

Order of Service
Attending to Grief in a Season of Cheer
December 13, 2009

Meditation and Prayer

Let us open our minds and hearts
To the place of quiet, to the silent prayer
For the healing of pain,
And the soft, gentle coming of love.

Readings

“Wild Geese,” by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
Love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours,
And I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
Are moving across the landscapes,
Over the prairies and the deep trees,
The mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese,
High in the clean blue air,

Are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
The world offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
Over and over announcing your place
In the family of things.

“For Loneliness,” by John O’Donohue

When the light lessens,
Causing colors to lose their courage,
And your eyes fix on the empty distance
That can open (on either side
Of the surest line)
To make all that is
Familiar and near
Seem suddenly foreign,

When the music of talk
Breaks apart into noise
And you hear your heart louden
While the voices around you
Slow down to leaden echoes
Turning the silence
Into something stony and cold,

When the old ghosts come back

To feed on everywhere you felt sure,
Do not strengthen their hunger by choosing to fear;
Rather, decide to call on your heart
That it may grow clear and free
To welcome home your emptiness
That it may cleanse you
Like the clearest air
You could ever breathe.

Allow your loneliness time
To dissolve the shell of dross
That had closed around you;
Choose in this severe silence
To hear the one true voice
Your rushed life fears;
Cradle yourself like a child
Learning to trust what emerges,
So that gradually
You may come to know
That deep in that black hole
You will find the blue flower
That holds the mystical light
Which will illuminate in you
The glimmer of springtime.

Sermon Attending to Grief in a Season of Cheer Rev. Bruce Davis (2209)

When it comes to the holiday season, especially when it comes to the American *cultural* phenomenon that we call Christmas, we find ourselves caught between competing emotions. When Bing Crosby croons his “White Christmas,” we sing along with him about the cheerful holidays of long ago—not sure whether these are memories or, more likely, visions of sugar plums, born of our yearning for joy and love in this holiday time. And yet, when Elvis sings of his loneliness and loss in his holiday hit, “Blue Christmas,” we’re all reminded that sorrow is a real part of who we are and must be during these latter weeks of December.

Bing begins with this:

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
Just like the ones I used to know
Where the treetops glisten,
and children listen
To hear sleigh bells in the snow

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas.
With every Christmas card I write,
May your days be merry and bright
And may all your Christmases be white

It’s a beautiful sentiment. It evokes children listening in awe to the sleigh bells amid the silence of falling snow. It invites us all to be happy and full of light. The white color of snow has long been used in our culture, especially emerging from our North-European roots, as a symbol of the good and the pure, and that comes across to me when I hear or sing this song as the Big Day approaches.

And yet, with apologies to Bing, not all in this holiday image is bright and beautiful. How *white* shall it be this year. White as the symbol of the good and the pure breaks down under closer scrutiny. Shall we be as

white as the new-fallen snow? Shall we be as white as Wonder Bread? The Currier-and-Ives-like scene in “White Christmas” projects a certain unreality. It comes from and favors a white culture. Where, in many dimensions, is the *color* of the season. Shall the children of Christmas all have white faces? Jesus, for one, most probably did not. Shall we limit ourselves to the lighter feelings of good cheer and avoid at all cost those darker feelings like sorrow and anger that may be called to the surface during this time of year?

Elvis’ holiday lyrics in “Blue Christmas” tell a truth that all of us will experience at times during these holiday weeks. Some of us will slip into nostalgia off and on, or we may find ourselves irritated by holiday commercialism. But for others of us profound Christmas Blues will be our primary experience of the season, born of grief and loss.

So Elvis answers Bing with this:

I'll have a blue Christmas without you;
I'll be so blue just thinking about you.
Decorations of red
on a green Christmas tree
Won't mean a thing dear
if you're not here with me.

When those blue snowflakes start falling
that's when those blue memories start calling.
You'll be doing all right
with your Christmas of white.
But I'll have a blue, blue blue blue Christmas.

Happy Holidays! Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! So do the Hallmark Cards shout out their good cheer. But what if we aren’t merry or happy? What then? Shall we *pretend* for the sake of appearances? For the sake of those who would be distressed to see us feeling what we are actually feeling?

I remember one of the toughest holidays of my life, during my mid-twenties. It was shortly before my first marriage collapsed. My partner decided to leave to be with friends in California for an indefinite time. That this took place a couple of weeks before Christmas was particularly hard for me. The reality of my pain was the more pronounced against the veneer of a happy season. I remember her parting words to this day. She said, “Be of good cheer.” She said it because the season said it. But more she said it because it would take some weight off her shoulders if I could be cheerful in her absence. But I was not cheerful. I was bereft. How hollow that “Be of good cheer” sounded and felt. How empty were the “Merry Christmas” greetings that year.

Author and teacher Marshall Rosenberg suggests that in any given moment we can feel only what we actually feel in that moment. There is authenticity and health in the experience and expression of our feelings as they are. And yet, allowing ourselves to feel sadness or loneliness in the holidays is counter to the culture of merriment that comes at us from all sides.

Let’s say I’ve just been reading an article about challenges to getting global CO2 levels down to 350. A friend comes up to me, wishes me “Merry Christmas!” and asks, “How are you.” My habitual answer would be “fine” or “doing well.” But in that moment I am actually feeling profound distress for the future of the human species on our planet. If I were to speak my heart in that moment I might say, “The truth is, right this minute, I don’t feel merry. I’m feeling fear for the future of humanity.”

