

When Your Cup Is Empty * December 8, 2013
© Rev. Erika Hewitt * Midcoast Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

“Christmas is a holiday that persecutes the lonely, the frayed, and the rejected.”
~ sportswriter Jimmy Cannon

Reading from TheOnion.com¹

DELMAR, NY— In an effort to ensure a smooth and enjoyable dinner with their relatives, siblings Jason, Alyssa, and Leslie Conroy reportedly sat down together Tuesday evening for a PowerPoint presentation covering all of the conversation topics that will be off-limits during the family’s [holiday] gathering.

“As you can see here, we’re unsure whether or not cousin Jessica is actually college-bound, so we’re going to avoid that subject and stick to the key talking points listed in this table,” said Alyssa Conroy, 26, during the siblings’ 48-slide presentation, which reportedly featured pie charts breaking down the... voting histories of extended family members, as well as Venn diagrams illustrating what each relative knows about their father’s upcoming surgery.

“While we’d like to stay away from this topic if possible, this timeline does lay out Sarah’s various employers and subsequent job search over the last several years, and the chart to the right summarizes Uncle Jack and Aunt Peg’s opposing viewpoints on the matter. Now, if you would open your handouts to page 14, Jason’s going to give us the outline of Dad and Uncle Jack’s ongoing argument about renting a house together in Cape Cod this summer.”

The presentation... concluded with a reminder not to ask Uncle Tim’s girlfriend anything, a slide that has been carried over from the last seven straight PowerPoints.

Sermon: “When Your Cup Is Empty”

There’s so much to love about this time of the year... and so much to armor ourselves against. Some of us love the Christmas season. Some of us here were (ahem) bringing out Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving, and shortly thereafter tuned our car radios to the “all-holiday-music-all-the-time” station so that we can sing along, out loud, with Elvis or Bing or even (God help us) Mariah. Some of us have trumped the earliest sunsets of the year with our own twinkling lights and bedecked homes.

And others of us wish we could fast-forward through this time. There’s much to be dreaded at the holidays, which can feel like a time of displacement, exile, and loneliness.

¹ <http://www.theonion.com/articles/siblings-gather-around-powerpoint-to-hash-out-offl,34628/>

Loneliness, as distinct from solitude or aloneness, and despite the fact that the prolonged holiday season draws people together.

There's no shortage of times and circumstances that tax our reserves, but Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's amplify our inner emotional frequency: the holidays are a magnet for memory; a temporal yardstick, against which the previous years telescope into each other. Inevitably, I find, Thanksgiving or Christmas conjures up memories of holidays past -- with all of their ghosts and with all of their joys -- and unconsciously, we often end up judging the present against the backdrop of our past.

When Richard and his mom and I sat down at our Thanksgiving meal -- just the three of us -- we paused to each name what we were thankful for. Out of gratitude and relief, I began to weep the tears I'd held back all day: I was grateful for this, this "now," this life. Without realizing it, all of *this* year's Thanksgiving preparations pulled me back to *last* year's Thanksgiving -- a week that, for reasons best left unexamined here, was the absolute pits. No matter that this Turkey Day found me at peace, not wanting for a single thing -- still, the Ghosts of Thanksgiving 2012 came to visit.

This is how human hearts and memory conspire. You know that, many of you do -- especially those of you who have lost a loved one and have been forced to reckon with that person's empty chair at Christmas Present, projecting her or his absence into all Christmases Future.

When life is sweet and family love is strong, the holidays magnify that goodness into a magical experience. But for those who already struggle with loss or depression, or with fragility of family or finances, the holidays require even greater reserves of strength to struggle through. As the sportswriter Jimmy Cannon put it, "Christmas is a holiday that persecutes the lonely, the frayed and the rejected."

How, then, shall we approach the next month?

Regardless of the ratio of merriment and pain weaving their way through your life, I offer you these three guideposts for the journey ahead of you:

★ First, we Unitarian Universalists believe in our own agency. From how we form community -- that's called *ecclesiology* -- to how we repair the world, our religious lineage has always trusted human beings far more than a supernatural, Santa-like God. I think we forget this at times -- suddenly forget our own generative and creative power -- when we feel buffeted or harassed by cultural forces like consumerism, entrenched traditions, and societal expectations.

Take family. If the holidays are in fact about family -- and indeed, you get to decide whether that's true -- be willing to step back and rearrange your notion of who "family"

is. There are the families we're born into, the families we might have spent our first couple of dozen Christmases with... and then there are the families we construct around us, our chosen kin. We get to be as creative as we want to in gathering them around us.

I do understand the importance of showing up for others, even it feels privately sacrificial. What I'm suggesting is that we monitor how and where and when this holiday time depletes us, and for each of those times, create space to lean into something that you find nourishing.

"There is no ideal Christmas," writes Bill McKibben, "Only the Christmas you decide to make as a reflection of your values, desires, affections, traditions."² If a requisite holiday activity takes a toll on you, you have the right to build yourself back up with something that feels comforting, meaningful, or balancing. As with most things in life, I believe, we're meant not to endure the holiday season with gritted teeth, but to savor what pleasure we can find, and to thrive.

