

Warming it Up

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Off the Scales © 2022 Rod E.S.Q.

I'll start today with a bit of a historical anecdote. It turns out that today is the birthday of Anders Celsius (who was born in 1701) – you'll likely recognize that last-name, as he is often credited with creating the

Celsius scale, which most of us use these days to figure out how to dress up before heading outdoors.

But the story is a bit more complicated – and interesting – than that... for one thing, some among us might use the Fahrenheit scale instead when figuring out our outdoor attire, and so do most of our neighbours across the border. When the subject comes up, you may hear some heated debates ensue – hopefully friendly ones – around the merits and pitfalls of each scale, and by extension, about the use of the metric system and the few places that resist using it.

But I'm going to skip that debate today, because I'm more inspired by the stories of the people who are associated with those temperature scales.

One of the first tidbits that I find surprising is that Anders Celsius never used what we now call the Celsius scale. He did create and use a similar scale, with the same size of degrees – but did you know it was upside down? With water freezing at a hundred degrees, and boiling at zero?

Dr. Derek Muller explains that he used this as a way to avoid having negative readings, which might aid in record-keeping. It was one of his

successors at the University of Upsala that eventually flipped the scale – possibly Carl Linnaeus. Furthermore, a different scientist called Jean-Pierre Christin also created a scale with zero as the freezing point of water, and 100 as the boiling point. So, the *C* in the thermometer could stand for Carl Linnaeus, or Jean-Pierre Christin, or Centigrade. Eventually a community of scientists decided to name the scale after Celsius, but you could argue that the *C* actually stands for the *Community* of scientists who worked on making temperature measurements useful.

And, while many of us who are used to metric units might sometimes look disdainfully at the Fahrenheit scale, we would do well to recognize the contributions that Daniel Gabriel Fahrenheit made to the community of instrument-making, and particularly to thermometer standardization. He promoted the use of mercury, and his thermometers were among the first to be consistent with each other, which was rare at his time. Even those of us who prefer Celsius have gained from the knowledge and techniques developed by Fahrenheit, and we now have the comfort of getting accurate readings when we want to know how to prepare when heading outside – regardless of what scale we might use!

And, I get the sense that a lot of us have been looking at these scales on the thermometer quite a bit lately! Whether it's a matter of checking to see if our body temperatures are at a healthy range, or trying to figure out how the shifting November weather affects our daily plans, these scales give an element of certainty as we face a meandering trend toward colder days for the next few months.

And it's not just cold... although the longest nights that come with the winter solstice are still a few months away, we can already feel the shorter days upon us... dinner time feels like night time, and with recent cold snaps and snowfalls, November has indeed felt like November lately.

And while the holiday time that includes Christmas is still some weeks away, many among us begin a time of expectation, with anticipation for celebration. The lighting of an advent wreath is one way that we can mark this time, and turn our attention toward what kind of warmth we may find in this cooling season.

Recently, the newspaper *The Guardian* had an article with some suggestions to try out, which might help bring some cheer as winter draws near. These range from listening to some favourite music you haven't heard in a while, to trying out a new food, to taking a mindful moment to take a pause and appreciate your surroundings.

Out of the 53 suggestions in that particular article in *The Guardian*, many are probably not for everyone, but what I noticed about them is that they include a combination of going back to tradition and seeking novelty. That is, finding comfort in older practices we may have let fall by the wayside, or looking for some excitement in things we may have forgotten could be options. Any of these can be a call toward mindfulness, so that we may make something more of this moment. A call toward mindfulness that may help us warm up, as we face the cooling days.

And intentionally seeking that warmth, for ourselves and others, is imperative during a season like this. Many of our holiday rituals are about offering warmth through what can be a harsh season. Be it bringing in a bit of evergreen nature from the outdoors to the indoors, making warm drinks that may also bring warm memories, or telling familiar stories that warm the heart, be they stories that have been told for centuries (like the Christmas story), or stories that simply remind us of last year, or that reunion where that funny thing happened, some years back.

For those of us who are fortunate to have a reliable home, it may also be a time to... get comfortable with the idea of staying indoors more than usual. Of course, over the past two years or so, staying indoors became

an emerging norm that came upon us with tremendous force – and was largely involuntary. But lately, the outdoors has become much more accessible to many of us this past year, and staying indoors may feel like more of a choice again.

Over the next month or so, we'll have an opportunity to exercise that option – we'll be able to get together on a Saturday – Christmas Eve – for some community warmth on a late December evening... something familiar, and still a bit different than usual. And on Christmas Day Sunday, we may all stay home and have a chance to hibernate, or hang out with other people we might not get to see all that often, except at this time of year. And the following Sunday, January 1st, we'll have an online-only service where we may all stay home while also having some community time online, in which those of you who feel called to it may share of your home, be it by offering a reading or poem, or perhaps some music or some other housewarming or heartwarming offering.

This is also a time to consider how we may warm each others' experiences – finding the spirit of generosity. Depending on your circumstances, you may find that you are in a position to offer a sense of warmth to others, by gifts of time, food, company, or money.

Or perhaps you may be finding yourself in a place where you could use some extra warmth. And it's worth remembering then that it is OK to reach out, be it to a friend, someone in your family, a community you've been part of, or some of the local services that offer support in cases of need. Help that is offered is only helpful when one is open to receive it.

We are also mindful of the people for whom a home is not a viable option to stay warm. These may include people whose homes have been destroyed, or the power to keep them warm has been disrupted, as is the case in many Ukrainian places. It is also true that people who live in our communities – down the street – have housing situations that may also be precarious.

As a community we are collectively able to offer something to warm the homes and the hearts of those around us. Some of us are in a position to offer support to refugees in many ways. Here, at Olinda, we also have an established practice – a ritual – of sponsoring a Christmas family, offering some essentials, like clothing, as well as things that may *sound* like luxuries – toys and other things that bring joy to children and families – but which can indeed be essential to warming the soul.

So, my friends, as advent beckons us to focus onto a holiday season of warmth in the face of cold and darkness, we take it as a call to action – a warm-up – into taking care of ourselves by warming our souls, being able to ask when our souls need warming, and seeking how we may warm the souls and lives of others around us, as we may be able to offer that warmth.

So may it be,
In the warmth of community,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening #226 People, Look East

Words: Eleanor Farjeon, 1881-1965, used by perm. of David Higham Assoc. Ltd.

Music: Traditional French carol, harmony by Martin Shaw, 1875-1958, used by perm. of Oxford University Press

BESANÇON

Hymn #225 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Words: Latin c. 9th cent., trans. Composite based on John Mason Neale, 1818-1866, recast

Music: Adapt. by Thomas Helmore, 1811-1890, harmony by John Weaver,

1937- , harm. © 1990 John Weaver.

VENI EMMANUEL

Closing #224 Let Christmas Come

~)-| Words: John Hanly Morgan, 1918- , © 1984 John Hanly Morgan

Music: English melody, adapt. and harm. by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958, © 1931 Oxford University Press

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