

**Sunday, Dec. 17, 2017**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kamloops**  
***Religion, Christmas, and the Unitarian Universalist Grinch***  
**Rev. Helen McFadyen**

Hmm mmm hmm hmm. (humming the melody of Silent Night)

“Christ our Saviour is born.”

Often when I sing Silent Night, I am moved to tears. I sing this carol out of tradition, even though its theology describing Jesus as the saviour of a fallen humanity, is foreign to my beliefs, and to what Unitarians believe.

I have not celebrated Christmas in the traditional ways of my childhood for a long time. This time of year, a melancholy usually comes upon me. It is tinged with personal memories and emotions—a mixed bag of happy recollections, unfulfilled expectations, and a few losses and regrets.

As I child I hoped, dreamed that my family’s Christmas would one day be ordered, sweet, and calm like the Cleavers, the Andersons, and other TV families of the 1950’s and 60’s. In fact, they were a jumble of good, bad, and ugly frenzy, French Canadian style.

The holidays can bring stress, high emotion, and relational chaos as individuals come together, valiantly trying, often failing to mimic the unrealistic portrayals blasted at us in advertising, media, and popular culture.

Real people and the holidays are never perfect; wine gets spilled, recipes fail, flights are delayed, someone gets sloppy drunk, stuff breaks, the dog gets sick, the kids cry in exhaustion...and so on.

At this point in my life, my parents, aunties, uncles, elders are all gone. My generation is shrinking every year and my small clan is dispersed across the continent. Christmas of yesteryear is no more. I am ok with that. Now, I choose this time of year for reflection, renewal, centering. A week of simplicity and retreat. I need it.

Exposed to the great festive hubbub around me, I am particularly sensitive to some of the disturbing messages at this holiday time. I find it a dissonant experience.

The ideal messages of peace, love, family, giving and joy get blurred by the world’s disorder and excess, commercialism, and prevailing rhetoric of political and social certitude.

“I’m right, you’re wrong. Shut up!” As a cohort, humanity seems to have lost its capacity for discourse... there is blatant intolerance... for gender identity and sexual orientation; undeniable oppression arising from white supremacist and colonialist cultures, the banning of religious symbols, denying rights and freedoms to people because of who they are, where they are born, or what religion they practice.

This is not a new story, folks. Early Unitarians were condemned, persecuted, sometimes executed for their heretical beliefs. “Heresy” in Greek means “choice.”

During the first three centuries of the Christian church, there were a variety of tenets about Jesus, including Unitarianism, belief in the unity of god or god is one, and universalism, that all will be saved, and there is no hell. Christianity lost its element of choice in 325 CE when the Nicene Creed established the Trinity as dogma. For centuries thereafter, people who professed Unitarian or Universalist beliefs were persecuted.

In the sixteenth century the Protestant Reformation took hold in Transylvania in eastern Europe. The first edict of religious toleration in history was declared in 1568 during the reign of the first and only Unitarian king, John Sigismund. This proclamation was the first of its kind in history; naming the right for individuals to believe and worship according to their own understanding; for clergy to preach and teach the Gospel as they too, understood it. It remains the cornerstone of today’s Unitarian Universalist principles of religious freedom, and of freedom of the pulpit.

We speak up. Sometimes from the heart, sometimes out of principle, and sometimes for other reasons.

That brings me to a story about an incident that happened last week.

I began when I got on the bus one morning, and discovered the interior decked out for Christmas... lights, decals, ribbon, merry Christmas messages on the windows. **Nothing about any other holiday. Not an art installation. This was cheap, disposable, made in Taiwan dollar store junk.** ...truthfully, my initial reaction was – this is embarrassingly tacky and ugly, it must be a joke. Surely we were being punked. Alas, not.

I wrote a snippy commentary expressing how this was inappropriate use of public space reflecting one single religious holiday (Christmas) over the multitude that exist for Muslims, Jews, atheists, pagans, humanists and so on. All true. There was an understated concern: My aesthetic sense had been offended...but deep down I felt it too petty, trite and classist to admit.

