A Unitarian Christmas

BY **TRACY SPRINGBERRY**, MINISTER, NORTH IDAHO UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP, COEUR D'ALENE, IDAHO

Each year the American Family Association (AFA) publishes a "naughty or nice" list. Companies who use Merry Christmas in their advertisements and holiday displays are on the nice list. If staff greet customers with the innocuous "Happy Holidays," the company makes the naughty list. AFA claims they are winning the "war on Christmas": a war that they see as a secular attack on Christ and Christianity as the moral underpinning of our society. In the five years since they began publishing their list and asking members to boycott the naughty companies, they claim they've seen the percentage of retailers recognizing Christmas in their advertising rise from 20 percent to 80 percent. "This is a huge win for the pro-faith community in America," claims the AFA.

What the AFA, Bill O'Reilly, and all people who see a religious holiday threatened by the words "Happy Holidays" don't seem to know is that there was already a war for the soul of Christmas, and it was the liberal religious community—specifically the Unitarians—who won.

This might surprise you. It did me. We would be the last people to fight a Christmas War, it seems. For most of us "Merry Christmas" is OK, and so is "Happy Holidays" or "Happy Solstice," and if we were to write a naughty or nice list of companies this time of year we'd be judging environmental stewardship or community ethics or labor practices. But once upon a time Unitarians believed the fight for the soul of the American Christmas was a battle worth fighting.

It was Unitarians who wove together Santa Claus, Christmas trees, gift giving around the tree, a focus on charity, and peace and goodwill toward all to create the Christmas that the majority of Americans celebrate today. And while the story of the baby Jesus was not left out, what was central to this holiday was not the coming of God in a human form for the atonement of human sins, as it was for conservative Christians, but Unitarian values and theology.

But how did Unitarians take over Christmas? Let me tell you the story.

Long ago, when the Puritans came to this country, they banned Christmas. At that time in England, Christmas was nothing like the Christmas we celebrate today. It was a wild public party, much like Mardi Gras. People drank. They got crazy. They shot off guns and fireworks. They made a nuisance of themselves. This partying way of celebrating had an old, old history. When Roman rulers were trying to convince their people to be Christian and not pagan, they announced Christ's birthday would be celebrated in December, the time when Romans celebrated Saturn with over a week of wild partying. Later, as Christianity moved north, the celebration of Christ's birthday got mixed up with other winter celebrations like the Celtic Yule. These holidays also had an emphasis on a party. We still celebrate this Christmas in some ways, and the famous Welsh carol "Deck the Hall," is an example of the enduring celebration of Yule traditions.

The Puritans understood the pagan roots of Christmas, noted that the Bible never mentioned celebrating Christ's birthday and insisted that everyone should simply ignore it. In 1621, when some of the colonies' newer residents tried to take Christmas day off, the governor ordered them back to work. Thirty years later the General Court of Massachusetts declared the celebration of Christmas to be a criminal

Quest

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I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver.
—Maya Angelou

A monthly for religious liberals

GIVING AND RECEIVING

offense. The Puritans did win *that* Christmas war for a long time. For nearly 150 years, celebrating Christmas was illegal in New England. But by the 1800s, things had changed. In the southern parts of the new United States people had been celebrating Christmas with public partying, and so had the new Irish immigrants who were settling in New England. Christmas was a great day for all the local bars. Additionally, by the early 1800s Puritans no longer had the moral and political authority to hold off Christmas. They were no longer a unified group and had divided into conservative and liberal factions. And the liberal Puritans, who were on the verge of becoming Unitarians, began to call for the public observance of Christmas.

Conservative and liberal Puritans divided on their beliefs about the nature of people and the nature of conversion. Conservatives believed people were naturally bad, based on the doctrine of original sin, but liberals believed people were naturally good because all people were created by God. Conservatives believed true Christian conversion was an emotional, spirit-filled moment. Liberals believed conversion happened through education and the development of character based on following the teachings of Jesus.

Christmas, the Unitarians believed, could be a holiday to promote their values of generosity and charity and social good, and would be a wonderful way to build these values, particularly in children. Unitarians at that time were obsessed with how to raise generous children with good characters. Tradition said the evil must be beaten from a child, but Unitarians did not believe it. Still, how did you raise a child who was kind, generous, and good? This was brand new ground and Unitarian parents were understandably anxious about it. Celebrating Christmas, many felt, had the potential to help.

