

“Living with an Enlarged Heart”

Reverend Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason.

It could be that his head wasn't screwed on quite right.
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.

But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.¹

Many of us know very well these beloved words of Dr. Seuss.

Some even have them memorized—
words you grew up reading,
or read or read, even still, to your own children each December without fail.

Others of you know this iconic story
because the holidays haven't truly come to your home
until you've sat down to watch the animated television special
that brought the book to life in technicolour in the 60's.

And, still others of us know these words for a different reason,
or in a very different way than maybe we once did.

Some have come to know all too well what it means to live
with a heart that sometimes feels two sizes too small.

With dread, at this time of year, some of us find ourselves cast in the role
of that unseemly character so at odds with the spirit of the season.

We feel cranky at the sight of Christmas lights
and all the hoopla that goes with the holidays.

Carolers cause us to break out in hives.

¹ Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*

Santa and his elves make us queasy.

“Bah-humbug” we think, even if we’re afraid to say it aloud.

We hate Christmas, and the whole Christmas season.

And, somewhere, lurking in the recesses of our mind,
is the fear we’ll soon be outed—to everyone.

That some small, uncharitable, curmudgeonly act on our part
will bring about the widespread wagging of fingers in our direction,
and some deep voice bellowing out from who knows where,
“You’re a mean one, Mr. Grinch!”

Now, no one wants to be called a grinch.
And, frankly, I don’t think anyone sets out to be deserving of the label.

But it happens, sometimes even to our own surprise.

We wonder how we lost the magic we once felt at the holidays.
We worry whether it will ever return.
We wait and plead and pray, sometimes in vain,
for the sense of joyful connection to come back to our lives.

Whatever the particular holidays we’ve celebrated in our past,
or the holidays we keep in our present day,
there seems to be at their core a yearning for the possibility of connection:
to others, to a bigger story, to the heart of who we are,
and the best of what we can be.

I’ve come to see the holidays,
be they rooted deeply in religion or without a whiff of belief at all,
whether they’re the ones kept by a Jewish family or the Hindu community,
whether they’re the traditions held by a gathering of devoted friends
or the ones improvised by a group of total strangers,
I’ve come to see the holidays as an elaborate and sacred effort
to set the best possible conditions for connection to occur.

I think we keep our holidays in the hope
that they will help us to cultivate and keep connection.

And more and more, I'm convinced that the outward trappings
don't matter as much as we often think they do—
just as the Grinch so famously discovered after he'd stolen
all the lights and ornaments and gifts from the Whos down in Whoville.

When he heard their voices united and saw their hands clasped,
he discovered the great secret about our hunger for connection.

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow,
stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so?
It came without ribbons. It came without tags.
It came without packages, boxes or bags.

And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before.

What if Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store.
What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.

What if?

Whatever the holidays you keep,
what is that *little bit more* you are searching for?

When was the last time you felt it,
and if it's been awhile, what do you need to find it again?

These are the questions we're asking ourselves in our theme groups this month
as we grapple with what it means to live a more connected life.

What I'm struck by as I've reflected on my own answers
is how much I leave it to chance.

How I enter the holidays hoping that, with some luck,
that little bit more will catch hold in my heart,
that the holiday spirit will sweep me up in some miraculous moment,
and that I'll be given a taste, a glimpse, some fleeting grasp
of that little bit more that will sustain me for at least another year.

It seems to be the experience we're all so desperate to have:
the hope for some transformative moment that breaks open our hearts.

It's as if we're looking, as Franz Kafka put it,
for "an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us."²

It seems we hunger for that in-breaking moment,
because, like little else, it helps us understand that little bit more
to be the sacred stuff that speaks so powerfully
to what's possible in this world of ours,
that points us toward our highest selves
and on the way to our becoming the ennobled beings we might be.

And what happened then...?
Well...in Who-ville they say
That the Grinch's small heart
Grew three sizes that day!

And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,
He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light

And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!
And he...
...HE HIMSELF...!
The Grinch carved the roast beast!

It's worth pondering why this story endures.