★ The second guidepost -- a lamp that you might allow to light the path, if your path grows dark in these winter days -- is to practice the depth of your own kindness and generosity. Bluntly put, I want you to be vigilantes of compassion: on the lookout for opportunities where, unnoticed, you can be a cushion between someone else and the hard edges of the holidays. Rephrase this guidepost, if you like, in the words of that once-popular bumper sticker: *Practice Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty*.

You don't need me to list all the ways that this is possible, but listen to the twist I'm putting on it: practice stealth compassion. Take kindness into your own hands without needing credit or thanks. Reach out to someone who's frayed or afraid.

Practice giving without needing to receive. Be spies for God. Make yourself a badge and call yourself a Special Agent for That Which Is Greater Than Us, as if you personally, and by proxy, could earn wings for all of the angels waiting in line.

There are innumerable ways to name the forces that compel us to help others, all of them overlapping and none of them more important than the rest, and so this charge is a means to an end -- kindness is always a good thing -- as well as a *means in and of itself*: choose to practice quiet compassion as a choice not to go numb to the sadness and need in the world. Choose not to harden your gaze and narrow your hearts, as an expression of faith; a way of being, or more accurately, of *becoming*.

Our larger culture is interrupted at times by a siren song of meanness, of pettiness, of a message that "there's not enough, so hang onto what's yours." From my perch, loving kindness is visible and alive in the world, and I won't be seduced into thinking that all is lost and the world's in a fast-moving handbasket. Take it upon yourself to be a source of

² In *Hundred Dollar Holiday*, p. 73.

beauty and healing for others as proof that our hands are the ones that bring repair and redemption into the world.

★ The third guidepost I hereby stake, for the sake of all our wellbeing, is a naming of the loneliness that exists apart from social or intimate loneliness -- any longing for the companionship of another person, or people. I call this haunting, ineffable force “cosmic loneliness.”

As a minister, I believe cosmic loneliness dwells at the level of the soul, which is why I also like the term “loneliness of spirit.” Many people of faith, inspired by French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, call it the “God-shaped hole.” It’s a longing that extends both outward and inward, as we search for answers to the universe’s oldest questions and as we stumble along the path of “becoming more at home in [our] own skin.”³

If you’re acquainted with cosmic loneliness, you know how its hunger chases you: the longing for something, we don’t know what, that can’t be papered over even by human intimacy. When pushed to our extremes, which is to say desperation, most of us try, at some point or another, to fill this emptiness with shopping or drama, or fanatic busyness, or the numbing relief of alcohol and drugs -- any of which are about as effective at filling the “God-shaped hole” as the punchline in that old joke: “Why should you hit yourself in the head with a ballpeen hammer?... Because it feels so good when you stop.”

When it comes to loneliness of spirit, what little respite there is to be found comes from a gentle commitment to be gentle with ourselves, and a willingness to ask for guidance.

Being gentle with yourself means exactly that: treat yourself as though you would a beloved child, without judging or dismissing whatever it is that you need to feel whole. Drink deeply at the well, rather than go thirsty. Sometimes that means cozying up on the couch to breathe instead of having a clean kitchen; at other times, it means prioritizing your own sense of balance over your day’s checklist. (This week, one of my colleagues posted the following on Facebook: “I set myself one goal for the day, and at 11:35 p.m., I just finished it.” There are days when I can’t match that record.)

We can also abate our loneliness of spirit by affirming, through any means possible, that we’re not all alone in carrying the world forward; there is -- I’m confident -- an Inner Knower that provides us with calm guidance if we ask for it inwardly, and listen for a reply.⁴

“There is a whole other language involved in listening inwardly,” says Yoga guru Erich

³ The words of Parker Palmer.

⁴ Paraphrasing Erich Schiffmann, in *Moving into Stillness*, p. 335+

Schiffmann. He continues:

More than anything else, listen to the way it feels -- that is, listen to the way you feel...

You may, for example, have three or four things to do today. List them in your mind and mentally say, "What would You have me do? Which one of these four things should I do first?" Then relax, listen and feel. Listen for a feeling, an insight or idea, or some sort of impulse to action. One of them will light up somehow as being the most appropriate one to do first. Do that one. Then ask, "Which one now?" And do the one that lights up. The answer will not always come in words. It might be a voice. It might never be a voice. It will probably come in the form of a sudden intuitive knowing without the use of any rational thought process.

What does your deepest being, the deepest part of you, want to do? Desire and silent listening are the keys. Make the practice one of listening, listening, listening.

When cosmic loneliness butts its head against us, and it feels like there's an emptiness on the other side, trust your deepest being; your Inner Guide. Ask for its help to lead you forward, trusting that its only wish is your own wholeness. It's not selfish or corny to move towards wholeness -- it's the only way we can thrive.



At the end of our days, if there's any celestial exit interview in which we're shown our life and asked to account for it, I'm certain of this: the Great Mysterious Holy One will not ask us to turn in a sum of our tasks and checklists. Instead, we will be asked:

What beauty was placed before you that you did not enjoy?

In what way did you neglect to treat yourself with the lovingkindness for which you were made?

In this world of suffering and beauty, let us enjoy the gifts of life that have been freely given to us.

In this time of year when our carefully-crafted schedules might to spin apart, and where joy and anxiety intertwine, let us care for ourselves so that we may care for others.

In this season of compassion, let us be more compassionate with all people, beginning with ourselves, and make of these holidays a meaningful cradle for our being.

May it be so.