

## **The Christmas Box**

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**It was going to happen sooner or later; Thirty-six years of Christmas services; readings, meditations, dog-eared files of raggedy yellowed newspaper and magazine clippings, children's stories, legends, plays, songbooks, orders of services and assorted carol books, all lay at my feet in one enormous heap.**

**Everything I ever filed, saved, wrote or compiled that had anything to do with this holiday season, was quickly reduced to a big mess; a jumbled, eclectic mass of my seasonal holiday resources . Last December, the frayed and aging file box threatened to let go and this was to be the year. Needless to say, a private and very undignified meltdown was imminent! There is a time in the life of any minister when some, if not all of our resources have reached a saturation point and they suddenly become overwhelmingly useless. Instead of producing great, new material conveniently at our fingertips, as such files are supposed to do, it has the opposite effect. Searching for just the right reading is somewhat like going to Home Depot to find a single tack!**

**However, I do believe that more often than not, there is a purpose for everything, even a massive mound of exploded files.**

**Knowing there was no point in wasting the morning by wailing and cursing at the impossible pile, I tried to sort it all and get it into some kind of order, knowing full well that was not going to be. The experience was similar to uncovering a pile of old photographs; you can't just put them back in the box, without looking at each one.**

**What started out, as a simple task became a day- long project. Such it was with what was left of my Christmas box.**

**In a sense it was a very revealing exercise as I perused three and a half decades of readings and writings. It became a trek through our UU history of the myriad of ways in which we have welcomed the December holidays.**

I noticed as I picked through it all, that I was a lot more clever with titles back then, on sermons like, "Hum buggers and Other Living Things, or one entitled, "Try Playing That on Your Pornograph!" The evolution of my Christmas thinking spanned from the Universalist pronouncements of "Glory to God in the Highest" modified to read "Peace and good will to all persons." to such simplistic revelations such as, "To much stuff does not make a Christmas" to the irreverent, humorous but cynical Unitarian sacrileges of the 1960's, found in a little vignette that I once dared to read from a conservative pulpit. I cringed as I re-read a story describing a self-centered inconsiderate house guest who brings her 'spoiled flatulent poodle' to Christmas dinner and ruins everyone's meal. I found another sermon, which was a pseudo-scholarly, intense, scientific analysis of the feasibility of the existence of the Christmas Star, entitled, "Star Light Star Bright, No, There Ain't No Star Tonight."

As the years passed, the floor of my living room melted into the lessons of age and experience; a more socially responsible appeal for a 'kinder, gentler Christmas,' surfaced as my generation attempted to "Unplug the Christmas Machine," and urged our congregations to turn off our televisions as if that was the only culprit that corrupted Christmas. We railed angrily at the existence of negative toys such as Power Rangers and Furbys, which have no redeeming value other than to feed the coffers of the advertising and marketing wizards, then ultimately relegated to the trash bins months later.

The Unitarian and the Universalist angle took on a new fervor in the 80's and 90's as we attempted to explain ourselves as a melting pot for all faiths and awkwardly tried to mix all of our respective holidays together in an attempt to prove our tolerance and acceptance for all.

The Winter Solstice, Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa as a real challenge for UU ministers everywhere and our responses were often such a muddle of rituals and ideas that none of those sacred holidays were represented either clearly or fairly.

I remember one exasperating service years ago called "Happy Hanasolisticemas" when all of the symbols and ritualistic paraphernalia that represented each of our faiths, were crammed together on the altar with the chalice. The great display finally reached, its limits when the Kwanzaa candles were added to the collection. Right in the middle of the sermon the menorah fell off the altar and into a flowerpot filled with very ignitable greens. In that church now, a fire extinguisher rests right next to the pulpit.

It was more than apparent that something had to change, to bring some clarity back to the simple message of the holiday season. Enough is enough!