It speaks, in the way that Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* did a century before it,
to that hope I believe we hold for a lasting change of heart,
for an assurance that even our worst self
can be transformed into something better,
into something of worth, dignity, and love,
something—someone—capable of compassion and care and connection.

It's no wonder we humans have created regular rituals
to remind us of these things—
these things we so easily forget or doubt or deny:
that we are of intrinsic worth, held in the arms of the universe,
and connected to every last bit of it,
not least those we love and who love us in return.

² Franz Kafka, from a letter to Oskar Pollak, 1902.

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Robert Fulghum tells the story of a year
he didn't receive many Christmas cards.

One fetid February afternoon[, he writes,]
this troublemaking realization actually came to me
out of the back room in my head
that is the source of useless information.

Guess I needed some reason to really feel crummy, so there it was.

But I didn't say anything about it. I can take it. I am tough.
I won't complain when my cheap friends don't even care enough
to send me a stupid Christmas card. I can do without love. Right.

The following August, I was nesting in the attic,
trying to establish some order in the mess,
and found stacked in with the holiday decorations
a whole box of unopened greeting cards from the previous Christmas.

I had tossed them into the box to open at leisure,
and then I ran out of leisure in the shambles of the usual Christmas
panic, so they got caught up in the bale-it-up-and-stuff-it-in-the-attic-
and-we'll-straighten-it-out-next-year syndrome.

I hauled the box down, and on a hot summer day,
middle of August, mind you, in my bathing suit,
sitting in a lawn chair on my deck, with sun-glasses, cocoa butter,
a quart of iced tea, and a puzzled frame of mind,
I began to open my Christmas cards.

Just to help, I had put...Christmas carols on the portable stereo
and cranked up the volume.

Here it all was.
Angels, snow, Wise Men, candles and pine [trees],
horses and sleighs, the Holy Family, elves and Santa.

Heavy messages about love and joy and peace and goodwill.

If that wasn't enough, there were all those handwritten messages of affection from my cheap friends who had, in fact, come through for the holidays.

I cried. Seldom have I felt so bad and so good at the same time.

So wonderfully rotten, elegantly sad, and melancholy and nostalgic and all...

As fate always seems to have it, I was discovered in this condition by a neighbour, who had been attracted to the scene by the sound of Christmas caroling.

She laughed. I showed her the cards. She cried. And we had this outrageous Christmas ordeal right there on my deck in the middle of August, singing along with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir to the final mighty strains of "O Holy Night."

What can I say? I guess wonder and awe and joy are always there in the attic of one's mind somewhere and it doesn't take a lot to set it off.

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It was Camus who said so elegantly that:
"In the depths of winter I at last discovered
that there was in me an invincible summer."³

What I love about Fulghum's story is that in the heat of summer, he discovered the depths of invincible connection, the ties of love that hold his life together.

His grinchy mood had set in because he thought he had been abandoned. He had lost sight of the bonds that connect him to the people he loves. He even began to second-guess his own worth.

Brene Brown says that shame is our fear of disconnection—our fear that we are unworthy of connection in the first place.

³ Albert Camus, *Return to Tipasa*, 1952.

What's ironic is how frequently we let our shame, our fear of disconnection, keep us from life's most meaningful connections.

Out of fear of being judged and rejected, we push ourselves away—
in our convoluted way of thinking—to save everyone else the trouble.

Now, we don't really know the backstory on the Grinch.
Seuss doesn't tell us how his heart ended up two sizes too small.
There are myriad reasons why someone shrinks from their life.

I only wish he had visited the Unitarian congregation in Whoville,
long before all the drama with the dog and the sled full of stolen goods.

For there he would, at some point, have likely heard and seen himself in
the cherished words of the poet Edwin Markham, who wrote:

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout
But love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle that took him in.⁴

That is my hope for us all in this season that is upon us.

That the great circle of love we celebrate at this time of year
takes you in, again and again, to renew the magical connections
that bind you together with all of life in this ever-spinning universe.

So, let Christmas come, and all the other holidays, too.

Let us risk living life with enlarged hearts—
hearts grown three sizes and then some—
that we might cherish the little bit more
that brings meaning to our days.

Amen.

⁴ Edwin Markham, "Outwitted."