In the 1800s, the Unitarians were trendsetters. They were well-educated, often wealthy, and had access to and control of the media. Unitarian thinkers began to write about Christmas, bringing their values and theology to the forefront of the conversation.

Christmas, the Unitarians believed, could be a holiday to promote their values of generosity and charity and social good….

One of the most influential moments in this transformation of Christmas was the publication of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in 1823 by Clement Moore, a Unitarian. Moore invented the Santa Claus we all know and love. Before that there was no unified tradition of a Christmas visitor bringing gifts to all. "He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf," wrote Moore, "And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself! A wink of his eye and a twist of his head, soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread." He had, with a single poem, transformed St. Nicholas, a bishop known for acts of charity, into the myth of Santa Claus.

Aaron Wolf, in "A Tender Unitarian Christmas," writes sadly, "what once was a real person who performed acts of charity as a response to the redemptive work of Christ, became an unreal, mythic figure, who inspires us to be nice to one another." Yes, Moore transformed St. Nicholas from a Catholic bishop to a Unitarian. Moore's Santa Claus believed in the worth and dignity of every child, and that all deserved some kindness and pleasure. He reminds us of our responsibility to be kind and generous to one another. Later it was another Unitarian, Thomas Nast, a cartoonist, who placed Santa on the North Pole as message that he existed for all the children of the world.

The Unitarians also brought us the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree had become a symbol of the holiday in Germany in the 1700s. One Christmas Charles Follen, a German immigrant, a Unitarian and the first German professor at Harvard, invited several colleagues to his home where he had put up a tree lit with candles and covered with ornaments as he remembered from his childhood. One of the guests later wrote, "It really looked beautiful. The room seemed in a blaze, and the ornaments were so well hung on, that no accident happened, except that one doll's petticoat caught fire." Two of his Unitarian guests wrote about the experience and in a short time, middle-class Americans were celebrating Christmas by putting up Christmas trees.

Unitarians also brought us family gift giving, especially the tradition of children giving to parents. Again the tradition came from Germany. Samuel Coleridge, the Unitarian poet famous for "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," traveled to Germany one winter, and there he saw a ritual around a fir tree, where not only did the children receive gifts from their parents, but they also gave their parents gifts. He wrote:

> *There were eight or nine children, and the eldest daughter and the mother wept aloud for joy and tenderness; and the tears ran down the face of the father, and he clasped his children so tight to his breast it seemed as if he did it to stifle the sob that was rising within him. I was very much affected.*

Coleridge loved how this tradition taught children about generosity and unselfishness, and his story about it was published in *The Christian Register*, the official Unitarian magazine of the time. This was one of the great answers to the Unitarian question—how do we teach generosity? This gift exchange among parents and children became part of the Christmas tradition,

not only in Unitarian homes, but also in homes across the country.

Unitarians also brought us Christmas charity. They believed our responsibility as a religious people was to follow the teachings of Christ, and an important part of those teachings was care for the poor. The publication of *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, a British Unitarian, brought charity to the forefront of Christmas. *A Christmas Carol* is steeped in the Unitarian theology of the spirit of Jesus and that how we treat each other matters deeply. In that story, the nephew of Scrooge says:

> *I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round... as 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 people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!*

And we believe it: not just modern-day Unitarian Universalists, but most people who celebrate the season. At Christmas we make sure, like Santa in "A Visit from St. Nicholas," that all children receive gifts, that the food banks are full of food, and that at least for these few weeks people everywhere are cared for.

I love all the Christmas traditions brought to us by our Unitarian ancestors. I love how they remind us to be giving, generous, and kind to the people we know and the people we don't. This for me is the spirit of Christmas. I'm proud to say that the spirit of giving is itself a gift from our religious tradition. ■

The Gift of Receiving

BY **WALTER LEFLORE**, MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP OF POUGHKEEPSIE, NEW YORK

I used to have a hard time letting people do anything for me. I'd work on my own house, repair my own car—I will admit, in years gone by that was largely because I couldn't afford to pay anyone. But the issue is bigger than that. I had a hard time letting people give me *anything*. I would demur. I would say "Oh no, no, you needn't; Thanks, but no thanks."

