

National Unitarian Fellowship

Affiliated to the General Assembly of Unitarian
and Free Christian Churches

Viewpoint



Christmas Thoughts

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Introduction

Unitarians seem to have endless discussions about who they are or where they stand in the religious spectrum. Are we really part of the Liberal Christian tradition as it says in our Charitable object? Some of our congregations will say, 'Yes. They definitely are' and others will definitely say they are not.

Every Unitarian is somewhere on the religious spectrum but it is a spectrum of many colours. Every Unitarian has their own view on what they are and why they are a Unitarian - and there are probably many who feel very comfortable attending their Unitarian Chapel and don't feel the need to answer that question, 'What do you personally believe?' It is not always possible to articulate what it is that attending worship and mixing with friends actually means. The answer is, 'it is better not to ask!'

These discussions come round time and time again, following the turning of the wheel of the year. The big landmarks are Easter and Christmas.

The question most frequently asked is, 'If you are happy to say that you are not a Christian but a something else, why do you celebrate Christmas and have a Carol Service?' The answer usually is, 'because we like it. It is part of the tradition of the land and what does it matter whether it is true or not?'

Actually that is the answer I give.

Last year I bought my wife an I-pad for Christmas and it didn't work. The help desk transferred me to someone who would

sort me out. The someone was an American and they were talking to me from somewhere in the snow. There were twenty minutes to kill while the I-pad was reconfigured over the line so we passed the time in talking about ourselves and our families. When the lady learned that I was a retired minister, she said, 'O that's good. It means I am able to wish you a Happy Christmas because I am a Christian too

I have learned since, that in the politically correct world, you can't just say 'Happy Christmas' to all and sundry.

And while we wonder why the non Christians enjoy it so much there are Christians who disapprove of it themselves. They say that what is really celebrated is a Roman pagan festival called 'Saturnalia', where presents are exchanged and there is a great feast where people reverse roles, the Lord serves food to the peasant.

In 1647 the Puritans passed a law banning Christmas altogether. They had vigilantes looking out for any evidence of decorations, music or feasts, even mince pies. Christmas Day was to be a normal working day and if it fell on a Sunday, it was to be a day of prayer. Christmas went underground.

When I worked in Saudi Arabia, Christmas was banned there. We couldn't have a carol service but we could have a festival of winter songs. We could decorate the inside of the house but it must not be seen from the front. The restaurant couldn't advertise a Christmas dinner but we could have a turkey dinner - but no crackers or paper crowns of course.

I have asked our NUF committee members to share some reflections about Christmas and here are some of them:

Joan Wilkinson

Christmas Past and Present – Hopes for the future

Childhood memories of Christmas are very different to those of my own children and now grandchildren.

As a child preparations for Christmas began early as I helped to pluck and pen chickens, which were to be sold at York market.

But the real Christmas began when my dad finished work on Christmas Eve lunchtime and I would go with him into Selby to choose a present for my mother. Being farmers the livestock still needed to be fed over Christmas and Boxing Day, but dad would have Christmas morning off as the foddering was shared between him and his father and his sisters.

We never expected anything expensive from Father Christmas, but usually one main present, and an orange, from mum and dad, and a Rupert, Dandy or Beano Annual from Granny and Grandad.

One year I had longed for a pair of roller skates but if not roller skates then a football. But what did I find on the end of my bed on Christmas morning but a large box, far too large for either of these things. Inside was a walkie-talkie doll. My sister, who I shared a bed with, gave me a good ticking off, for not showing

more excitement with this beautiful doll so that by the time I got downstairs my disappointment didn't show.

To this day I am appalled at such ingratitude but oh with what envy I eyed my older brother's roller skates and his old tattered football, the sort with the inner liner and the weight of lead. As an adult I continue to learn the importance of gratitude for people and for this wonderful world we live in from remembering what an ungrateful child I could be.

The most memorable picture I have of being a young mum at Christmas, was when our eldest son was just two. Early on Christmas morning he woke us shouting with excitement as he came into our bedroom dragging the small red tricycle with pedals on the front wheel, shouting 'he's been, he's been'. Joy like this I had never encountered before. It had been worth all the scrimping and saving that had been needed. He never got to pedal it properly but walked it around as did his two younger brothers as it was passed down the line.

Christmas now is very different as we seem to live in a world, where the shops are full of lots of expensive toys. But remembering how scarce money was earlier in life I can't but think of the many young parents wanting to experience that joy of a child's response but who just can't afford to treat their children as they would wish.

My wish for the coming year is that the difference is lessened, between those who have enough and to spare, in which to bring up their families and those who live in poverty.

My wish for our Fellowship, is that we will continue to reach out to all members but especially to those who are no longer able to join with others in worship and that those who are able may decide to put themselves forward as volunteers to ensure that we may continue to be a vibrant fellowship. Another wish would be that more and more of you will feel able to write and contribute to our two publications.

