

THE YEAR THEY CANCELLED CHRISTMAS

I want to relate a story we rarely tell during the holidays. As our trees sparkle with cherished ornaments, children are giddy with delight, and spicy cookies bake in our ovens, it's difficult to imagine a world with no Christmas at all. But it happened.

On June 3, 1647 the British Parliament established punishments for anyone caught observing Christmas. The offender then was none other than the culprit that was later to grow in the heart of Scrooge: commercialism. Actually, the first record of a complaint against commercialism goes all the way back to 245 A.D. when the Church father Origen proclaimed it heathenish to celebrate Christ's birthday, as if he were merely a temporal ruler when his spiritual nature should be the main concern. However, commercialism didn't really get into full swing until it reached the courts of Medieval England.

In jolly olde England, the twelve days of Christmas had become the time for all good nobles and merchants to show their loyalty to the king by offering him lavish gifts; even cash was considered an appropriate present. In the mid-thirteenth century, when the merchant class failed to do its share, Henry III closed all shops for two weeks until the merchants agreed to come up with a stipulated two thousand pounds.

Gambling was also very popular at Christmas. It's said that Queen Elizabeth's nobles gave her loaded dice with which to play so that she would always win. What do you think of that? Kings and Bishops vied to outdo each other in the splendor of their attire and the bounty of their banquets. Inevitably, there were reactions against what Christmas had become, and when the Puritans came to power, beheading King Charles I

and establishing Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector of the country, the edict banning Christmas was made manifest.

The town criers passed through the streets ringing their bells and shouting, “No Christmas! No Christmas!” For those who celebrated Christmas quietly in their parishes, this caused a great deal of soul-searching, even some martyr-like acts of courage. For the common people, however, it provided a new form of Christmas entertainment: the riot.

Nevertheless, the law was law, and in time, it had dire effects. Carol singing and broadsides (a sort of Christmas card precursor) disappeared from public life, and their preservation became an “underground” movement fostered by the country folk.

But people soon found the years without Christmas to be intolerable. In 1647, ten thousand folks from Canterbury (always a spunky town) passed their own resolution that “if they couldn’t have their Christmas Day, they’d have the King back on the throne again.” Indeed, the monarchy was restored in 1660 and, with its return—guess what?—Christmas regained official acceptance once more.

But America took longer to recover from the joyless Puritan influence. In 1856 Christmas Day was still an ordinary workday in Boston, and failure to report to a job was grounds for dismissal. Classes were held in New England public schools on Christmas Day as late as 1870. It was probably the influence of immigrants from Germany and Ireland that finally convinced the Yankees that Christmas could be a harmless, pleasant, and even religious festivity. The first state to declare Christmas a legal holiday was Alabama in 1836. The last was Oklahoma in 1890, a little over a century ago.

However, in its absence, many of the fine old Christmas traditions were *almost* forgotten, and some were in danger of disappearing altogether, like plum pudding, caroling, and mistletoe.

Yet one writer believed that Christmas could still be alive and well, and he set out, almost single-handedly to make it so. *A Christmas Carol* by the Unitarian Charles Dickens (1812-1870) remains to this day, next to the Nativity itself, the best known and loved holiday story of all. It's the ultimate embodiment of what Dickens himself called:

the Carol philosophy: that Christmas is a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time, the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of other people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave.

Dickens' efforts succeeded, and Christmas survived, and blooms year after year, both within our hearts and in the air. As we kiss beneath the mistletoe and sing, once again, the beloved carols that were nearly lost to us forever, may we strive to deserve the ultimate compliment paid to the reformed Scrooge... "and it was always said of him, that Scrooge knew how to keep Christmas well, if anyone alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of all of us, and all of us!"

Dickens' vision that Christmas is the only giving time of the year is neither totally accurate nor desirable, yet his sensibility was a good one. And it remains central to our Unitarian Universalist tradition that sincere joy need not get out of hand and that genuine giving need not become bribery.

It's still tempting to righteously dump on all the holiday hoopla. And we do. Preachers rail against its excesses. And I have. Psychologists remind us that it can lead to Seasonal Affective Disorders. Sociologists say that it can disrupt family life. Arid

rationalists clamor that it's merely ancient superstition celebrated on the wrong date. Yes, it's tempting to get down on Christmas, wallowing in its flaws and waste.

But, we life-affirming and cheerful Unitarian Universalists refuse to let anyone ruin the holiday party. God knows, there's little enough joy in the world, little enough sacred time and space, little enough feast, festival and fantasy as it is to permit the Scrooges and Grinches of the planet to diminish, let alone ban, the holiday.

Sooo...rather than fight commercialism, or feel victimized by it, I suggest we reclaim the gift-giving part of this season as the spiritually meaningful act that it is.

Christmas, at its truest, symbolizes our supreme *Yes* to life. It celebrates the wonder of birth. It affirms the significance of loving bonds. It can represent humanity at our most compassionate.

We simply need to learn how to strike a middle path between the hyper-commercialism of medieval England and contemporary America and the sterile scroogism that throttles the spark of joy bursting in our hearts. The middle way would have us, first of all, give gifts that are real not rote, fresh not stale.

You know, someone gave a Christmas card simply because she thought she should. As the story goes, this woman dashed into the hallmark store at the local mall, grabbed a box of 50 innocuous looking cards, and without reading the message, scribbled 49 to all the people in her address book that she didn't expect to see over the holiday season. Sound familiar?

Well, a day or two later, when the cards were already in the mail, she chanced upon the one card which hadn't been sent. Perhaps you can imagine this woman's horror when she read, "This card is just to say...a little gift is on the way." Now, our friend here

did what she felt was obligatory and got caught, because she hurried too fast. She did something she didn't really care about, something she had been constrained to believe had to be done.

