expression in his Xmas classic, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," with the phrase: "Peace on Earth. Goodwill to All." But shouldn't I wish that at any time of the year? Upon careful examination, I have concluded that the only truly common feature across all geographies and all belief system actually just boils down to this: everyone on Earth shares the last page on the calendar together: ... so perhaps we

should proclaim “Happy Year-End?” Ugh, that sounds so lifeless and fiscal. I might rather stick with the magic of Merry Something if it could be more inclusive.

An Episcopalian priest exclaimed to a UU minister: “I don’t get you people! Eleven months of the year, Jesus Christ is practically taboo, and then in December you Unitarian folks go all out: Christmas carols, Christmas services, mitten trees, decorating Xmas trees. What gives with you people, anyway?”¹

This, it seems to me, is a perfectly logical question – one that you may well have asked yourself or had people ask you. After all, only some of us, as Unitarian Universalists, consider ourselves to be Christians. We need to remember that, in fact, some of us do regard Jesus as our Lord and Savior. But it is factually true that for most of us, Jesus is regarded as a great spiritual leader, but not as the one true son of God. So, if this is the case, then how can we legitimately celebrate Christmas — literally, the Christ’s mass? What right do we, as UUs, have to celebrate Christmas? Isn’t it sort of like showing up at a birthday party when we hardly even know the guest of honor, and we haven’t been invited?!

Well, to answer these questions, first of all, let us briefly look at the history of Christmas.

Evidence shows that it was in 337 A.D. that the authorities of the prevailing Christian church refashioned the ancient pagan Winter Solstice festival into a celebration of Jesus’ birthday. But going back before that, how had the solstice celebration developed? Long before Jesus, the darkness and cold and retreating sun, particularly in the northern climates made many people anxious and scared for their survival (I can relate). So, when the ancient people started to see the sun return – as it will next Sunday, after the shortest day of the year Dec. 21 – these people celebrated the event with feasts and singing and

even exchanging gifts (sound familiar?) Some of their symbols of revelry are still with us – holly and ivy and wreaths and decking the halls with greens. A tradition they also had is one you’ve maybe hear about: kissing under the mistle-toe?

Okay, someone like me who grew up in the sunshine state, can definitely relate to this pagan heritage of partying to defy the winter bleakness. But Unitarians from every point of the compass actually have a very special reason for celebrating this holiday: Unitarians, in fact, helped rescue and shape Christmas. From the beginning, the church had a very tenuous hold on Christmas. On both sides of the Atlantic, annual celebrations at the end of December were carnivals of partying, drunkenness, and debauchery. In England, Christmas was banned by the Puritan-controlled government from 1647-60. The excesses were so disturbing to the Puritans of Massachusetts that they also outlawed the holiday from 1659-81. It was Unitarians in the 1800s who brought Christmas back to New England. In 1832, Unitarian minister Charles Follen of Lexington, MA, missing the rich traditions of his native Bavaria, introduced the first Christmas tree in New England. And as we have heard in the service, several famous carols were written by Unitarians in the mid 1800’s.

But perhaps the single greatest Unitarian influence to Christmas was British Unitarian Charles Dickens’ story, *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens “caught” Unitarianism during a visit to New England, during which he met William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson and other prominent Unitarians. *A Christmas Carol*, penned not long after and published in 1843, is perhaps the most famous Christmas story, other than the Nativity itself.

In “*A Christmas Carol*,” Christmas is about reconciling with the past to appreciate today, hope, fun, generosity, and sharing oneself with friends and loved ones. As UUs, we still

hold these values today. Unitarian Universalists we are perfectly free to sort through all of the various elements within the Christmas mythology — Jesus, Santa Claus, the singing angels, the presents, the virgin birth, the lights, the mistletoe, the pointing stars, and all the rest — in order to sift out those messages of joy and hope, wonder and love, compassion and peace that we each personally want to affirm.

So I wish you all a Happy and Musical “Year-End,” 🎵 singing in a winter wonderland!

So, let’s join together in a short meditation (or prayer of thanks). We will take 5 breaths together, saying “Each breath”, then inhaling, and then saying “is a song,” and exhaling. And take a few minutes of silence before our short discussion.

¹ Historical descriptions blended and paraphrased from “Unitarian Universalists Celebrate Christmas? Why?” Rev. Andrew C. Kennedy, UU Milwaukee, Wisconsin; “The Surprises of UU History: *Christmas...*” by Rev. Julie Stoneberg, Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough, Massachusetts; “How Unitarians Saved Christmas (and why we celebrate the Solstice)” by Rev. Nathan Detering, First Parish Unitarian Universalist Area Church in Sherborn, MA.