

Light in the Darkness

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Every year as we approach the Winter Solstice,
we experience the days becoming shorter and shorter
and the nights longer and longer with
darkness incrementally lessening each day's available light.
With this darkness comes the cold season of winter,
foretold this past week by falling first snow.
It's no wonder that down through the ages our fore bearers
have created holidays, indeed holy days
to lighten up our lives amid such darkness.

For example, at this time of the year,
Christians, including Unitarian Universalists who are UU Christians,
have Advent,¹ a time of waiting to celebrate the birth of Christ.
The word Advent comes from the Greek word "Adventus" meaning "coming."
Christians in the Middle Ages started this tradition of Advent.
Advent is the first season of the Christian Church year,
leading up to Christmas, beginning on the first Sunday nearest to November 30th.
For Christians traditionally this is a time of fasting,
praying, and examining one's life.
Advent is thus a time for Christians to live in joyful preparation,
and hopeful waiting for the coming of Christmas.

The Advent wreath with a candle lit every Sunday until Christmas Eve,
symbolizes the light of God coming into the world through the birth of Jesus.
The circle of the wreath can be for Christians
a symbol of God's eternity and endless mercy.

The candle for the first Sunday represents faith.
The second candle, which we lit this morning, is for hope.
The third candle is for joy. This candle is also called "gaudette,"
meaning "rejoice and be glad for the Lord is coming."
And the fourth is for love.
The candles on the wreath seem to show us how the light in our lives
can get brighter as we approach Christmas Day.
For Christians, when Jesus was born,

¹ Much of the information about Advent comes from this short YouTube video.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSsMq6UXXwo&list=RDFwssGB1RZvo&index=29>

he is believed "to have brought light into the world."
We know for sure that Jesus brought into our world
a new way of thinking and a new way of sharing and giving.
We light our Advent wreath to show that such light can warm
even the darkest and coldest of winter nights,
as well as light the hearts of those around us,
to whom we give our love and care.

This season, our Social Justice Committee organized a food drive
that happened yesterday.
Also, our Social Justice Committee
has another drive for gloves and boots for folks at Isaiah 61,
a center here in Laconia, where the homeless gather,
as well as a pillowcase drive for Belknap House,
throughout this month of December.
And our share the plate is for the homeless families now at The Belknap House.
So, this is indeed the spirit of this season – that of giving and being generous.
Such giving brings light and warmth to those in need.
And when Christmas finally does come,
let us recall that manger scene, so long ago,
where people reported witnessing the mystery of a miracle,
the miracle of love in the midst of so much suffering.

As Unitarian Universalists, a number of us celebrate the Winter Solstice,
casting a circle as have the ancients before us,
as we celebrate the arrival of the increasing of the sun's warmth –
and the days turning towards more and more warmth and daylight.
In ancient times all over the world people celebrated the return of the sun.
For when in the fall, the sun waned, our ancestors of long ago became afraid –
Afraid as their Sun God appeared to them to be weak and sick.
As an offering to their Sun God, people brought dry cedar to use as wicks,
gathered fern seeds and mistletoe.
The fern, with its fan-like shape, resembled fire, the Sun god's spirit.
People lit fires on the hilltops. They make crude wheels from trees,
setting them on fire, they rolled these wheels to the top of the hills,
praying for the return of the sun and its fire and warmth.
Our Worship Committee will be helping us as a congregation
celebrate this year's Winter Solstice on December 19th.
Always a wonderful service, and another way that light is brought into the darkness.

The Winter Solstice invites us to celebrate the earth and its cycles,

beholding the mystery of the miracles all around us,
including the miracle of life itself,
as well as the miracle of the sun's returning.

Another way we humans celebrate light in the darkness this season is through the celebration of Hanukkah, with its Festival of Lights. Some of us as UUs celebrate Hanukkah within our families, and many of our congregations have some aspect of Hanukkah in our worship services and Religious Education programs.