Best Wishes to you all this Christmas and for the New Year.

Joan Wilkinson

Kenneth Smith

How appropriate it is that Unitarian services begin with the lighting of the chalice, its flame representing for me both the fragility of our physical existence, the light of the human spirit Christmas and New Year Thoughts and the warmth of human fellowship.

In the dark winter days we need the reassurance that the light will return again as the year turns. Jews mark this desire in the festival of Hannukah, Hindus in the festival of Diwali.

The news bulletins often tells us only of the darkness of the world and we all need to be reminded that it is only part of the story – that however dark the world seems at times light can still break through.

For me one week of the past year particularly encompassed both light and darkness ; the first was the joyful arrival of my

first grandchild, the second was the death of a friend of many years in tragic circumstances.

As grandparents we now eagerly await reports of the newborn's developmental achievements – rolling over, sitting up, standing up, first steps and first words (without having to endure the fractured sleep patterns of his parents!).

When a friend dies suddenly we are reminded that human life is a vulnerable condition whose equilibrium can easily be threatened by stresses that may not be apparent to even their closest relations.

As a young child learns to walk, not by frequent admonition but by repeated encouragement and praise, I hope that we can all resolve in the year ahead to encourage one another and build one another up as the apostle Paul counselled his followers and as the book of Proverbs advises, 'Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered'.

Christmas Cards by Ian Martin in Thailand

I live in a land where December 25th is just another day. To be sure there are plenty of artificial Christmas trees and snowmen in the shopping malls, where Christmas songs belt out the merry tunes. Christmas in Thailand is really part of the New Year festival which is a big holiday.

December is the cool dry season in Thailand, not that there is much cool about the warm sunny days that are hotter than any

English summer. There is however always one reminder of the Yuletide weather - the scenes on the Christmas cards I receive.

I always remember my dear Auntie who would post her card in November. She must have thought that natives would have to carry it through the jungle as they paddled up the rivers with the mail sacks on their heads. Well actually I live in something more of a concrete jungle with high rise buildings and traffic jams. Always the sound of construction somewhere.

If Christmas is about anything it is about fellowship. It is always nice to get cards from friends who one has been unable to meet in the last year and this is especially true for me who is living overseas. I have sometimes kept in touch for years with people who have gone to other parts of the world, although time often means contact becomes eventually lost. Even in an age of email the Christmas card remains a way of maintaining old friendships and creating new ones.

I must not forget to mention family again. I always looked forward to cards from one of my uncles. He would inquire if there had been much snow in Bangkok.

One place I sent a card to over many years was a Unitarian Church. It was good to keep in contact. This year God willing I will be able to be there in person for a December service. No visit to the UK is complete for me if I am unable to attend a Unitarian service and it is especially nice to go to one which has a Christmas theme.

Hugh and Elizabeth Barlow

As we have no immediate family, and others all live a long way away from here, we usually spend the two days of the Christmas holiday on our own (there is no public transport, and we don't have a car).

But for the past two years Hugh has been involved with a Party on Christmas afternoon, aimed at clients of the Food Bank, and others who are on their own and lonely. I expect to be at home recovering from all the busyness of December. The Visually Impaired Club have a Christmas Lunch at a venue outside the Town at the beginning of December, and then a special celebration at our normal meeting later in the month.

Although Hugh is a Christian, and I am a Unitarian, we agree that this seasonal celebration should be a time of sharing and caring for those less fortunate than ourselves, rather than a time to celebrate our own faith in a personal (and possibly selfish) way.

My hope for us both in 2015 is that Hugh will remain fit, and I will continue to improve in health after all the traumas we suffered in 2014. I hope also that the Sidmouth Unitarian congregation will continue to thrive, and be better known in the Town (our premises are now being used by many groups in the community). And the NUF also has our support in bringing the Unitarian message to more and more people who need a spiritual base to their lives.

Tony McNeile

I like the magic and the mystery of Christmas. It's all gone commercial - so what! Keeping the spending in proportion is the challenge. Otherwise I love the trees and the lights spread across the town centre, and decorations showing through house windows.

I like buying cards and making contact again with friends who we rarely see - and looking for presents.

For the Romans with their feast of Saturnalia when all the usual roles were reversed, it was a time of fun and madness - and it still is today. We gather for Christmas meals, we eat too much, imbibe too much sometimes. We celebrate. It is a target too, all the things that must be done by Christmas!

And there is a mystery within it. The midnight service with candles and carols has a magic all of its own. I loved our Christmas morning service when the children brought their toys to show. We sang the carols for the last time and washed them away with a glass of sherry afterwards.

There are times when we should not ask too many questions nor look for rational explanations but just go with the feelings. Let them be feelings of joy and love and mystery and believing that there really are angels.

Now if we could carry that joy and goodwill forward into the New Year long after the tree and decorations have come down, then who knows how much better the world may become.