The story was picked up by local cbc radio host and newspaper editor. I did a radio interview over a poor cell phone connection. Media being what it is, wanted to inflate this... to say I was outraged, anti-Christmas, I was a Grinch minister and so on. Not so. I may be a cultural snob, and I may prefer a quiet winter retreat to a big Christmas dinner, but I am definitely not anti Christmas. As a pluralist and Unitarian Universalist I am naturally drawn to explore and learn from the diversity of holidays and observances – at least 27 from November to January across the world’s religions—including Hanukkah, solstice, kwanza, yule, Bodhi Day, and secular observances too.

The editor of Kamloops this week pointed out to me that the majority of Canadians identify as Christian, therefore, when in Rome, why expect anything but images that represent the majority.... Good point.

I responded: Transit is a public service funded by tax dollars, and which claims to embrace the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedom for employees and passengers (including freedom of religious expression). That said, the Charter is clearer about "freedom of" than "freedom from" religious expression.

Some years ago, a BC Humanist group were denied their bid to buy advertising that carried a message suggesting that God may not exist...it was inflammatory.

With the controversy in Quebec about quashing display of religious symbols in public space, do we really want to completely and intentionally ignore the religious diversity of BC Transit patrons? Can't we be more discerning (not to mention, tasteful).

Choosing to publicly lift up one religious holiday rather than none or many (despite mass secularisation of Christmas) is an unfortunate choice and missed opportunity --BC Transit's organizational philosophy claims to want to embrace diversity etc.

After the radio interview, a senior staff person at Thompson Rivers University– wrote to me – *Your call for Kamloops to rethink and widen its inclusion of other holidays represented on City Transit was measured, thoughtful and kind in tone.*

*[name of radio interviewer] description of you as "outraged" was an irresponsible misrepresentation of your point of view.*

*The talk back question posed "should we take the decorations down or is the Minister a Grinch " was also highly irresponsible, and a gross mischaracterization of what you were trying to express.*

*I wanted to let you know, firstly as a human, and secondly as a secular humanist, that I completely appreciate that asking others to think about anothers' right to feel welcome to exist in our community as something other than a mainstream participant is very difficult to do and it is no threat to anyone to ask to be included.*

*I wish you strength as you deal with the fallout of this.*

She was right about the fallout. Comments and opinions quickly appeared on social media. Some were thoughtful and made me think about new perspectives on Christmas and expression of beliefs.

I was also accused of being anti Christmas, and of speaking for minorities of other faiths/cultures who don't need a privileged \*\*\*\*\* to speak for them. Others just went off on tangents.

A sampling of comments:

**Cal:** *from Vancouver, I am OUTRAGED that BC Transit would support this obvious display of white supremacy in our diverse community of British Columbia. Our cis-heteronormative, colonial, patriarchal, anti-woman, anti-LGBT, anti-brown and blackness tributes to "Santa Claus" and other images of white supremacy MUST end.*

**Nancy** a local politician, said: -- *it's reassuring that the quirkiness which living in a small place brings is still alive.*

**Me in response:** *I find it hard to appreciate the "quirkiness" of small town life which often is a screen for narrow views and an excuse for discriminatory behaviours and practices. Our small town culture seems susceptible to memes of quaintness which have a micro aggressive impact, albeit unintentional and unconscious...until someone points it out.*

**Kevin:** *I heard that this bus is decorated by volunteer workers each year. I would say a person wishing to have it all removed would be on shaky ground, because it pits respect for some vs. respect for others. I've never seen anything in my life that suggested it is possible to cleave faith from culture. While it is morally valuable to act in a manner which respects others and value, accommodate, welcome and include diverse cultural behaviours, it is extremely difficult to regulate. If these cultural expressions actually do cause harm, then it is another discussion entirely, but as for the Hanukkah bus and the Yule bus, BRING 'EM ON!*

**Violet** in Vancouver called me "another social justice warrior lemming out to ruin everyone's Christmas." She added, "Political correctness is making people stupid and this is a prime example."

