

Unplugging the Christmas Machine,  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda  
Rev. Fran Dearman, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016

*NB: This sermon relies heavily upon a book by Jo Robinson & Jean Coppock Staeheli, “Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love & Joy Back into the Season”, 1991. Available through Amazon.ca.*

## Unplugging the Christmas Machine

The hours of daylight grow shorter through December. We respond with our own brightness—the lights, the trees, the giving of gifts. It can be a lot of fun. It can also be a bah-humbug time, because reality will never equal our romanticized ideals. We can make this season a time for discerning our true values and celebrating in a way that is authentic, fulfilling, and meaningful.

Thousands of years old, winter solstice could be an anxious and fearful time. Ancient peoples responded with elaborate ceremonies: huge fires were kindled on hilltops hoping to lure the sun back again with their light and warmth. And every year it seemed to work!

The flames of our candles echo the great fires on the hilltops. The circles of yuletide wreathes echo the wheel of the turning seasons. The colours of the season—red, green, and white—echo the foliage with which we decorate our homes, evergreen with leaves and life. And may our lives be evergreen with love and hope and meaning.

Stories of an extraordinary birth of a child of wonder also converge with the winter solstice in many ancient cultures, including Egyptian, Persian, Greek, and Roman traditions—with the promise of new life and new hope.

One of the old, old traditions of the season that I particularly enjoy is the world turned upside down, what the Romans called Saturnalia. When I was serving as third mate onboard a merchant ship, at sea on Christmas Day, after supper the first mate sent me forward to cover his watch in the wheelhouse, because it would be the first mate and the chief engineer who washed the dishes that night, while the cooks put their feet up, the Newfoundland watchman played the squeeze box, and the motley crew sang all the songs they knew.

Another time, ashore with my Naval Reserve Unit in Victoria, we officers took off our jackets and put on frilly aprons to serve Christmas dinner to the ship’s company. The youngest of the ordinary seamen traded jackets with the grizzled Captain and sat beside him at head table, and a good time was had by all. Christmas can be fun; the hustle and bustle carry us through the dark cold nights.

Christmas can be quiet, also. One of my favourite memories of Christmas past is getting home late Christmas Eve for cocoa and long talks by the light of the Christmas tree. Christmas is a

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time for memories, for questions, for wondering. What about Santa Claus, children ask? How shall the adult respond?

As long ago as December 1896 (*Robinson p. 74*) Good Housekeeping magazine engaged that question. Tell the stories, they replied; but tell them, always, as stories. Let the child engage the story in his own time, in her own way. Tell the truth, tell the story, and remember that for children, as for all of us, there is a deep truth at the heart of a fairy tale.

There are other questions, this time around the wheel of the year. Have you ever woken up with a bubble of panic that you carry around with you all day? Like a carpenter nudging a spirit level, have you ever trod carefully through the day, keeping that bubble within bounds, keeping the panic in perspective? There are stories to be told that echo with loss and fear; perhaps the downtime of a winter holiday may help tell the story in perspective, with the balance of time passed. (One particular fear we face at this time is the documented rise in incidents of bigotry, misogyny, and racial scapegoating, as thuggish elements feel emboldened by the outcome of the recent presidential election in the United States. Let us not forget who we are, and that we are not alone.)

Life is a risky business—a random walk through a hazardous environment; but there is also reason for optimism, and gratitude. In some ways, life does get better. Take for example, smallpox. We remember polio, and typhoid, and smallpox. Some of us here carry the scars from the smallpox inoculation, about the size of a quarter, maybe high on your left shoulder? And some do not. We no longer inoculate against smallpox. Outside of the laboratory, smallpox is gone, history, eradicated.

There are many things we worry about, and should do, near and far. How do we tell that story? We tell it. We acknowledge it. We see it for what it is. We need not revel in catastrophic detail, imagining the worst. We need not deny it, either. We can put it in perspective. We can tell our truth. We can remember who we are, and what our values are. We can be mindful of the choices which still do rest within our power. We can acknowledge adult anxieties, so the children can know it's not their fault. We can relieve them, and ourselves, from the burden of an unnamed fear. We can name the fear, and face it. We can let our children help with solutions. Together we can seek out realistic perspectives, and hope.

For example, climate change.

The weight of scientific opinion recognizes that the climate is changing radically, and more quickly than anticipated, as a consequence of human activity since industrialization. We need to respond with real change. Now. And what does that mean at Christmas?

Part of our response is a religious engagement. In worship, in ethics, in values, in word and deed, we re-shape our story, we wrap the old story around new concerns. The Christmas stories take us back to nature, back to the realities of snow and cold and darkness, back to the reality of a

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homeless family finding shelter in a cave, among the animals, because there was no room at the inn. Human, oxen, cattle and dove, we're all in this together.

À propos, informing the chef, as they bear a fine roasted turkey with all the trimmings towards the festive board, that you've decided to become vegan or vegetarian, might not be one's best move. Timing is everything! Please do give the cook some lead-time!

