Festivals of Light

Rev. Dr. Jim Sherblom

December 2, 2018

In the coming weeks you will perhaps discover that I am something of a Mystery geek. I happily swim, as do we all, in the divine mystery that is life, often with the benefit of extra Light. I mean Light, with a capital "L", not meaning loser but divine Light, plays a big part in many mystical traditions. Just one example, the gospel of John has Jesus of Nazareth proclaim his identity as: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light!" Many spend December, the darkest month of the year, in festivals of Light!

When my family lived in Munich, West Germany, in the early 1980's, we enjoyed buying our presents at the annual Kris Kindle market. My daughter loved the December 6 visit by St. Nicholas. The children leave their shoes or boots out that evening for the spirit of Bishop Nicholas of Myra, Greece to leave them coins or chocolates to enjoy. The food, the lights, and the mood of the season were a high point of the entire year.

On my father's side I am descended from Swedish immigrants who celebrated Santa Lucia on December 13th, which was the winter solstice in Sweden, the shortest day of the year, under the old Julian calendar. Lucia means light, so on this day a young girl dressed entirely in white, with a crown of evergreen Lingonberries and a red sash, carries a circle of glowing candles on her head, restoring the light after darkness. When the Swedes became Christians, and adopted the Gregorian calendar, they moved their festival of light to a week before solstice, now again December 13th, and designated it in honor of a 4th century Christian martyr, coincidentally named St. Lucy (Lucia), so they could still celebrate it in Christian households. I love these festivals of Light.

Of course, those who followed the old religion continued to celebrate the winter solstice on December 21st with Yule logs and bonfires. This festival of light brings much that is merry and bright to the shortest day and the longest night. In some Yuletide traditions, each year, the dying year's manifestation of divine mystery dies December 22 to be reborn three days later on the morning of December 25th. Recurring themes of birth and death are abundant across the world's spiritual traditions.

As the Rev. Joan Javier-Duval reminds us this month: "Out of the depths unknown, the spark of life ignites and we are born. We enter a world, a universe, not of our making. Our lives unfold in mystery and wonder. Questions abound for which there are no definite answers, and so, we gather in community, to seek in one another assurance and recognition, compassion and strength. We gather in community to be reminded of what is most ultimate, and what is most sacred, in the spirit of searching and of reverence." This is the purpose of any community of faith, to help us find hope, comfort, and joy.

Tonight, is the first night of Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of light. It remembers the desecration of the holy temple in Jerusalem over two millennia ago, and uses that memory to sustain the light of the Jewish faith in the face of ongoing anti-Semitism and persecution. As the song we sang says, light one candle with thanks they did not die, another to honor the pain they endured, one candle for the sacrifices they made, and another that peace has been restored. Don't let the light go out, let it shine through the years, through both our love and our tears.

How do we engage this holiday season, with its various traditions, not as spiritual tourists but with authenticity? What does it mean for us to be spiritually authentic? And can we, especially if raised in

different traditions, celebrate together? Celebrating authentically, even when it means going beyond your tradition and mine, can be a goal of this emergent community. From where comes our comfort and joy? This can be particularly complicated in December, when Advent, Hanukkah, Yuletide, Winter Solstice, and Christmas follow one another with gay abandon, or overlap in exciting and mysterious ways. So, our American Christmas today combines an old Nordic winter's tale, the Celtic winter solstice, the Anglo-Saxon Yuletide, gospel stories, and a remembrance of Jesus' birth, all smashed together into a uniquely American holiday.

Yet there is a common theme running through all of these various celebrations: families and friends gathering together for a holiday. That is the centerpiece of this season. Think of a particularly happy holiday memory for you, who was there? Why was it special? How does your family uniquely celebrate this holiday season? How has it changed over the decades? Remember a time that you felt loved, affirmed by your friends and family's unique traditions, or the joy of coming together. This sense of peace and joy is what the winter holidays are really about, and everyone who can maintain friendly relationships can enjoy them.

I grew up the fifth of ten children in a poor Baptist minister's family. There was no extra money for Christmas, unless my father worked a second or third job to earn it, and even then, it didn't go far. Mother would give the younger children ten dollars each to buy presents for our nine siblings and two parents. Sometimes we would get creative, and make each other presents instead, or pool our resources to buy a gift for a few dollars. At twelve I got a paper route, so I splurged and spent a whole month of tips on buying presents for my whole family.