Many people expressed they wanted to see more diverse expression of the Holidays, but the strongest responses were from non-religionists...people who see ALL forms of religion as undesirable and evil.

**AI--** *Keep the proselytization of barbaric bronze age ideologies off our publicly funded resources. You can have all the crosses and manglers you want at your church, they don't belong on public transportation.*

The comments and cross talk turned silly, then vitriolic and hateful, so I hit delete and shut it down. I simply will not provide a vehicle for hate speech and bullying. My intention all along was to get people to think more broadly about our community, the people in it, and the range of religious and cultural celebrations and practices.

One comment moved me in a new direction:—

Kevin said: *Most folks don't know anymore about the origins, meaning or traditions associated with the components of Christmas that they maintain.*

He is so right.

So, I went back to the history...to the roots of Christmas and its components. You know what? Anyone who sees a religious holiday threatened by the words “Happy Holidays” doesn’t realize that there has already been a war for the soul of Christmas, and it was the liberal religious community—specifically the Unitarians—who won it.

We would be the last people to fight a Christmas War, you’d think. For most of us, “Merry Christmas” is OK, and so is “Happy Holidays” or “Happy Solstice.”

But, once upon a time Unitarians believed the fight for the soul of Christmas was a battle worth fighting.

It was Unitarians who wove together Santa Claus, Christmas trees, gift giving around the tree, a focus on charity, and peace and goodwill toward all to create the Christmas which the majority of Americans and Canadians celebrate today.

And while the story of the baby Jesus was not left out, what was central to this holiday was not the coming of God in a human form for the atonement of human sins, as it was for conservative Christians and reflected in Silent Night, but Unitarian values and theology.

I draw now from part of a presentation made by Rev. Julie Stoneberg at a Unitarian gathering in Eastern Canada in 2011.

From time immemorial, year’s end has been marked by celebrations. In agrarian cultures, it meant that people could finally relax: crops were harvested, the days short, and food and wine stocked in the cellars.

Celtic peoples commemorated winter solstice with rituals and revelry. Worshipers of Mithras in ancient Rome held a big festival at this time of year to ensure the conquest of winter and darkness.

We know that Jesus’ birth began to be celebrated on December 25 in the 4th century, as a Christian counterpart to these pagan festivals. Scriptural analysis suggests Jesus was actually been born in the fall. (There are no flocks/shepherds in the fields in winter, nor did the Roman census take place in Dec.)

In his book *The Battle for Christmas*, historian Stephen Nissenbaum writes that from the beginning, the church had a very tenuous hold on Christmas. Even on this continent, annual celebrations at the end of December were carnivals of partying, drunkenness, and debauchery.

When Roman rulers were trying to convince their people to be Christian and not pagan, they announced Christ’s birthday would be celebrated in December, the time when Romans celebrated Saturn with a week of wild partying.

Later, as Christianity moved north, the celebration of Christ’s birthday got mixed up with other winter celebrations like the Celtic Yule. These holidays also had an emphasis on a party. The famous Welsh carol “Deck the Hall,” is an example of the enduring celebration of Yule traditions.

The Puritans in America understood the pagan roots of Christmas. They noted that the Bible never mentioned celebrating Christ's birthday and insisted that everyone should simply ignore it.

In 1621, when some of the American colonies' newer residents tried to take Christmas day off, the governor ordered them back to work. Thirty years later it was legislated that, celebrating Christmas was illegal in New England. Went for nearly 150 years.

In the mid 18th century, Christmas was found only on Almanac calendars, and hymnals did not contain Christmas songs. It wasn't until around 1800 that church services began to be held on December 25th.