Over the years as our traditions and expectations grew, we have finally come full circle. We have done it all and more. At home, we've dragged out the Christmas boxes, the growing mounds of decorations, and sorted through them every year vowing to simplify. We've sighed loudly once more as the ugly angel Aunt Matilda proudly gave us years ago, is vacuumed off, and parked in its mandatory place on the top of the tree. The stores have relentlessly come up with the most amazing things, new and "improved" items to add to our collections; drippy red white and blue lights, circular lit lawn trees, new age flying Santa's and reindeer, that have a strange way of flipping over in the wind. All of this is then added to the boxes that are already filled with last years innovation- the neon tube lights and, those too are crammed in along with the ever growing tangled balls of multi colored mini lights that we can't bear to throwaway because they still work.

Now, contrary to the inspiration that this annual glut of joyful ornamentation is supposed to conjure, just stand next to anyone precariously perched on a ladder, attempting to unravel and hang the latest tangle of glittering decor, on their homes and I do not believe you will hear "Silent Night" hummed under their breath!

Somehow, like my Christmas files, too much of a good thing can have exactly the opposite effect. There is a purpose for everything and this morning as I recall my very reduced new file of manageable Christmas material, I wish for us this year a real Christmas.

Not necessarily an' old fashioned one, for I do not wish to hunt down and shoot my own food, or slave over a temperamental cast iron stove to cook what I know will be a disaster.

And not necessarily a modern one either, for there are some new and improved toys and conveniences we could all do without.

Sometimes we just need a small explosion of the excesses in our lives to bring us to the point of valuing real simplicity again. I guess we all do need to consider the excessive holiday piles before us, of accumulated stuff that only demands that it be used in some way. Well, throw it out, give it away, and get it out of your life as at times it is hard to tell when it all becomes a burden rather than an asset.

However through all the reams of readings and quotes, stories and sermons, through all those years, one theme prevailed. Family. Not necessarily the family we grew up with, or spent time with, or created by our own choosing, or loved, but the many kinds of families that we have come to know throughout, sometimes in unexpected ways through each era of our living.

Many years ago when I could not afford to fly home from college for Christmas, I spent the day with one other fellow student who was also left behind. On Christmas morning we discovered one another's plight and together walked through the foggy cobble-stoned stillness of Oxford, hearing only the carols of boy choirs emanating from the packed cathedrals and churches along the way.

With the dining room closed for the holidays, we came across a greasy spoon on the other side of town and stopped to purchase fish and chips wrapped in a day old newspaper, as was the tradition, then sat on the curb and ate our Christmas dinner... both of us, strangers, 2,000 miles from home. At that moment we were bonded together, as we shared our chips and listened to the amazing sounds of Christmas in that ancient city.

We both felt held, and for a time we were family, not the one we came from and longed to be with, but the kind of family that comes to us in a moment of need, held up by an essence of peace, and good will which we shared together, that passed by so quickly and would never return again, but would never be forgotten.

That day, one without presents, or a tree, or all of the familiar that made Christmas real...just sitting in the numbing foggy British cold there was time to believe in Christmas again, not in its complications and obligations, but to become enveloped in the spirit in which it first came to us.

And finally, let there be for all of us this year a simple critical gift of Time. Time gained from weeding out all of the extraneous and unnecessary from our list of "I should's " and fill it instead with something much better, with family...no matter where you are, who you are with, a loved one or a stranger, or in whatever form it may take.

In closing I saved from my file one of my oldest readings by Vivian Pomeroy.

"There had to be a Christmas, and there will be a Christmas to the end of time upon this habitable globe. Much at present seems to cheapen it; but we must not yield to cynicism. Amid perils, troubles and greed, it is all the more certain that we dare not surrender the true Christmas spirit. " Some where and somewhere the children unborn are singing, Oh listen!"

The Christmas spirit is the song of what Abraham Lincoln called "the angels of our better nature." It is music from the undaunted heart of the world. And somehow at Christmas time we all come home for a little while to what we most really are, which is what we shall be. And suddenly round the corner we come to the unspoiled surprise-to the loveliness and hope and innocent felicity which we so often feared we would never see again."

So be it, Amen