

MARCHING TO A DIFFERENT LITTLE DRUMMER BOY

by Kit Ketcham, Dec.14, 2003

I don't know how long it's been since you sang this song, but join me in one of my favorite Christmas carols of all time.

"All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth, my two front teeth,
I want my two front teeth!

All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth, so I can wish you
Merry Chrishmash!"

What were the holidays like for you the year you were missing your two front teeth? How old were you? About six or seven? What was life like then?

That was the season I got an electric train--my heart's desire. My mother, who worried a bit about my tomboy tendencies, also supplied a doll--a boy doll, to be sure (though not anatomically correct, as I recall), but a doll nonetheless. Which I named Peter, after my cousin, and promptly stowed in the closet while I played constantly with the train.

That was the best Christmas I can ever remember. We moved the next year, from Portland to Eastern Oregon, far from our cousins and friends, and Christmas was no longer an extended family gathering.

As I grew up, started earning a little money and could buy presents for people, I began to notice that not everyone approached gift-giving the same way.

Some liked to take lots of time to think about the gift and figure out how to make money or ingenuity stretch far enough to provide a present that would satisfy the recipient AND the giver. Others dashed into a store, picked up whatever was on sale and not too awful a color, wrapped it and stuck it under the tree. Some presents were homemade, some were expensive, some seemed to be what the giver thought the receiver OUGHT to have.

Our family was pretty strapped in those days. My dad had only his income from the church, whereas when we had lived in Portland, he had served on the auxiliary Portland Police force as well.

Our parishioners often gave us food--venison, fish, Canada goose, duck, pheasant. Nowadays fancy restaurants serve these meats; in those days, we were grateful to get this charitable subsidy to supplement our garden and Dad's salary.

My cousins, on the other hand, had parents who were much more affluent. They got many presents for Christmas; we three kids got one or two presents each. It was pretty hard not to notice, when we came back to Portland to celebrate one year, that the cousins' piles were lots higher than ours. Our gifts were what our parents could afford and we understood that. But children still compare themselves to others and we felt a little bit underprivileged in comparison to our richer relatives.

As I grew older, I found myself striving to give the best possible presents to my loved ones. I often went deeply in debt at Christmas,

struggling to provide for my parents and siblings what we could not afford when I was a child.

Later, as a parent and spouse, I smothered my son and my husband with many, many gifts. In my heart I secretly hoped that they would do the same for me. But my good example never seemed to sink in.

They usually gave me one present, from the two of them, something for the house, or--one year--a gift described by my husband as “soft, warm, fragrant, a beautiful blue-gray color”, which turned out to be a small .38 Colt pistol in a real sheepskin holster. He explained it as something he thought I needed when I went to downtown Denver to attend my grad school classes. I stowed it in the closet and ran up the Master Card bill, since I had nothing else to play with. (You’ll notice I’m not still married to him, but we are friends and are able to laugh about this story now.)

I admit all this to you with a certain embarrassment. I suspect I’m not alone in my hunger for the appreciation and love shown by others’ generosity to me. I used to struggle with it every year, as this season approaches. I am now able to resist the temptation to shower others with many gifts in order to win their appreciation and I try to find ways of being generous without breaking the bank--or Master Card!

But every year I wonder: what does Christmas mean? How did it happen that we shifted from Mystery to Materialism?

As I examine my own desires during the holiday season, I’m inclined to believe that the songs, the tinsel and red ribbons, the lights, the rich food, the emphasis on buying the perfect expensive present for that loved one, can be ways we distract ourselves from our own deep feelings of separation from others.

As a child comparing my one gift with my cousins’ stacks of gifts, I felt separated from a society that could afford lavish presents. As a young adult, I tried to protect others from that feeling of separation but felt it myself when they did not reciprocate as I hoped they would.

As a parent and spouse, I felt a strong need to give in an effort to belong, to be known, to be loved. A materialistic society had trained me to express my love with expensive gifts and had trapped me into thinking that this is how others should express their love for me.

We know, in our heart of hearts, that this is not true. Gifts have many meanings, not all of them generous and loving. Gifts are sometimes bribes, or payoffs, or duty. We are usually quite aware when a gift is not given in love.

And that kind of gift rarely satisfies our deep hunger.

Most of us figure out a few ways to deal with this yearly crisis. We tune out the carols and decorations until we’re good and ready. We stick a buck in the Salvation Army kettle every time we go to the store. We buy cards with a more liberal religious flair. We design worship services that march to a different little drummer boy, as I have today.

We look for charities to donate to that satisfy our desire to improve

the environment or provide relief for the homeless or bring justice to an unjust world.

But deep inside, we may still not be satisfied. We may wonder why everyone else seems so eager to spend and decorate and bake and wrap and run around like crazy. Is this really the meaning of this season? It may feel like something's missing.

The roots of our dominant holiday, Christmas, are set deep in mystery. For at least 4000 years, human beings have grieved the end of the old year, symbolized by the waning of the day's hours, and have celebrated the beginning of the new, when the sun's path across the sky becomes longer, brighter, warmer.

The waning of the sun was a crisis for ancient peoples; would it come back? would the land warm again, would crops grow? would their families survive the colder weather? Life was dying all around them at this time of year. Though they were pretty sure from past experience that the sun would again grow strong, it was a yearly mystery, one that required sacrifice and appeasement of the mysterious powers which controlled the seasons.

