

# “Holiday Presence”

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25 December 2016

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

“So may we with heart that sings, share the truth this season brings.”

Those words, from the hymn “Once in Royal David’s City” were not among the original lyrics.

The original hymn was based on a poem written by Cecil Frances Alexander. She was the wife of an Anglican minister.

The song told the story of the birth of Baby Jesus, believed by Christians to be the Son of God.

But in 1957, the Unitarian Universalist hymn composer Carl Seaburg re-wrote the words, in a more universal spirit.

His lyrics emphasize a loving mother tending to a baby in a humble stable...a symbol for times “when life turns hard, [and we] find in love our stay and guard.”

Seaburg’s new lyrics took as their starting-point the Christian nativity story...

And then extended beyond it, so the song might hold meaning for as many people as possible.

So it might hold meaning for people who, no matter what their religious background, might be trying to make sense of life...especially when it “turns hard.”

In this new version of the classic hymn, we're told that no matter what our station in life or our situation, we can indeed "bestow gifts."

And what's more: the message that comes from "on high," that is, from the angels, is that "joy's a gift you cannot buy."

## §

So if joy can't be bought—and I think we all know that it can't—where does it come from?

In recent years, it's been suggested that "joy"—or, at least, a sense of deep fulfillment and meaning—might have nothing to do with the "happiness" that we so often pursue.

At this time of year, whether we're celebrating Hanukkah or Christmas or Kwanzaa or Festivus-for-the-rest-of-us...it's quite natural for us to be seeking "happiness"...

Whether in a shopping mall or elsewhere...  
And whether we're fully aware of our seeking, or not.

As we walk along to the soundtrack wishing us a "merry" Christmas and a "happy" New Year...

We may long for the gift of happiness.

If we're fortunate enough to be feeling it,  
we may cherish it and hope it lasts forever.

And yet, this particular midwinter,  
I've heard more than a few people saying they feel a bit bleak.

So it's helpful to be reminded that we couldn't buy joy even if we wanted to...

...that the route to a meaningful life might have more to do with simple presence than store-bought presents...

And that meaning and joy might not require “happiness” at all.

## §

The psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl believed that it is the human “will to meaning” that can be a source of resiliency and courage—even in the most difficult times.

He helped people rise above despair by helping them see how their lives could be meaningful if they survived.

Their individual desire to make some kind of difference in the world, however small, was helpful in pulling many of them through.<sup>1</sup>

In recent studies, it’s been affirmed that giving to others and making personal sacrifices for a larger group can foster a sense of meaning and joy.

The psychologist Martin Seligman wrote that in a meaningful life "you use your highest strengths and talents to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than the self."<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, it’s clear that serving others might actually lead to anxiety or concern, sadness, or grief.

It can be inconvenient, frustrating. Exhausting at times.

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<sup>1</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Esfahani Smith, “There’s More To Life Than Being Happy,” *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2013.

In short, serving something larger than ourselves might not bring us happiness at all.

It might seem, at least in the short term, to bring about just the opposite.

In fact, it may be, that as we're present to each other, we give up the expectation of "happiness" in return for something deeper.

Something such as a more enduring sense of meaning, purpose or joy...

And that something might just be the renewable source of strength we need to live in this world today.

## §

"In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan.  
Earth stood hard as iron. Water like a stone."

In a world that can indeed seem as "hard as iron"...  
difficult to understand and challenging to heal...

Surely we need some renewable source of strength  
to keep us going. To keep us present.

Such a source of strength might not provide us with  
"happiness"...but it just might reveal to us our wholeness.

And it might do so in a way that allows us to become the human  
beings we so long to be.

The human beings that the world needs now.

## §

It's been said that this "whole" or "holy" person...the one we are looking for...can be found within each of us.

This essential Self, this inner teacher, this God within...that is as ordinary and vulnerable as a baby in a manger...

Yet as loving and all-embracing as any Higher Power we might imagine.

It seems to me that each of us has met this Holy One at one time or another...

This is the One that lets go of the need to be right in the middle of an argument...suddenly realizing that the relationship is more important.

This is the One who is moved to act to protect someone who is vulnerable...even when it puts us at risk.

This is the One who, unexpectedly or inexplicably, hands over something precious, whether it be money or time or a treasured object...because we know it can do more good if we give it away.

I'd venture to say that this whole and holy human shows up at unexpected times, and perhaps only rarely.

Perhaps when we feel that we have nothing to give.

Perhaps when our best-laid plans for happiness have fallen short.

## §

The miracle of the oil lamps at Hanukkah occurred following a time of great challenge, when resources appeared to be limited.

The Temple was to be rededicated in Jerusalem, after a victory over rulers who had prohibited Jewish worship.

At that significant time, there was only enough oil to light the menorah for one day...

But despite the evident scarcity and against all expectations,

The light of hope and meaning was kindled and rekindled and rekindled...

A light that drew upon the well of God's loving presence that had been promised for all eternity.

Likewise, we too—no matter what our religious tradition or background—can draw upon an inextinguishable well of presence.

A well of presence that presents itself to us in this moment, and this moment, and this moment, and this moment.

As we let go—even momentarily—of our expectations for happiness...

Perhaps also let go of our need for complete understanding or certainty...

We may find a source of life flowing within us that we didn't know was there.

A source of renewal we can draw upon.

A source of meaning we can trust.

## §

At the beginning of the service I sang “In the Bleak Midwinter”—  
and I sang an earlier version of the lyrics, not the updated ones in our  
UU hymnbook.

The original last verse was written by the English poet  
Christina Rossetti.

It’s among my favourite verses of all the hymns I’ve ever sung.

This remains true for me, even though I know that some people read  
its theology differently than I do.

“What then shall I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.  
If were a wise man, I would do my part,  
But what I can, I give him...give my heart.”

As human beings, we’re continually updating our perspectives.

Re-writing our lyrics...  
Coming to new interpretations of old stories.

When I consider the Christian nativity story today...  
I imagine the birth not of one specific person who is singularly  
divine...

But of the awakening of meaning in each one of us,  
as we become present to each other and to life itself  
in a new way.

When I listen again to the Christian nativity story,

I celebrate the love, fragile as it is,

that persists in times of hardship and uncertainty...

And I honour our ability,  
which must be continually renewed and reborn,  
to give unselfishly of ourselves.

§

Today in your presence, I see meaning incarnate.

I see it in the faces of people who seek to live  
with courage, grace and insight...

People who give the gifts you can,  
in your many bright and shining ways.

To quote the hymn we are about to sing,  
it is your presence that is and can be “the blessed song of love  
eternal.”

Even as darkness and fears will arise this midwinter and beyond,  
know that your presence is a gift...

And that your days on this earth are holy.

Please join me in singing Hymn #55, “Dark of Winter.”