

Winter Fuel

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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26 December, 2021



Wood Gathering © Rod E.S.Q. 2021

The song *Good King Wenceslas* is one of the few Boxing Day carols in common usage (though there are a few other traditional songs for Boxing Day, that are better known in different regions). Upon first hearing, the “plot” of the carol might be a bit tricky to follow, but the gist of it

is that a princely figure – Wenceslas – spots a poor man who is gathering winter fuel – firewood. Wenceslas asks his page about the man, and is told where the man lives, and the two of them set off to offer the man a hearty meal and firewood to help him through the winter.

The trek to the man’s dwelling was difficult in the bitter winter cold, and the page that came with Wenceslas was daunted by it. Wenceslas encouraged his page to literally follow in his footsteps in the snow, to minimize the cold’s bite while walking. Following Wenceslas’ leadership, they offer a blessing to someone else, which in turn enriches the life of all who offer from what they have to give.

Like many of the stories of this season, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish factual detail from legendary narrative. Wenceslas was a duke in Bohemia, rather than a king, though there are accounts of his charitable kindness. The specific tale described in the song, may or may not have happened, and if something like it did transpire, there is no way of knowing whether it was on December 26th, which is the feast of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr – the casual reference to the feast

of Stephen meant it could be sung as a hymn in church on that day of observance.

Yet, it is fitting that the story of an act of charity is recounted on Boxing Day, which has included traditions of alms-giving and charity. In the British tradition, there are times when money boxes were set aside for people in need. The specific practices shifted over the years, and at some other points in time, there have been customs of knocking on the doors of wealthier folks, and asking for donations for one's personal money box. More recently, we see elements of this practice in Christmas bonuses that are sometimes offered to employees, as well as in practices of extra giving around this time of year.

One lingering aspect of the Boxing Day holiday that we still see to this day, right here in Canada, is the fact that Boxing Day is a statutory holiday, in addition to the Christmas Day stat holiday. This reflects the commonwealth recognition that many workers are required to work on Christmas, by the very nature of their work. Boxing Day offers a kind of “deferred”, or extended, Christmas when folks can be ensured a holiday to spend with family or friends, and to take some well-deserved rest – to regather winter fuel in the wake of such a busy season.

I should mention that there are a few other traditions related to Boxing Day. Some continue to have currency in certain regions, while others have fallen out of fashion. In several countries, it's still often a day dedicated to watching sports – and I imagine a few of you indulge in this tradition... even if it's not strictly as a Boxing Day observance.

In the United Kingdom, killing a wren was considered unlucky, *unless* it was done on Dec. 26, so wren hunts were a part of Boxing Day. And while this is no longer a mainstay, a few of the other specific Boxing Day carols I could find were related to the wren's predicament. Similarly, fox hunting has been a popular sport on this day, though this has also been regulated away.

Of course, in Canada, Boxing Day has become synonymous with big retail savings. This can have a few meanings, in that it's an opportunity to even out the bank account, even if money boxes or bonuses weren't a part of the equation... though it also comes with a risk of glorifying excessive consumerism. There are different ways of refueling, and sometimes getting a good bargain that sets us up for the new year can go a long way, like a pair of new boots or an affordable new jacket, to keep us warm into the winter. (A lot of my must-need wardrobe has historically been financed by Boxing Week.)

And being "in need" might mean many different things in our community. It might mean having limited money, or limited food, or limited ability to have a reliable place in which to stay warm. Beyond physical and immediate needs, it may also mean being short on time, energy, company, and other opportunities to connect more deeply – with others and with oneself. It may mean feeling the need to look after our health and wellbeing – physical and mental.

Each of us will have different abilities to offer specific kinds of blessings to our neighbours. And each of us will also find times when we are in particular kinds of need, when we're in a place that we might do well to accept an offering to us, and perhaps even ask for the means to help us fulfill some of our most urgent needs.

Some charitable causes – supported by those among us who are able to do so – are sometimes labelled "band-aid" solutions: that is to say, short-term remedies that address immediate needs... needs that are often due to larger systemic issues. This does not make these causes less important – relief for immediate needs can make a big difference in someone's life *now*, be it our neighbour's life or our own. And contributing to short-term respite to ongoing challenges does not mean that we can't also work to address larger systemic problems – the kind of work that often takes much more time... sometimes multiple lifetimes. We can each do our parts, as we are able, at different times.

My friends, there is still a winter ahead of us, with a number of challenges still to face, and with opportunities to work together and in our own ways.

My friends, may we take time now, as our season continues, and gather up our winter fuel.

My friends, may we find blessings in offering those blessings that we are able to offer.

So may it be,
In the spirit of the season,

Amen

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Suggested Carols:

Boxing Day Carol – Good King Wenceslas

Words: Jason Mason Neale & Thomas Helmore

Music: 13th Century Spring Carol

TEMPUS ADEST FLORIDUM 7.6.7.6

Closing Carol #235 Deck the Hall with Boughs of Holly

Words: Traditional Welsh

Music: Old Welsh Carol

YULE Irregular