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Everywhere, There Is Light or, Let Go of the Cow!

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The holidays are about being left out.

OK, the holidays also about family and togetherness and warmth and God-with-us. The central scene of the Christmas story is the baby with mother and father at hand. Christmas & Chanukah & Kwanza & all the rest are about family and friends and connection and inclusion. But the holidays can also be a time when some of us feel especially alone or left out — perhaps because we're *supposed* to be reveling in the warmth of family and friends. What if we don't have that? What if we feel left out?

Even if we do have family, we can feel left out at holiday time for reasons as simple as geography. It's becoming less and less common for family members to all live in the same state, much less the same town. The family I grew up in is me, my brother, and my Mom and Dad. Mom and Dad are enjoying their retirement in the Twin Cities of Minnesota where my brother and I grew up. My brother, Tom, lives in San Diego. I lived the last four years in Boston, keeping the continent balanced I guess. Before that, I was in Syracuse, New York.

This means we spend a lot of holidays apart. We might have time with friends, or I'll spend Christmas with my wife's family. But when I give a call home and my folks tell me about getting together with my uncles and aunts and cousins there in Minnesota, I feel the distance. I feel like I'm missing out. This Christmas will be the first in years that I'll spend with my brother and parents.

This theme of being left out is in the Christmas story, too. There was no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn. When I think about that together with the idea of family, it really starts to stand out for me. Joseph with Mary on the verge of giving birth, knocking on doors, looking for a place to stay, and having those doors shut in their faces.

Two things occur to me here: One is that it's simply so hard to deal with a door being closed to us when we know there's life and warmth behind it.

Here's the other thing: They're wandering around Bethlehem looking for this place to stay. Bethlehem. Why are they in Bethlehem? They needed to go to the city of Joseph's family to be counted for the census. Bethlehem is his family's city. So — wait — they're in Joseph's home town and they can't find a place to stay? There's no uncle or aunt or great uncle or great aunt or cousin or cousin twice removed who has as much as a lousy couch to offer them? They're being left out by their own family! Ouch!

But we leave each other out all the time. We shut each other out. I'm thinking of the people left out in the cold by the current economic system. There's a big party going on in a big fancy house over there decorated with lights. We can hear the revelry. But only one percent of us are invited. I'm thinking of the people in this community who

are without secure housing. People who spend the evening in the library or go from one store to another in town, the stores that are open all night, trying to stay out of the cold. Mount Pleasant does not have a shelter for the homeless.

As I understand it, this has been an issue of long standing here. I'm glad that there is now the group called the Isabella County Restoration House that can organize efforts to address this terrible situation. Their long term goal is a permanent shelter of some kind. But they have been wise enough to recognize that in the mean time something needs to be done. Eight churches in our community have stepped forward to host 20 people for a week of evenings at their facilities. But they will need help to do that and so other congregations are stepping up to partner with these larger congregations. They'll need help presenting an evening meal, preparing it, presenting it, cleaning up after it. Help registering guests. Help hosting overnight. Help being good hosts. Several in this congregation have already said they will help. We Unitarian Universalists often say that our faith is about deeds, not creeds. Just after the service ends today, we'll talk briefly about getting involved in this. This is an exciting opportunity for you to get to know who you are as a congregation, an exciting opportunity to get to know our neighbors. We don't want to be left out of this effort!

We have all felt left out. I think it's pretty common to feel left out. I'm having a flashback to middle school. There's a group of kids laughing over there, having fun. If only I could be part of that! Or, think of what it's like simply to be new in town. Maybe this sort of thing happens in little or big ways all the time. Maybe even, sometimes, in this sanctuary or even in coffee hour.

I'd like to share with you a story my wife shared with me. It's from a collection of stories from around the world for the winter solstice. These stories are put together and retold by Carolyn McVickar Edwards, a writer who has a real gift for turning a phrase. What I'm going to start doing now is alternate between sharing this story and sharing what I think about the story. Please give credit to Ms. Edwards for all the beautiful expressions that follow — the rest is mine!

The story is called "The Sun Cow and the Thief." The story comes from a tribal community in eastern India that is known for its skill at woodcarving. In the story there's a village that's described as "like a hinged box with many sides." Outside of the box there is a "lonely man" looking in. There are cracks or gaps in the walls of the box-village, and through those gaps, what he sees is beautiful:

[. . .] he could see brightly colored crisscross lines everywhere. People walked to and fro along the lines, carving shapes and painting shimmering colors as they went. The man saw an order so neat and easy it seemed he should have been able to slide right in, the very blood in his body singing.

Gorgeous! It makes me think of this box we're in right now and the beautiful light that streams in on us through the stained glass windows. But what does this box look like from outside? For the man in the story, though it seemed like he should be able to get in, he cannot. The box-village has no doors. "He could only look, never touch. He would always be on the outside, looking in."

This image breaks my heart. Again, I think there are lots of us who can remember a time when we felt just the same way. On the lonely outside, looking in at color and shape and light.

There is one more character in the story: the Sun Cow. The Sun Cow walks around the box, "milking out her light in the day, filling the village box with color and warmth. At night, she chewed her cud, her black sides giving quiet warmth but no light."

We might wonder, what with the cracks in the walls of the box, what the villagers thought of the man out there with the Sun Cow. But

Whenever those inside the village looked out, they saw only their Sun Cow, that lovely black heat, that night-chewer, that day-maker. They smacked their lips with the cream of it. They did not say "Look at that nice man standing outside looking in! How silly that he stands alone at the edge when we could simply make a place for him in our carvings of shapes and colors. Come, sir, you are welcome."