That was the spirit of the season. To this day, I still don't like receiving expensive or fancy presents. Occasionally a Christmas miracle would occur. At five, I desperately wanted a big metal fire truck, with real hoses and ladders, which my parents could not afford. The church's women's guild took up a special collection and Christmas morning the truck was under the tree. When I was ten there was no money for a turkey, so my mother decided to make do with a little chicken for all of us. On Christmas Eve the manager of the local grocery store stopped by, it seems he had over ordered turkeys that year, and had a 24-pound turkey he hoped we could find a way to use. That's the spirit of Xmas.

Yet my Christmas wasn't mostly about the birth of the Messiah, it was communal gatherings, pageantry, and presents. You know, the 17th Century founders of this congregation didn't even celebrate Christmas, neither with pageantry nor presents, because they thought of it as a pagan holiday. But thank goodness for the late 19th Century Christians who embraced all the opportunities of this season! This is how holidays are born and transformed over time. It was also so with Hanukkah. Several years ago, a member of my Brookline UU congregation, who happens to be the son of a famous rabbi, pointed me to a December 13, 2006 New York Times article, in which Jennifer Hecht told the story of how the American Hanukkah came to be celebrated as it is today.

She writes that "In the 19th Century, many Jews lived secular lives, practicing few of the laws of Moses (the Jewish dietary, ritual and prayer laws). Meanwhile, Christmas was becoming a consumer baccanal, with feasts, presents and solstice friendliness called "Christmas cheer". Throughout the world many progressive Jews saw no harm in joining in. Others worried… Rabbi Michael Silberstein wrote in 1871, 'A misuse has arisen in Jewish families, namely, the observance of the Christmas holy day as a day of Jewish sanctity.'"

"[Silberstein] and others wanted a separate winter party compelling enough to keep secular Jews from decorating a tree. The Jewish calendar had a ritual in December, Hanukkah, during which candles are lit for eight nights, using a lighting candle called the shamus. Silberstein and others decided that 'the festival of Hanukkah should be turned into a family celebration' with a big fuss in school and at home. The plan worked nicely. Today Jews can stake their identities over by the electric menorah and join the Christmas party, the big American winter festival, without feeling too displaced." Americans create our holidays, out of traditions both new and old, to meet a certain need in our lives.

Now American secular holiday traditions often seem to me somewhat sentimental and silly, as if we are afraid of the dark, with no recognition of life's pain and complexity. No mention of the strength we need to never become our own foe. No light shone upon the suffering of the world. No prayers lifted up so hostility and anger never tear us apart. No rituals performed to bring us together with peace in our heart. But this is the miracle of Light, which recognizes deep and painful darkness, and yet knows that our pain and suffering will ultimately yield to light. Don't let the light go out, let it shine through our suffering and tears.

When you gather, whenever you gather, with loved ones this holiday season, may it be in this holiday spirit. There is no healing without first realizing our brokenness. It is in the acknowledgement of our failures, our suffering, and our shortcomings, from which the brightest light of our being shines forth. We are spiritual beings of light and darkness, anxiety and equanimity, hope and fear, sadness and joy. When we gather together, let us bring our whole selves, so that we can help to heal each other, until our comfort and joy becomes truly genuine.

As my friend and colleague Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker writes, "Let there be a season when holiness is heard, and the splendor of living is revealed… There are inexplicable mysteries. We are not alone. In the universe there moves a Wild One whose gestures alter earth's axis toward love…" Let us join in the wild inexplicable Christmas mysteries, bringing our whole and broken selves into genuine fellowship, and experience the mystery of love, comfort and joy. May it always be so.

How will you spend the next three weeks? Will you spend it working too hard, or shopping too much, with no time for the friendly gatherings that hold so much of the peace and joy of this season; or will you spend it attending parties, celebrating with mirth and joy with family and dear friends? As a faith community we express our holiday cheer through song and meditation, through stories, and worship services. Come join in singing Christmas Carols this afternoon! As a congregation we seek to find a way for each person to be truly here, present to all of the joy and majesty of this special time of the year. You are unique. Yes, your presents are nice, but your presence with family and friends is what this holiday is most about. That sense of the Christmas mystery is a UU Christmas miracle. It is how the love, hope, joy, and light we seek comes again to dwell with us. May it ever be so for us and for our loved ones. Joy to the world. Amen and blessed be.