The winter festivals take us back to nature, back to the realities of light and dark, of feasting and forgiveness, and the world turned upside down. I challenge you, this Christmas, to make some new tradition that engages the realities of nature, and the reality of climate change, and do something, do some one thing, to turn the world upside down. Or rights side up again....

And while we are saving the world, we might also give some thought to what we truly want out of Christmas this year.

Fortunately, much thought has already been addressed to this question, and field tested in workshops over decades, by the team of Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli. Robinson and Staeheli tell us that over time we have, to some extent, as a society, moderated our excessive seasonal consumption of rich food and alcohol. However, over time, seasonal spending has not diminished; if anything, it's gone up. In fact, many businesses count on Christmas spending for their annual profit margin. An economy driven by war and Christmas. Somehow this does not seem healthy.

The advertising plays into our romantic fantasies: happy families, gracious and kind; enough money, enough time; time for fun, warm times, safe times; times when we will be truly loved. We want to believe; we are vulnerable in this desire, and easily manipulated by guilt and doubt. And why would we not want these things? Love and acceptance: these are our heart's desire. But warmth and safety and love and acceptance and happy families, gracious and kind, these are not to be acquired in the marketplace, buying and selling.

Where will our heart's desire be found? Robinson and Staeheli invite you to take the Christmas pledge. "Believing in the true spirit of Christmas, I commit myself to: Remember those people who truly need my gifts; Express my love in more direct ways than gifts; Examine my holiday activities in the light of my deepest values; Be a peacemaker within my circle of family and friends; and Rededicate myself to my spiritual growth."

How do we get there?

We begin by recognizing that folks have different hopes for Christmas; so we need a range of possibilities. We need the freedom to define for ourselves what our role is to be. We need to make time for closeness and sharing. We need a time of relaxed calm. We need to consider our roles and how they will change, as we grow from child to adult, from receiver to provider. We

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need to consider how others we are close to will cherish their own memories from their families of origin, which may well differ from our own.

Robinson and Staeheli looked closely at what children really want from Christmas. They found that children want four things: Children want a relaxed and loving time with the family; Children want realistic expectations about gifts; Children want an evenly paced series of events with the family through the holiday season; Children want reliable family traditions.

Children want love and acceptance, as do we all. Children want to know that they are a priority with their parents, that they are more important than the busyness of the festive season. Children will want to be empowered to do stuff, and not just receive. Children want assurance that they are loved, and the security to grow, learn, and be happy in their environment.

You can't buy that at Walmart.

Perhaps the best gift one can give, to a child, to a friend, or to one's inner child perhaps, is to go for a walk together. One family I know would always go for a walk together on Boxing Day, around a certain lake; that was their reliable family tradition.

Some of these traditions are hidden rituals; you might have to ask. What do you remember, from your own childhood, or adult years? The way things are done, the way events are spaced out? The special place for a decoration? A much loved if slightly battered ornament for the tree?

Me, I fly home to Victoria at Christmas, most years; that has become very special to me. Christmas morning it's my job to make scrambled eggs, before we open gifts. A few days later we will go to Nanaimo to visit my aunt and cousins, and watch the pantomime their local theatre group stages each year. On New Year's Day I walk around the waterfront, and look for roses. In my home town of Victoria British Columbia, that is a not unrealistic expectation! And there's this tree ornament, a reindeer; this poor reindeer is down to three legs and one antler, but I love it all the more.

Christmas leads us into the past. We could get lost there. There will come times when we need to think more about establishing new traditions. We could think about doing something for others, which is a great way to find some perspective on one's own challenges. A shield of new traditions can protect us from the ghosts of Christmas Past. We could be intentional about this, and not just fall into whatever happens. We could take responsibility for accepting who we are, where we are; we could plan ahead; we could seek out balance; we could schedule down time, if that's what we need; we could schedule some meaningful activity, if that's what we need. We could examine our values, and try to bring our activities closer to our values.

So, what are our values, and how do we express them? Peace, at home and in the world? Time with family? A beautiful home? Church activities? Spiritual life? Music? Exchanging gifts? Parties, entertaining, visits? Reconnecting with relatives and friends? Doing something for

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others? Perhaps just simple down time for rest and renewal? Me, I think better when I get enough sleep and take time to clear my desk....

I would invite you to think about that, about what our values are and how we express them, and then think about what you might do to make that real, in all the messiness and incompleteness and imperfection of human life. Think about one small thing that is within your power to do, this Christmas.

In conclusion, Christmas and the holiday season can be a lot of fun. Solstice has been a special time since humans first noticed the turning wheel of the seasons. Each age of humanity faces its own challenges. The challenges, in our time, include the seduction of the marketplace, engagement with radical environmental change, and the economic realities of a global economy. We've seen worse. We'll see better. We can talk to one another about our fears and anxieties, and listen to one another as we put our concerns into perspective, and together seek out a better way. We can resist the hollow promises of a commercialized holiday. We can seek out and make real the activities that accord with our true values. And we might even have fun while we do it!

Merry Christmas!

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