I don't do that much anymore. While I'm not prepared to take just anything from just anyone, I've gotten much better at receiving and better about asking. I learned an important lesson a number of years ago. I was humbled into learning to receive.

About a year after I first started attending my home church, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I don't know that I had even joined the church by then. I knew the people where friendly and I knew some of them liked me. But I didn't really understand what it meant to be in community with those folks.

After my surgery, all sorts of offers for meals and care-taking came in. My first reaction was to say "No, no, that's just not necessary, we'll be fine." It was rather like stopping a train. Folks just kept insisting on helping, so I gave in. At first, I was just being polite. It was the easiest route, and the food *was* good.

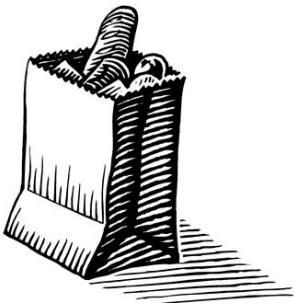
Then came a call from the wife of our minister emeritus, saying they had been cooking and wanted to drop off some food. Don, at the age of 81, living on the fumes of his retirement money, drove into the driveway. I wanted to meet him at his car but he wouldn't allow it. I watched this small, frail man get his walker out of the car, and then he turned back to get a basket of food out. I watched this determined man clamber up the front steps to bring us a meal. His effort and determination brought tears to my eyes. Don Kafka taught me the importance of receiving that day.

Don was born in Czechoslovakia and went to Norbert Capek's church in Prague, where our flower communion ritual was born. During the Nazi occupation, Don was in a forced labor camp in Germany. I don't know if that had anything to do with why giving was so important to him. But I do know that what I received that day was infinitely more important than the food that fed us.

I want to pass on the lesson Don taught me. There is something powerful in genuine giving. And there is something powerful in truly receiving. Genuine giving calls for genuine receiving. And genuine receiving requires a willingness to be humble. To truly receive means we place a greater focus on the other than on self.

I think we need more receiving and more humility in both our personal and congregational lives. Receiving is a critical part of the natural flow of give and take. Receiving is a necessary component in manifesting our covenantal belief in being in right relation with one another and with the world.

Receiving is a gift we can give to ourselves and to each other. And there's no way of knowing when such a gift will be given or received. There's no way to predict where a gift will come from. Years ago, I expected only a basket of food from Don Kafka. I got a life lesson instead. ■



Receiving

BY **KATE TUCKER**, MINISTER EMERITA, FIRST UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF MINNEAPOLIS

When I was three or four, my older brother Kevin was in kindergarten. He got to do so many interesting things, while I stayed home.

One day he got to go to with his class on a field trip to the local Sunbeam Bread bakery (factory). Later that evening, before dinner, he told us about his adventure—how he got to see the dough rising in the pans and how the pans rolled into the oven on conveyer belts.

I suddenly felt the stab of unfairness and envy.

Then, to make it worse, Kevin took out from somewhere a little package, a miniature loaf of bread in its own little adorable red and yellow plastic wrapper. It was the souvenir each child was given at the end of the tour.

When he held it up and showed us, I exploded in a crying fit: *He got to go and I didn't; he got a prize and I didn't, wah wah wah, it's not fair....* It was a real 3-1/2 year-old "I'm at the end of my rope" tantrum.

As I was doing this, I saw Kevin's face fall, and my folks' faces fall. In the midst of my self-pity party I had not taken even a second to see what was coming next—that Kevin had been on the verge of handing that little treasure to me because he wanted his little sister to have and enjoy his souvenir from the bakery.

His innocent heart had been holding me all along. Something in me immediately grasped the nature of the wrong I had done. Somewhere inside I grasped that by being a whining little horse's ass, I had derailed what could've been a joyful generous moment. By being a really rotten receiver I had turned a potential party into one sad, sour situation. And I felt so bad that the only way I knew to apologize was to cry harder.

It was one of my first glimpses into the truth that how we receive matters. That receiving is the key to something.