At one time, in Babylonia, the chief priest symbolically sacrificed the king to appease the gods and return light to the sky, stripping the king of his crown and fine robes and then performing a sacramental rite to reinstate him by the grace of the gods. In later years, a criminal--real or fancied--was actually killed in the king's place.

As the old year came to an end, symbolized by diminished sunlight, the old rules of living relaxed temporarily. Festivals of eating, drinking and boisterous merrymaking began about the middle of December and lasted until January 1.

As the centuries wore on and Christianity became better-established, pagan ceremonies and Christianity began to clash. To the pagans, the festivities were harmless fun. To the Christians, they were an abomination in homage to a disreputable, non-existent god. But it wasn't easy to put the pagan practices out of commission. Many pagans had been converted to Christianity, bringing their fondness for the old ways with them.

Many now think that the Christians invented Christmas to compete against the pagan celebrations of December 25, which in Persian and Roman religions was a holy date, celebrating the return of increased sunlight and the miraculous birth of the god Mithras.

Nobody really knows when the child Jesus was born, and for centuries Jesus' birthday was unimportant to Christians. It was his death and resurrection that mattered in the Christian faith. But stories emphasizing his divine and miraculous birth kept popping up; it became important to establish Jesus' lineage through the Hebrew King David, in order to prove his Messiahship.

Mary, his mother, also was gaining in importance, her motherly love

offering to Christians something that their stern and sometimes crotchety Father God did not offer.

Women who had lost babies and children to disease and accident turned to Mary, the mother of the murdered Jesus, for comfort. Her ability to ease the grief of her worshippers became a part of the mystique of Jesus' birthday. And this homage too satisfied a deep need for a female object of devotion, as pagan goddesses gradually fell out of favor.

No matter what we believe about Jesus, we can pause before the most startling thought that has ever crossed the minds of humankind, that one mysterious night, God may have come to earth as a baby with a human mother of humble origins, who bore him in the way women have born babies since time began. Even if we don't believe in the traditional concept of God, it is humbling to think that a human baby has the potential to change the world as Jesus did.

We have cluttered Christmas up with gifts, with wrapping paper and ad campaigns, with trite songs and hokey jingles. As for the sun, we have always known that that it would come back. We have our snow shovels and our frozen vegetables, our gas log fires and our politically correct fake fur coats.

We survive winter pretty well, even when we have to drive over the pass in a snowstorm. We peruse our seed catalogs in January and buy our summer clothes during spring ice storms. The sun's cycle is no longer a mystery to us. We've cracked that one.

What is still a mystery, however, is the power of a single human life. How did that baby do what he did? Jesus and his crusade to change Jewish religious culture have profoundly affected nearly every other human being on the planet since his death.

Whether we consider ourselves Christian or not, we are members of a Christianized culture. People have been both positively and negatively affected by the power of Christianity. The simple message of Jesus has been perverted many times and used to enslave and destroy whole nations. But it has also been used lovingly to bring people together, in acts of generosity and love and justice toward others. We have all felt both the positive and the negative effects.

As Unitarian Universalists, we tend to march to a different little drummer boy than the folks around us. We are turned off by the impossibilities of the Christmas story and the commercialization of the season, yet we sense that there is something about Christmas, something we want to hold onto, to celebrate, to explore. Something more mysterious than the cycles of light and dark, which science has explained to us.

We examine the mysteries of light and dark, of good and evil, of death and rebirth, of love, hope and joy, of generosity, of loneliness, and we see that these are the mysteries of human life. These are the edges, the characteristics, the qualities of human life, that life which suffuses each

of us. And we wonder--what is the potential of our single human life?

We have seen what the potential of Jesus' human life was, at least thus far. We have seen its good and its bad outcomes. And we dimly recognize the potential of our own lives, our good and our bad choices. We don't know what others will make of our lives when we are gone; we, like Jesus, have no control over that.

We look at our children and do all we can to maximize their potential, hoping and praying that they will be the best they can be.

And when a child is born, we are again overcome by the mystery of human life. What will this baby do to change the world? How will this new life cope with the light and the dark, the good and the evil, the death and rebirth, the hope, love, and joy, the despair, the hate, the sorrow that she or he will encounter? For it is in our response to the mystery of human life that we fulfill or destroy our potential.

It is never too late for us to change the world, whether we do it by forgiving another person, by letting go of anger, by generosity of heart, by working to understand another's beliefs, by giving a child or a friend encouragement. This is the deepest mystery of all, that our lives, our single lives can transform the world.

We don't have to be the Buddha, or Gandhi, or Jesus, or Martin Luther King. We can be Al and Sarah and Don and Roy or Sandy and Sally and Kent and Jack. No matter who we are, our every human act changes the world.

A poet said, "You cannot stir a leaf without the troubling of a star"; and a chaos theorist told us that the wing movements of a butterfly in South America affect the weather in North America.

Our 7th principle states that we covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. This principle underscores the fact that what we do with our lives matters. Our every act changes the universe.

This, then, I believe, is the mystery of Christmas, that my life and yours do change the world, daily, for better or for worse. What greater gift can we bring to one another than a world--small or huge--that is improved by our presence in it?

At this gifting season, when we are beset by commercialism and trite cliches, bothered by the miraculous legends and what we may consider meaningless ritual, can we dig beneath the candy and the candlelight to give the real gift of the season--the power of our own single life?

As another poet Mary Oliver has said, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

BENEDICTION

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering these words of Howard Thurman:

When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the brothers and sisters,
and to make music in the heart.
Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.