For Jewish and UU Jewish families Hanukkah is a time in late fall when families gather to celebrate their faith and their families. Our Time For All Ages story this morning of the magic menorah provides us with the basic storyline of this ancient tradition. A menorah with its eight candles burning is a symbol of the strength of the Jewish people in spite of persecution and oppression.

The ancient story of Hanukkah² goes back over 2,000 years ago, to about 200 BCE, when the Jews were living in Egypt. The Jews of that time were able to practice their religion and customs without the Egyptians stopping them.

But then, in 175 BCE Antiochus ascended to the Syrian throne. He and his armies invade Egypt and became ruler of Egypt and Jerusalem. Antiochus would not allow the Jewish people to practice their religion – Judaism was outlawed - Antiochus imposed Greek Gods upon the Jews, who could no longer publicly worship Yahweh, their God,

In 168 BCE Antiochus and his army entered into Jerusalem, seized the Great Temple and desecrated the building. He then dedicated the building to the worship of the Greek God, Zeus.

Outraged, a Jewish high priest, Mattathias, preached that it was time to take a stand against the Syrian invaders. Mattathias had five sons, who led the fight against the Syrians for three years. The leader of this fight was Judah Maccabee, one of Mattathias sons. The Maccabees miraculously, at great odds,

² I found some of the information for Hanukkah on the following sites: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FBX53ZblU>; https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/3157659/jewish/The-Hidden-Message-of-Chanukah.htm; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z35dl01fouw>.

recaptured Jerusalem for the Jews.

According to the Talmud, the Jewish high priests were then eager to consecrate the Great Temple.
But as they were preparing to light the Great Menorah in the Temple, they could only find one jug of olive oil, enough to light the Great Menorah for one day and one night. The priests rededicated the Temple to their Holy God, using that one jug of olive oil for the menorah. Miraculously, the eternal flame within the Temple remained lit for eight days and eight nights, until more pure olive oil could be produced.

The word Hanukkah means to dedicate.

This story of the dedication of the Great Temple is one that has been told and retold for thousands of years. This story attests to the strength of the Jewish people, to overcome religious persecution, as well as tell of the mystery of the miracle of the eight days and nights that the menorah created light amid the darkness.

The fire of the menorah can represent making the world brighter, one person, one flame, at a time.
The eight candles tell us that miracles are possible,
For within Judaism, everything is a gift from God.
A miracle that oil burns.
A miracle that rain falls from the heavens.
A miracle that the sun shines.
All of life, everything is a miracle.

This story of Hanukkah and freedom from religious oppression reminds me of cultures that have not fared as well, in terms religious freedom, as well as survival of their customs and culture. Within our own country, until fairly recently, there has been a huge effort to “integrate” Native Americans into the dominant white culture. Native children were taken from their families and placed in boarding schools.

William Kent Kueger’s book, *This Tender Land*, taking place at the time of the Great Depression,

tells one of many such stories of what happened to these children.
One sadly senses the loss of connection for these children
with their cultures, and their families.
Another book that gives us glimpses into the great suffering experienced by
native children forced into such settings aimed at
changing a child's culture, language, and connection to his/her/their heritage,
is *Stolen Words* by Melanie Florence,
a children's book that deeply touches the heart.
A grandfather and a granddaughter are talking.
The grandfather cannot remember
the words of his native language, as they had been taken away from him
when he was a child in a boarding school.
"Grandfather, how do you say "grandfather" in Cree?"
asks his seven-year-old granddaughter.
For a long time, the grandfather was unable to answer.
"I don't remember," he slowly replied.
"I lost my words long ago."
In a moving conclusion to this children's story,
the granddaughter brings to her grandfather a book of the Cree language,
so that they can learn the language together.