So I asked members of my congregation: what's hard about receiving? Here's some of what I heard:

Giving is more acceptable; it's the power position.

The Bible tells us so.

"*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" (From the Book of Acts, which quotes Paul, who says he's quoting Jesus.)

I don't know; I just know giving gets most of the good press.

It's better—stronger—to be the helper.

"*We are all here on earth to help others,*" goes the quote. *What the others are here for, I don't know.*

Sometimes, one person said, *it's hard to receive because we have a problem with the giver.*

> Giving turns into receiving and receiving turns into giving.

Scholar Stephen J. Patterson points out that Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan gets misinterpreted much of the time. In the story a man is beaten, robbed and left for dead, and two would-be helpers pass him right by. Then a Samaritan stops and helps, binds up the man's wounds and takes him to an inn.

Usually this story is told to encourage us to stop and help. "Be a good Samaritan." It's told as a story about giving. But as a story told by Jesus to Jewish peasants, this would not be a story about giving. Jewish peasants would not identify with the Samaritan. They would identify with the one beat up and lying in a ditch.

Jesus is saying, if you were beat up and left for dead, who would you let help you? For a Jew, the Samaritan was the despised enemy, the unclean "other," the one you'd never choose to be your EMT. So Jesus was asking his people: *What are your limits when it comes to community? Can you let yourself be helped by an untouchable?*

Would you let this Samaritan haul you to the inn? Would you run the risk of being seen with him and having people wonder if you are one of "them"?

A few brave people said *receiving is hard because you don't believe you deserve the gift.*

Or: *you don't want to bother anyone; everyone's overloaded.*

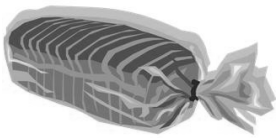
Or they said: *If I start asking for what I need I may fall into a big abyss of my neediness and never climb out.*

Or they said: *If I receive, I'll owe. I'll need to pay back, and maybe I won't be able to.*

One person said*: I'm not a good receiver because I don't have the energy or the time to figure out what I need to receive and then to ask for it. It's just easier to tough it out and do it myself.*

Or they said: *I'd like to be a good receiver, but I don't know how. I haven't had much practice.*

But I would just say that for those of us who haven't had practice, opportunities will come. In the great cycle of life, opportunities to practice receiving will arrive.



Sometimes giving and receiving are so overlapped and intertwined we can't hope to tease them apart. Giving turns into receiving and receiving turns into giving. As the song by Joseph and Nathan Segal in our UU hymnbook puts it:

From you I receive, to you I give.
Together we share,
and from this we live. ■

A Gratuitous Duck

BY **BARBARA MERRITT**, MINISTER EMERITA, FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

Maybe I don't get out much. But I have always heard the word gratuitous associated with "gratuitous sex and violence" in movies I don't want to see. Other negative connotations include a gratuitous insult or a gratuitous humiliation. The definition I always assumed was that gratuitous meant unnecessary, arbitrary, indefensible, senseless, and unjustifiable. Until I purchased a gratuitous duck. On my day off, a friend and I were visiting an art gallery in Brattleboro, Vermont. I was not intending to buy a duck. I did not need a duck. I was not looking for a duck or any other sculptures of farmyard animals

But there that duck was, with soulful eyes. Standing a full sixteen-inches tall, made with a hand-carved wooden body, a metal neck and head—a handsome piece of primitive folk art. While it clearly belonged in the mallard family, the colors were a beautiful blend of gold and green. I was surprised to find out that the duck was not very expensive. Completely on impulse, caught up in some whimsy I did not understand, I purchased said duck, intending to place it in the foyer of our home. But this duck gives me such delight that it is now sitting in our living room. Every time I see it, I smile.

It has been hard to explain to my family why I felt the need to purchase this rather large, multi-colored, aquatic bird. And then, someone told me it was a "gratuitous duck." I assumed initially that this was an insult, a way of saying that the purchase had been frivolous and indulgent. But no. I was introduced to the other meanings of the word gratuitous.