The earliest churches to do so were Universalist churches, and the Unitarians were close behind. Nissenbaum states that they did so not because it was biblically sanctioned, but because they themselves wished to!

They hoped that their celebrations would help to purge the holiday of its excess and disorder. However, this religious effort failed to transform Christmas from a season of misrule into an occasion of quieter pleasure.

Christmas, the Unitarians believed, could be a holiday to promote their values of generosity and charity and social good, and would be a wonderful way to build these values, particularly in children. Many Unitarians felt that celebrating Christmas, had the potential to help to raise generous children with good characters.

I've been getting a lot of strong hints from my nephew about how he likes amazon gift cards, and have I sent him a Christmas card yet? This unchurched boy would not know the nativity story if he fell over a manger scene. In frustration, I thought of how to get him to appreciate values of generosity. I wish I could watch him open the card Feed the Children charity announcing that this Christmas I bought a goat for an African family in his name!

It was Santa Claus, not Jesus, who would come to transform Christmas. According to Nissenbaum, it was Clement Moore's poem "*A Visit from St. Nicolas*" in 1823 that succeeded in creating a new kind of Christmas.

Clement Moore, a Unitarian, invented the Santa Claus we all know today. Before that, there was no unified tradition of a Christmas visitor bringing gifts to all.

"He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf," wrote Moore, "And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself! A wink of his eye and a twist of his head, soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread."

With a single poem, he transformed St. Nicholas, a bishop known for acts of charity, into the myth of Santa Claus...and transformed him into a Unitarian.

Santa Claus now believed in the worth and dignity of every child, and that all deserved some kindness and pleasure. He reminds us of our responsibility to be kind and generous to one another.

The Unitarians also brought us the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree had become a symbol of the holiday in Germany in the 1700s. One Christmas, Charles Follen, a German immigrant, a Unitarian and professor at Harvard, invited several colleagues to his home where he had put up a tree lit with candles and covered with ornaments as he remembered from his childhood.

Two of his Unitarian guests wrote about the experience and in a short time, middle-class Americans were celebrating Christmas by putting up Christmas trees. Several prominent Unitarians, saw the introduction of the Christmas tree as possible antidote to selfishness and greedy consumerism.

Like Santa Claus, the Christmas tree was an ‘invented tradition’. It is useful, writes Nissenbaum, to think of traditions not as static entities but as dynamic forces that are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated; all have at some time been invented to forge meaning or to serve a social/cultural purpose.

Unitarians also brought us family gift giving, especially the tradition of children giving to parents. Again the tradition came from Germany.

Samuel Coleridge, the Unitarian poet, traveled to Germany one winter, and there he saw a ritual around a fir tree, where not only did the children receive gifts from their parents, but they also gave their parents gifts. Coleridge loved how this tradition taught children about generosity and unselfishness, and his story about it was published in *The Christian Register*, the official Unitarian magazine of the time.

This was one of the great answers to the Unitarian question—how do we teach generosity? This gift exchange among parents and children became part of the Christmas tradition, not only in Unitarian homes, but also in homes across North America.

Unitarians also brought us Christmas charity. They believed our responsibility as a religious people was to follow the teachings of Jesus and an important part of those teachings was care for the poor. The publication of *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, a British Unitarian, brought charity to the forefront of Christmas. *A Christmas Carol* is steeped in the Unitarian theology of the spirit of Jesus and that how we treat each other matters deeply.

Earlier in the service we sang, *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*. The words of this carol were written in 1849 by Unitarian minister, Edmund Hamilton Sears. This song focuses not on Bethlehem, but on his own time, and the contemporary issue of war and peace. It’s his response to the just ended Mexican–American War.

The Christmas traditions brought to us by our Unitarian ancestors remind us to be generous and kind to the people we know and the people we don’t.

They wanted to raise it up so people are made better by Christmas, not consumed by it or lost in it. Let us walk in their light through these dark days of winter, through the many holidays that our neighbours celebrate.

May it be so, and amen.