

## Holiday Homily

My first “Christmas” Sunday in a Unitarian Universalist Church 35 years ago was a real eye-opener. Having recently come out of a strong Christian tradition, I knew nothing more about this time of the year called Christmas than that it was the celebration of Jesus’s birth. There, on that Sunday, I learned that this time of celebration dated far before Jesus’s birth and was celebrated by other than Christians. Thousands of years ago, the solstice was celebrated with decorating and singing and gift-giving. And the Jewish tradition of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, also occurred at this time and with many of the same activities.

What a wonderful revelation. I was free. Even though I no longer considered myself a Christian, I could continue to celebrate this time of year. I could still decorate my home, send holiday greetings, and give gifts to my friends and family.

But...this wonderful revelation also opened up some hard questions. What do I do with my lovely ceramic nativity scene? And my Advent candles holder that was a gift from a very special friend? And what about the Christmas carols I so very much liked to sing? And Handel’s *Messiah*? Did this mean I could no longer listen to my favorite Christmas album?

I was uncomfortable. If I set out my nativity, lit my Advent candles, sang the Christmas carols, and listened to the *Messiah*, I felt horribly hypocritical and guilty. How could I do all those things and yet no longer believe in the divine Baby Jesus that was born on Christmas Day? And yet, I knew I couldn’t just throw all of this away. It would leave too big a hole.

I think my dilemma was similar to that which many of you may have faced, maybe are facing, or may face some day. So, I’d like to briefly share with you how I’ve given myself permission to celebrate this season of the year, blending in all the traditions, so that I no longer feel hypocritical nor have I left myself with a big hole in my life.

I do my blending in this way. I consider all the traditions, the solstice, Christmas, and Hanukkah, to be a symbolic statement of light over darkness, good over evil, and hope over despair.

The ancient solstice traditions of decorating, singing and gift-giving celebrated the yearly return of light to the earth, when the days started getting longer again, part of the natural cycle of life, and that is easy to celebrate. We are all ready for winter to turn toward spring.

Although I don’t believe in the literal story of Jesus’s birth and life and miracles, I do believe in its message, a message of hope, of peace on earth, good will to all people. I do believe that a man named Jesus had a great impact on the world’s history. And, in believing in his humanness, I can believe in the potential inherent in each of us to have an impact on others and on the world in which we live. Therefore, I can celebrate Christmas with my nativity and carols and *Messiah*.

Although I am not Jewish, I can also celebrate Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, for I believe in its message of hope. A people desecrated, a people defeated, came back and reclaimed their heritage and their tradition, and this victory was symbolized by the miracle of the lights. I find it valuable to me to celebrate Hanukkah, to celebrate hope, so very much needed in these times.

How do I combine these? I have both Advent candles and a menorah on my fireplace hearth, and I light and celebrate each. I sing Christmas carols and Hanukkah songs at the same sitting. I listen to albums of the *Messiah* and Israeli folk tunes and Peter, Paul, and Mary campfire songs as I decorate my house with ornaments given to me by friends and/or my grandkids, ranging from Baby Jesus to Mexican tin lamps to baseball players. And I have an angel chime for lighting on Christmas Eve.

In these ways I acknowledge that this season is an important season. It's a time when the whole world seems to take pause for a while to remember, to think about the good and the light and the hope, and to have the human contact we so often don't take the time to nurture nor enjoy nor celebrate. It's been so important to me to give myself permission to celebrate what which is meaningful to me from all the traditions, because they all speak of life, light, love and hope. Some years it's easier, some years harder, depending upon where I am in my life's journey. But when I pause to remember that each is a symbolic statement of light over darkness, good over evil, and hope over despair, and that others share that hope with me, my journey seems a bit easier. May it be so for each of you.

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December 22, 2019