Gratuitous comes from the same root as *gift, pleasing, gratitude*, and *grace.* Latin: gratis. Something that comes to us as a free gift, as a spontaneous and unmerited, unlooked for and unbidden gift is a "gratuitous gift." Theologically, grace is often referred to as "gratuitous grace."

I had not earned this duck, hoped for it, or searched for it. I wasn't even conscious that I wanted it, let alone needed it. Yet, there it sits, in a central place of my living room, offering a blessing that partly has to do with beauty and partly to do with something more mysterious.

The universe offers many uninvited gifts. Some seem unnecessarily harsh and capricious. I'm never happy with such "gifts"—I resist them, resent them, wail against them, and fiercely wish they had not found their way to my address.

And then other gifts are sheer grace, absolutely gratuitous, in the best sense of the word. A smile from a stranger, the first warm day of spring, a flower coming up through an old icy snowdrift, an email from a long-lost friend, a word of encouragement from a colleague. I just need to focus on the truth that grace shows up in surprising ways.

I have a duck to prove it.

Published by Skinner House in 2007 in the UUA Meditation Manual Amethyst Beach: Meditations. *Available from the UUA bookstore (www.uua.org/bookstore or 800-215-9076).* ■

Year-End Giving

At the end of last year, many of you responded generously to the challenge fund, and your gifts were matched dollar for dollar, helping underwrite the CLF's vital worship, religious education and outreach programs. Thank you deeply for that critical help. If you can, please consider stretching your contributions again this year. Why wait for our letter? You can easily make a gift online at www.clfuu.org or by using the enclosed envelope. Thank you! ■

Gerda's Raspberry

BY **KAAREN SOLVEIG ANDERSON**, SENIOR CO-MINISTER, FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

I stopped at the Holocaust Memorial, something I had previously walked quickly past. Names of hundreds of thousands of survivors towered over me, neatly written on giant plexiglass monuments. At eye level, sayings and quotes by survivors are etched into the structures.

I got stuck in front of one. The world stopped for a while as I read and re-read the quote. Tears trickled out. I jotted down the quote on a piece of paper and brought it home. This tiny piece of paper received its own folder. I'd open it up, read the quote, and re-file, only to pick it up a few days later. The words were by Gerda Weisman Klien: "Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present to me that night on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to a friend."

I tried to put myself in Gerda's place, in Ilse's place. I couldn't. Until one day with a raspberry pint resting in my lap, I'd lift one up and think of gifts given: my mother's words of comfort the day I came home from school humiliated that I had been the first to misspell a word in the spelling bee; my sister's strong hands clenching mine as she whispered comforting words to me past drones of machines, pumps, and tubes during my ICU internment hell; my lover's words to me that to him I am Grace, I am Home. With each thought, I ate a raspberry. Something previously unimaginable now took shape, my vessel of life was full, filled with gifts. I felt Gerda's words and life in a way I couldn't comprehend before, by getting to the gifts that were given to me, all residing within, like well-eaten raspberries.

Published by Skinner House in 2000 in Glad to be Human. *Available from the UUA bookstore (www.uuabookstore.org or 800-215-9076).* ■

From Your Minister

BY **MEG RILEY**
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I still remember the Christmas I was in the 8th grade. There was a box under the tree, a large box, the kind that clothing came in. I was quite excited about that box. Shaking it in the days leading up to Christmas affirmed that it was clothing—that particular swoosh that fabric makes moving from side to side in a big box, with the faint sound of tissue paper around it.

In 8th grade, I cared a lot about clothes. And I didn't get a lot of them. Each of us four kids had $30 a month budgeted to cover all of our personal expenses—shoes, clothes, school supplies, toiletries. Mostly, to stretch that dollar, I made my own jumpers and A-line skirts—items which I wore proudly despite uneven hems, crooked zippers, seams where the plaids didn't quite match. But I was excited to receive something store-bought, which didn't come out of the monthly allotment.

Christmas morning, I chose that big box as my first gift to open. Underneath the wrapping paper was, as I hoped, a slate grey box from O'Neill's, the nice downtown department store. I lifted the lid, parted the white tissue paper inside, and there lay… a Girl Scout Uniform. That white blouse and dark green A-line skirt. Matching green knee socks with gold tassles to go around them. A badge sash. A variety of pins, some little patches and the numbers of my troop, "6-7-1," ready for me to sew them on. My face shifted from animated excitement to unbreathing stillness. And then, even though I knew my mother was eagerly watching my face, I couldn't stop tears from beginning to pop out of my eyes.