One holiday season I went to my spiritual director about the blues I was feeling. A spiritual director is something like a counselor whose focus is to help with spiritual growth. “Why,” I asked, “am I feeling down? There’s nothing going on that is distressing me this year.” She indicated that many times, even if we don’t feel stress in our own life situation, we are feeling the stress of our planet. When forest in the Amazon is being razed to make way for herds of beef cattle, when a military offensive is under way on far continents, this is taking place in our own extended body. Even not knowing what is happening, we may feel the pain of the planet within us because we are connected to it.

The list is long of reasons for holiday blues. In a season dedicated to peace, many of us become more aware of violence and injustice at home and abroad. In a season dedicated to loving connections, many of us remember loved ones who are gone. Others of us find few friends, especially in a time of year when people spend so much time indoors at home. Wishing for loving community, we may find ourselves not included because those who got there first have little welcome for newcomers.

In each case there is a tension between what we wish for and what actually is. We wish for long evenings of laughter and joy with friends, but we don't seem to be able to find them or create them. We wish for a friend who is special and close, but we may be between dear friends at present. We wish to talk with a mother or teacher who recently or long ago has died. We wish to snuggle by the fire with an animal friend who is no more.

The holiday blues can come up because of stress in our lives, as well. Again there is the tension between how it is and how we would like it to be. Many of us in Snohomish County are feeling the weight of the recession this Christmas more intensely than even the last couple of years. The budget for presents for our children or grandchildren has evaporated. Job loss or prolonged unemployment brings anxiety into the family system in a way that everyone feels. Stressful times challenge otherwise stable relationships, and separation and divorce place a pall on holiday joy. Even the *prospect* of separation, coming out of stressed or chronically unsatisfying partnership creates a tension in the family circle.

Another important factor in the blues during this time of year has to do with the season itself and the diminution of light. Seasonal affective disorder can rob us of the energy that we usually rely on to keep us going. Though this is a biological phenomenon, akin to the bear who hibernates when the days become cold and short, there are no easy biological answers to it.

There are no easy antidotes to the holiday blues. But I will share with you four strategies that help me to survive the season year after year. They don't make the blues go away, but they can bring a light into the darkness that sometimes we feel:

- Get outside. Yes it's cold or wet or icy. But whatever shade of blue you are experiencing, cabin fever and sedentary days will deepen the shadow of your depression. So, I tell myself to get out and walk. Even if it's only at the mall, get up and move around.
- Slow down. One of the most profound tensions of the season for me is the speed of the life and the demands around me and the sluggish pace of my own mind and body. Using Mary Oliver's language, I can cause myself any amount of suffering when I try to goad and press the soft animal that I am to keep pace with the flurry of life around me. It would be like getting a hibernating bear to begin dancing. So I sit down. I slow down. I cut out the worrying for a while. I close my eyes in meditation. I walk *slowly* across the room, *slowly* out to my car, *slowly* into my office. I begin to march to the rhythm of a different drummer—my own self. My own natural speed this time of year is ever-so-much slower than the one that our Christmas culture implores us to take.
- Feel the grief that is there. Let it also be part of the season. Amid the acute sense of loss or the disappointment of unmet dreams, we all will experience some degree of grief. The first of five stages in any grief process, according to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is to deny the grief and to pretend that life is only cheerful. In our culture it is common for us to get caught in that denial. Christmas cheer and merriment sometimes ring hollow, as if the grief is lurking just behind the veneer of happiness. The practice I've found is this: just feel the weight of the grief in my body. That's it. Just feel it. Notice where it is and what it is. By bringing our attention to it from time to time, the intensity of the grief will lessen. Instead of being totally owned by it, we come to a place where we can simply observe that it is part of our total experience. Eckhart Tolle says that if we will do this practice regularly, like a meditation, step by step we will transform that grief into positive energy.

- Keep an eye on each other. When grief of loss turns into clinical depression in this dark season, it becomes a community problem. I may not even see how deep my depression is becoming until a loved one comments on how withdrawn I've become. Episodes of recurrent major depression are caught most early when family or friends notice that the spiraling down is beginning again. There is no question in my mind that some very effective medical work happens in response to deep depression. Counseling and medication make an enormous and life-giving difference.

I love to look at the newsletters of other UU congregations this time of year. Some advocate that we all jump into this season of good cheer with both feet. Others suggest that we would do better to attend to the sorrow that often accompanies the holidays. What I would like to suggest is that we do both. Don't have joyful holidays or sorrowful ones. Those are just abstract concepts. Be open for the great variety of emotion that presents to you moment to moment at this time of year. There is a movie from the early seventies called, "Love and Pain and the Whole Damn Thing." I love that title. That's the real world. For me, over the years, that's what Christmas is. Some love, some pain, and the whole range of life emotions. Be open to what comes, even if it's not what you expect. Be *surprised* by all variety of moments, whether they fit into the frame of a Hallmark Card or not.

My granddaughter, Charlotte, was running around the house on a cold day last week, swinging her blanket wildly. Then she ran to the couch where Mary was sitting and jumped into Mary's lap. They both let out a yelp, and they looked at each other with wide-open eyes.

"What was that?" I asked, myself surprised by their reactions.

Mary began to laugh and said, "Charlotte has just discovered static electricity!" Now classically that's not considered one of the important holiday moments. But for me it will be one of the highlights of the holiday season.

Be where and who you are right now. Feel what you feel right now. Notice and revel in the surprises. Your holidays will happen moment to moment, the love, the pain, the whole damn thing.

Sure, let it be a white Christmas. But let it also be a blue Christmas when it needs to be. And let the holidays be red and green and yellow and purple, too. Time, perhaps, for a new song: "I'm Dreaming of a Rainbow Christmas."

May it be so.