So the first lesson is simple: if you don't mean it, don't do it. Pause and remind yourself that you're acting because you have a choice.

That leads me to lesson #2. Gift-giving is spiritually vital only if our gifts are real and authentic, *and* if we're responsive receivers as well. That may be the subtle key. Giving generously must be matched up with receiving gratefully. So let's find ways and moments during the season to be a merry, exuberant recipient. You know, some of us who are mighty good at giving aren't so hot at receiving, but the religious imperative is to be bilateral, to grow increasingly mature both at delivering and garnering gifts, surprises, blessings. Why not start being ambidextrous this holiday season?

In truth, there can be no full giving without receiving. Ultimately, gift-giving is a relationship, and just as the act of giving produces a spiritual connection, so too does the act of receiving.

Every Sunday, worshipping among you here at San Dieguito, I've chosen to wear this beautiful stoll made by our Transylvanian sisters in Brasov, Romania. It reminds me of our deep connection with Unitarian roots, going back to 1568. You see, spiritually, my ministry doesn't emerge in a vacuum but comes from somewhere. I stand upon Transylvanian shoulders and am grounded in the tradition of responsible freedom and religious inclusion practiced, amidst severe persecution, for 450 years.

Carolyn and I received these handcrafted stolls, even as we delivered money and gifts to our sister congregation in Transylvania about 20 years ago...precisely as our

spiritual relatives had been struggling to free themselves from the devastating oppression of post-communism.

Now, the fact is that our Unitarian sisters and brothers in Transylvania are profoundly impoverished of material resource but not of spiritual sensibility, and this beautifully woven stoll represents their profound generosity. Without keeping score in life, all of us simply need to give and receive from our respective abundance in order to keep the gifts flowing and our relationships mature.

Third, remember that a gift isn't just an object; a gift is an incarnation of the heart, a little bit of the word of love made flesh or steel or pottery or paper or cloth. A surprise bit of love crossing over from my heart to yours.

Here's what I mean by surprise. One of our church members relates the story about her young son sharing a meal with the homeless, during our interfaith shelter stint, a few years back. Naturally one of the side benefits of this operation has proven to be its intergenerational nature, where the young and old alike in our parish, spend quality time alongside one another, while engaging our homeless guests.

As we cooks worked in the kitchen, my son, Aaron, wandered around the tables in the Common Room, a little bored until he spied a deck of cards. And in the open and bold manner of a nine-year old, he looked up and asked the guests, "Does anybody here know how to play poker?" Chuckling, a group formed, playing and arguing about my son Aaron's arbitrary rule-making.

When the supper was ready, Aaron came over to me with a puzzled look and asked quietly, "Mom, aren't we going to wait for the homeless people?" And I responded, "Honey, these are the homeless people." Then he said, in a hushed voice: "But, Mom, they look just like everybody else!"

And I knew then I had given my son a gift more precious than anything I'd ever put under the Christmas tree. Many weeks later, on rainy nights, we wondered aloud if some of his poker partners had a dry place to sleep. Now, you see, for us,

homelessness is no longer a social problem. It has the names and faces of Aaron's poker partners."

Finally, let's quit worrying about finding or giving the perfect gift. Give from your soul and don't fret whether it's a fine or fitting, let alone perfect gift. Remember special gifts are often unexpected ones. At this time of the year, popular magazines seem to be sporting articles about "The Perfect Gift" for the season, pushing their products shamelessly.

Here's a story that could pretty much be told about either of my grandmothers, Zelma Flanagan or Clorinda Ramirez, and myself—not exactly, but the deep feelings are real familiar. I bet many of you will identify with this tale of the imperfect gift as well.

My friend tells it this way:

One day after my grandmother died years ago, I took part in the sad but fascinating ritual, along with my folks, of breaking up her household. I worked on the breakfast room. It had a sunny, quiet, affectionate feel to it, unlike the austere formality of the dining and living rooms. My grandmother was fond of her morning moments in the breakfast room. And objects she was particularly fond of gravitated there with her.

At about eye level on one of the shelves stood an object which didn't seem at home there. It was a glass candy dish, painted hot pink and laminated with odd cabbage-like bumps on the dish cover and three skimpy legs below. It was hideous. Now where, I thought did this thing come from? It was so unlike Grandma whose taste ran to bone china and rosewood. Why would she keep such a thing?

And then I remembered. I had given her the dish for Christmas nearly 30 years before. It had been an extravagance on my part, taking up a good part of the ten dollars or so I had saved for presents for family and friends. I was eight years old. I was very proud of the dish because I had chosen and bought it myself. It was my attempt, awkward to be sure, to symbolize my love for my Grandma through (an adult-like) gift.

Now, if I had been my grandmother, receiving such a present, I probably would have conspicuously displayed the thing on the living room mantel for the holidays, then discretely chucked it. But she kept it among her cherished things. Perhaps she did so precisely because of the awkwardness of the gift. Perhaps she kept it as a sign that her oldest grandchild was growing up. Perhaps it reminded her of her own childhood. Perhaps it simply warmed her heart, for love seldom comes in perfect packages.

Yes, Christmas often comes in the guise of a glass candy dish, painted hot pink and laminated with odd, cabbage-like bumps on the dish cover and three skimpy legs below. Hideous, to be sure, yet a gift offered from the loving heart of an eight-year old boy.

And once again we're reminded, aren't we, that love lies at the heart of things, love lies at the heart of Christmas at its truest, and that we Unitarian Universalists stand tall in the joyous lineage of Charles Dickens, and must always be counted on to make sure that Christmas will never, ever be cancelled again!

Tom Owen-Towle
December 14, 2008