They didn't say that. They didn't even see him.

Who, I wonder, is outside our beautiful box, wishing she might be invited in? Who haven't we been seeing? Who is invisible to us? And what boxes do *we* gaze in at, hoping for return recognition from within? I know more than some of you have felt invisible in one way or another. The feeling of being invisible can be demoralizing. And frustrating. One of our basic human needs is for acknowledgement. We human beings are social animals, and acknowledgement lets us know that we're not being left out -- lets us know we are human beings, too.

Wanting to be noticed, we can be tempted to do things that we wouldn't otherwise do, things we know we shouldn't do. In the story, the lonely man acts on his frustration and on his feeling that his being left out just isn't fair.

He steals the Sun Cow. It was evidently easy to do. He "simply tossed a noose over her head and pulled her away. Away over the edge of the world. Away from the box. Away from all the can't-get-in."

The man is hoping that he can leave the box and the people in it behind him — while he bathes in light. Surely he knows that he will leave the people in the box village in darkness. Maybe this is misery looking for company? For, sure enough,

The lights and colors in the village plunged to darkness. Without Sun Cow's milk there was only night. The people could not see. Babies cried, unfound and unfed by their mothers. No one knew when to wake up, when to work. All the order lay like unswept wood scraps in a dark room. The tidy lines were lumped and smudged, the colors disappeared. Where had their Sun Cow gone? What had become of her? They waited in sorrow and fear.

So the people are scared and in trouble, but one thing I notice here in the story is that the people still aren't acknowledging the man who took the Sun Cow. They still aren't acknowledging the thief. All they know is the theft. He is still left out. And now,

he has even more problems because the Sun Cow isn't giving light to him, either. He tries to milk her to get light — sets down a stool and a pail — but the Sun Cow kicks the pail away. The story says that the Sun Cow "was only trying to save his life, of course, for just think what would happen to a [] person who tried to milk the sun!"

But the thief doesn't know that the Sun Cow is concerned for his safety. The thief doesn't know the Sun Cow is thinking of him. No. The thief sits in the dark and bemoans his plight:

For ever so long he sat, hoping for her light again, longing for a sign that he might milk her.

The thief is experiencing real spiritual hunger. But he seems not to be acknowledging the harm he's done to the world of the box. He seems to be worrying only about himself and his own plight. But maybe he starts to think about others. Maybe he begins to consider that *someone* might as well have light, rather than *both* he and the box be in darkness, because, finally, he decides to let the Sun Cow go.

Here's how the story concludes:

Finally, he knew he could not keep her anymore. He leaned against her for good-bye, for a final giving-in to going back to the endless looking in and never having. Then he slipped the noose from its stake and from over her head and set the Sun Cow free.

But she did not return to her circling walk around the village. Instead she leapt up, high, joyously high, up over the moon. And now she walks not just around one village but in a vast sky circle around all the villages, around the circle of the whole world, so that no one now need simply look in without being part, without being seen. Everywhere there are doors, carved intersections, lines crisscrossing that can be walked in and about, shivering and shining with color. Everywhere there is light.

That's the end of the story, and this sermon has to come to an end, too, so what I'm doing here at the end of the story, like a good preacher, is looking for the moral. With the Christmas story, it's a little easier on this point. What does Jesus, the rejected one, do? Well, he does receive gifts from magi and visits from shepherds. But when he grows up, Jesus is all about the Big Welcome. What does Jesus do? Jesus seeks out the left out.

What about our thief and the Sun Cow? What's the moral of that story? There are certainly other ways to read it, but I'm going to read it this way: The moral is: Let go of the cow!

What would that mean? Don't hang on to the prize? Wait. Let me try this:

If we want to be connected, we have to let go. Feeling left out, the thief plunged others and himself into darkness. Trying to steal some light only for himself, claim some light only for himself, he remains in the dark. What changed in the thief? How did he change his mind? The story says that he resigned himself to "endless looking in and never having." But what he also must have thought is *let the box have the light*. In other words, he's *been* thinking of his own situation. But then he starts to think about others he has hurt in an attempt to get what he wants. He starts to think about others.

Holding onto a source of light just for oneself makes darkness for us all. *Let go of the cow* and you yourself are a source of light.

And if we're living in a land of light and color, let's try, when we look out, to see more than the Sun Cow. Let go of the cow! Letting go is letting in. There lonely people out there, just outside the door, feeling left out, waiting -- hoping for an invitation to come in. There are other sources of light than that cow. Let go of the cow!

The holidays are about being left out. And the holidays are about letting go and letting in. We can make a place for you in our carvings of shapes and colors. Everyone can be a source of light. Look! There are doors everywhere. Fling them open! Everywhere, there is light. Come on in. May we be one. May it be so.

All quotations are from: "The Sun Cow and the Thief" from *The Return of the Light: Twelve Tales from around the World for the Winter Solstice*. Ed. Carolyn McVickar Edwards. New York, NY: Marlowe, 2000. 57-61.

Closing Words

Let your light shine in the darkness
that there may be hope.
Let there be the light of courage where there is fear,
The light of peace in the midst of harried holidays,
The light of grace
that lets us accept help from a friend
Let go of the cow!
Everywhere, there is light!
May it be so. Amen.