"But…you asked for a Girl Scout uniform!" my mother said. "You need one! You just joined the Cadette troop!" It was true. I had just joined the troop, right at the age when most girls were quitting Girl Scouts. The troop leaders demanded that I have a uniform, so I had dutifully reported that to my mother. I joined the troop because they went hiking, camping, canoeing, biking— things my family never did. I hated the uniform and all of the pomp and circumstance that came along with Girl Scouts.

> In this season of giving and receiving, may you know that you already have what you need.

Now my tears started to fall in earnest. "I know I asked for it," I sputtered. "Because I have to have one. But I never thought of it as . . . a PRESENT!" Now my mother's face had fallen as flat as my own. "It cost $27," she said very quietly, and she walked into the kitchen to get a cup of coffee.

All these years later, I can feel the swirl of emotions that competed for my attention as I watched my mother's back as she stiffly walked away, as my siblings went on to open their own gifts, oblivious. Swirling grief. Deep disappointment. Guilt. Discomfort. The vying of my mother's truth with my own to define what mattered in that moment. I sat in my long flannel nightgown and pink fuzzy slippers and felt awash in churned up feelings. And then, as my mother returned with hot coffee, I turned back to the tree and the other gifts and the morning, until the morning's chaos jostled me back to the familiar. My mother and I never spoke of it again.

So much giving and receiving is like that. We try to listen to each other, to offer gifts that we hope someone else wants; we give sacrificially, and we don't quite get it right. We try to receive gifts from others graciously and yet we can't help but measure them up against what we had hoped they would be. If we could truly master gracious giving and receiving, we would be Jedi masters, I think. The force would be with us.

Happiness is wanting what you have, the bumper sticker says, and most dogs could teach us a lot about that. But as humans, it's not as simple as we'd wish. My Great Uncle Louie, one of the most exuberantly happy people I knew, used to open the tie that my Great Aunt Annie gave him each birthday with genuine and loud appreciation. "It's the best one yet!" he would declare, this working man who never wore ties. He would put it back in the drawer until his next birthday, when Aunt Annie would take it out, wrap it up again, and present it to his joyful reception once more.

I suspect he knew this procedure was a charade, that the real gift for him was the humor of the situation, and yet as kids we were awed that Louie could so appreciate something he already had. Annie swore he did not know, and Louie was absent-minded enough that this was entirely possible. But it was also clear that Louie was happy, loved his wife dearly, and felt that what he had was absolutely enough.

In this season of giving and receiving, may you know that you already have what you need. The tie you want is already in the drawer. No gift received can bestow upon you the truth of your place as a child of the stars, of the earth, can give or take away the spark of divinity that lives within you. Whatever winter holidays you celebrate—Christmas, Chanukah, Chalica, Solstice, Kwanzaa—may you begin those holy days, and, indeed, every morning, knowing that you have exactly what you need, and any gift you receive from someone else is frosting on the cake. ■

REsources for Living

BY **LYNN UNGAR**, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I know that the Christmas season is supposed to be a hard time for Jewish kids, with Chanukah a poor substitute for the gift extravaganza that is Christmas. But that wasn't how I experienced it. What I saw of Christmas, which we celebrated as a kind of add-on with my non-Jewish cousins on my mother's side, was a morning spent opening gifts, wrapping paper flying, followed by playing with whatever toys they had gotten, followed by a big lunch with ham. Sure, it was fun, and probably more fun for the cousins who got the bulk of the presents, but it was over so quickly, like a roller coaster with just one big hill.

Chanukah, like my cousins' Christmas, had a build up to the big day—or rather the big first night. Piles of presents appeared in my parents' bedroom, one pile of eight presents for each of us four kids. It was understood that there was one big present apiece, generally opened on the first night, but there were seven other presents for each of us to prod and rattle and wonder about. There was the impatient waiting for the sun to go down, and the rather tedious grating of potatoes for latkes. (The invention of the food processor has made potato latkes a very different undertaking these days.) And finally, there was the ritual of lighting the candles, saying the blessing, singing Rock of Ages and the dash to our parents' room for the carefully-selected present.