And two articles taken from the Fulwood Old Chapel Christmas Messenger'

(Adapted from an article taken from livinglife4u.blogspot.com)

I am not a huge fan of religion, though I consider myself spiritual. Therefore, while I know the story of Jesus and even have a manger as part of my decorations, that is not what Christmas means to me. With that being said, Christmas is my favourite time of year!

There is something about the sights, sounds, smells, and just the overall atmosphere around the season. I love it all not just the day but the whole season. Christmas has a sort of magic quality to it.

When you were little the idea of Santa Claus coming was always a mystery but also such an exciting thing. You went and saw him at your local mall, wrote to him, and did your best to be good all year long. All so that you would make his "Nice" list and get a present under the tree from him. As you grow older the logical side of your brain kicks in and you tend to stop believing in Santa and say no way is he real.

Well I am here to tell you that he IS real - as real as you and me. And how do I know?

Because he IS you and me. He is the spirit of Christmas represented in all of us. Christmas means love, kindness, gratitude, giving over receiving, family & friends, magic, togetherness, and peace. All of those things are what Santa Claus is and represents. Santa,

through all of us and all the parents around the world, helps to bring presents and watch the behaviour of all of us throughout the year. Santa is the feeling of happiness, joy, and comfort that we all feel in the air around Christmas. It is the end of a year and it is time to look back at what has come and gone, and spend time with those who mean a lot to you. Why do you think when we watch movies like "Polar Express", "Miracle on 34th Street", "The Santa Clause", and even "Grinch" we all can't help but smile? Because even though we may not be little children waiting for a man in a red suit to come down the chimney, we still FEEL Christmas and what he represents.

So asking if you believe in Santa is not necessarily asking if you believe in the actual person so much as if you believe in the true spirit of Christmas. And if you do, hold it in your heart throughout the whole year, not just for a month or so at the end of the year. If you still believe and can still feel the magic of Christmas then you should be grateful and spread it to those around you.

Chris Ojan, a midwife

Do the bells still ring for you? As we approach Christmas and the New Year, many of the traditions and stories of Christmas have a deep significance for us, individually.

As a Midwife of over thirty years, I have been blessed to be part of the wonderful miracle of birth, time and time again. To me, nothing demonstrates God's Love, Light and Life, in the world, as much as a new baby. They arrive, a bundle of Love and Trust, fresh and new, bringing new possibilities and potential. The

birth of all babies should be a joyful, calm and peaceful event; the perfect manifestation of God's loving creation in the world.

Unfortunately, today, we live in a complicated, frantic and often fear filled world and we pick up on all these energies. Many people have not learnt to calm their thoughts and protect themselves from the hurly burley of life and are finding it increasingly difficult to switch off from stress. This can be seen reflected in the fact that even the wonderful, natural and timeless event of birth has become one often also filled with anxiety, fear and increasingly, complication.

Birth is a Natural process and as such, is honed throughout time to be instinctive, safe and smooth. The most uncomplicated births in my experience are usually those where the mother is free from stress and pain; relaxed, positive, trusting and accepting.

Whether we take the tranquil Christmas Nativity as a metaphor, or more literally, we might contemplate Mary being spiritually at peace, calm, relaxed and at ease, (despite the inadequacies of the birth place!) knowing she was truly Divinely guided, blessed and utterly safe and protected. What a wonderful gift for a baby to enter the world in an atmosphere of quiet and calm, looking about wide eyed and trusting, feeling loved and secure. No hustle and bustle, no interference from the world, (yet) no fear, only Love.

Our modern day scientific knowledge is a gift too. From it, we know that stress and fear (and the hormone adrenaline) are the 'enemies' of the birthing mum. Adrenaline blocks the action of oxytocin, the hormone of Love that is designed to flood the moth-

er's body during a smooth easy birth. Oxytocin is produced when a mother is undisturbed, relaxed and at ease and is a strong natural painkiller.

So, if in pregnancy, mothers become more self-aware and mindful, practice relaxation, release fear and reduce or eliminate stress, learning to trust and feel safe, then during birth, oxytocin can flow easily and the mother usually feels very little or no pain.

Oxytocin is a pheromone, which means it acts on others too, so when the mother is calm, and stress free, the effects of this hormone pervade the whole room. The whole scene is bathed in calm tranquillity and everyone, midwife included, 'feels the Love'. The birth becomes a truly awe inspiring and even spiritual experience; A blessed Nativity, even in today's hectic world.

Chris Ojari Midwife and Antenatal teacher.

<http://www.peacefulandcalmbirth.com>

Hypnobirthing coffee mornings are held at Fulwood Old Chapel

And finally, thank you to our readers for supporting us through the year. May you make your Christmas a time of joy and the coming year one of peace.

tony mcneile

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

Please send your comments to the editor,

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