Another people who suffered and are currently suffering
from religious persecutions as well as an effort at ethnic cleansing
are Tibetans living today within Tibet.
After the Chinese invasion of their country in 1959,
about one million Tibetans have been scattered across the globe.
The other five to six million Tibetans left in Tibet have had their monasteries destroyed,
Their monks and nuns killed, or jailed.
They are faced daily with efforts to destroy their culture.
To say the name of The Dalai Lama is to risk being arrested today.
The Dalai Lama of course is the head of Tibetan Buddhism
and was, until he let go of the title, the head of the Tibetan people.

I experienced directly this human destructive motive
to destroy a religion and/culture
when I visited Romania – the part of Romania that has our Unitarian churches.
This part of Romania is called Transylvania, and here, after World War I,
part of Hungary was given to Romania.
The Hungarians within Romania are our brothers and sisters in faith.
Under the Communist leader Ceaușescu
Transylvanians faced efforts by Ceaușescu to erase their culture.
This is similar to what happened to Native people here in our country.

In Transylvania, children were taken from the villages,
and placed in the cities to work.
After Ceaușescu was killed by a mob,
revolting against his cruel dictatorship in 1989,
the people in the villages still were traumatized by what they had experienced.
We found that trust was low.
And we could see that there were few young adults.
They had been taken away earlier in their lives by the Romanian government.

So, Hanukkah is a warning to all of us about the importance
of the right of freedom of religious choice
and of people being able to practice their own culture's customs,
and keeping their families in-tact.
What happened to the Jewish people over 2000 years ago
when Antiochus invaded Jerusalem and desecrated the Great Temple,
sadly, continues to be part of what we humans do to one another even today.

Heather Cox Richardson is a journalist whose writings I follow.
In her December 1st newsletter³ about the current threats to Roe vs. Wade,
she issued this warning for all of us. She wrote:

Make no mistake:

it is not just reproductive rights that are under siege.

*If the Supreme Court returns power to the states to legislate as they wish,
any right currently protected by the federal government is at risk.*

*Justice Sonya Sotomayor made the connection
to the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom today
when she was questioning a lawyer during the oral arguments:*

*"The issue of when life begins... it's still debated in religions.
So, when you say this is the only right that takes away a life,
that's a religious view, isn't it?"*

So, right here, right now our own right of religious freedom
is threatened.

I don't know about you, but I experience this current era we are living in
as the darkest time in my life.

This week's shooting of innocent children in Michigan by another child,
makes me wonder when and if we will as a country
wake up to the urgent need for safe gun control?

This week's news about a new mutation of the COVID virus, the Omicron,
as well as the rising number of people being infected
and dying by COVID staggers the heart.

Our own state has the highest number of COVID infections in the country.

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The climate crisis rolls on, whether we pay attention to it or not.
And our democracy is threatened in ways I can hardly believe,
especially with efforts to control who can vote.

I am sure there have been times in history just as dark or darker.
I think of the fall of the Great Temple in 69 AD
and the great suffering by the Jews.
who were then spread out in the diaspora.
I think of all the wars, plagues, famines and other great suffering.

And yet, in spite of such terrible darkness,
in the human heart and soul, there is a knowing of light.
Light of Advent, of waiting, of preparing for Christmas morning.
Light on the hillsides, praying for the Sun God to not desert them
but to return warmth and light to our earth again.
Light from eight Hanukkah candles,
reminding us all of the preciousness of our human choices –
Freedom to worship as we wish,
Freedom to be with whom we wish,
Freedom to speak our own truths.

It is a great blessing to be a Unitarian Universalist.
One reason out of many, is that we have our Principle
of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
And in such searching,
we include the different voices walking along with of us,
Some of whom may not agree with what we think on a certain issue,
such as how to worship during this holy season.
Even though we may not agree in terms of our theological beliefs,
we choose to walk with one another, and to listen to one another.
And through such a beloved community as ours,
a great light indeed shines out in the darkness.

Peace and love to you.
Happy Hanukkah for those who celebrate Hanukkah.