But it wasn't over after the first two candles burned down, after the present was opened, after the game of dreidel had been played. There were seven more nights to go. Admittedly, after the first night the ritual was more perfunctory, the candles occasionally missed on a busy night, and the presents generally trinkets. But there was still the pleasure of unwrapping, of surprises, of choosing the color pattern of the ever-increasing rank of candles in the menorah. The pleasure was less like a roller coaster and more like a trail ride through the woods.

The season of giving can feel like a whole lot of pressure to find the right gifts, to afford the right gifts, to be suitably thrilled by the gifts that you are given. That's an awful lot of weight to wrap up in colored paper and unload in a single orgy of gift-giving. But what if you looked at the whole of December not as the Season of Shopping, to be followed by the Moment of Unwrapping, but rather as the Season of Giving? What if throughout the whole month you celebrated the way you were able to give to others: a back rub, a cup of cocoa, a bag of food for the local food pantry, a funny note, a carefully chosen book from the library or song on YouTube? Perhaps you could have Secret Santas in your family, so that each person would draw the name of a family member that they would do something special for each day for a week. Then, for the next week, draw new names. You could spend the whole month looking for small, anonymous ways that you could do something kind. Choose something that you can give as a family to someone else, like giving a neighbor the gift of shoveling snow or caring for a cat while they're out of town. Give the gift of experiences: take a walk in a neighborhood bedecked in lights, look at the stars on a clear night, splash in puddles, read a story by candlelight. Agree with your family that on Christmas (or Solstice or Chanukah or the holiday of your choosing) each person will get one special gift to unwrap, but that you will be opening the rest of your presents throughout the month, often in ways that don't involve tearing paper.

What if you looked at the whole of December not as the Season of Shopping, to be followed by the Moment of Unwrapping, but rather as the Season of Giving?

Then open your heart to the Season of Receiving. You deserve the absolute finest that life has to offer. So you will want to be on the lookout for the gifts that drop in your lap. Open your heart to fully receiving a compliment, a hug, a quiet moment with a book, a delicious cookie. We tend to think of these bits of delight as stolen moments, but they are not—or don't have to be. Rather than stealing a bit of time to yourself, sneaking a bit of chocolate or grabbing a moment to talk on the phone with your best friend, you could simply treasure these small gifts, seeing them not as guilty pleasures but as presents graciously given and graciously received.

The traditional religious word for the gifts the world drops in our laps is *grace*. Grace offers us gifts, not just on Christmas morning or the first night of Chanukah, but daily, hourly. It is our job to be instruments of grace, tossing gifts out into the world, less like Santa handing out gifts to good children according to their wish lists than like dancers on a Carnival float tossing glittering beads to anyone who would reach out and catch them. It is also our job to reach out and catch those worthless, priceless beads, and to sling them over our heads so that our blessings can shine out through all the long winter nights. ■

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The Careless Candle

BY **REV. JOHN E. WOOD** (1910-1980)

A candle is a careless thing, God wot.
See how it is always
stretching up and reaching out.

It gives its substance without murmur or complaint to the
flame that is consuming it. It doesn't even seem to care
into what corner the flame flings its light; whether the
corner is clean or dirty, pretty or ugly, far or near, high

or low, deserving or forgotten, useful or neglected.
Apparently, too, it doesn't care to whom it sends its warmth;
whether to the outer chill, a lonely heart, a child's
delight, a bore or a lout.
A candle that tries to conserve its substance is poor company
on a dark night. It was pleasant to look at in the day time.
It was slender, smoothly appealing. But any candle that does
not give itself away is a disappointment in the deepening
shadows of a long evening. Some friends are like that. Good
fun in days of play, poor company in the hours of dusk and trouble.

A candle must give itself away. In the giving, the spending,
the spreading, the sending, it finds itself.

Published by Skinner House in To Meet the Asking Years, *the 1984 UUA Meditation Manual.*
Originally published 1952, in Spiritual Embers, *the Universalist Church of America Lenten Manual.* ■