

“Red and Greener”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull and Diane Szymaszek
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
December 14, 2014

Jan

Red and green and sparkling silver and incandescent blue and shining yellow and pulsating purple, not to mention the highest possible decibel level as we enter the mall. One hour we've given ourselves to take care of the shopping list that we're not sure we even remembered as we ran out the door. How remarkable it is that those of us who celebrate Christmas to the cultural rhythms of our time don't go blind, deaf, or atrophied altogether.

I'm a self-confessed “Christmas lunatic.” I revel in Christmas, though I avoid malls—not so much as a spiritual practice, but because the high-intensity stimuli simply drive me nuts. This doesn't mean I don't consume. I have a list of family, friends, and strangers for whom I purchase gifts with a seasonal *joie de vivre* that flies in the face of Christmas red and greener and the sentiments of my friend and colleague Mark Belletini, announcing like some latter-day prophet:

“...come, Love greater than my longing,
silence greater than fatigue of tongues,
and haul my heart away from the undue frenzy of
the season, and bestow it to rest, proportion and
the haunting dark beauty of winter's long nights.”

We are just seven days from the briefest day of the year, just seven nights from the longest night of the year, when winter arrives with what Greta Crosby calls its “pregnant negativities.” Pregnant is after all what this season of Advent is about—expectation, anticipation, wonderment, bewilderment, and approach to a birth that has captivated humankind for centuries.

Diane:

I consider Christmas, and I have to resist the impulse to buy. I try to create gifts for heart and soul, taking my inspiration from two dear friends. Joanna Macy is a friend and mentor seasoned in the wisdom of Buddhism and the activism of reverence for this earth. Eleanore Milardo, or Ellie, was a gardener—a gardener not simply in the traditional sense but a gardener of spirit, as she created from native species her spiral garden and inspired me to invite you to create the Spiral Garden just outside these windows. Of course we don't really do the creating; we design, and Earth does the amazing work.

People hurry and scurry
running in all directions
mind scattered far from peaceful

What has happened to us
in all of these years
I hear people say again and again

These words of Ellie’s echo daily for me—especially so at this season when hurrying and scurrying are the order of the day. It takes a conscious act of resistance for me to heed Ellie’s words, but over the years that is what I have tried to do, live “fully each moment” quite often in spite of myself. I become attuned to what she taught me: that “God [that force of Love in the universe] hasn’t left. Grace is here, and I do “know celebration at its best.” For me, this is the spirit of Christmas and the spirit of life revered.

Ellie we lost to cancer a few years ago. I still miss her, though I feel her love and her teachings with me every day. Who she was and who she continues to be overlap with the truths embodied by Joanna—Joanna Macy. Just this autumn I spent a week at the Unitarian Universalist Conference Center in Rowe, Massachusetts studying, conferring, **sharing and** listening to and with Joanna and a number of new friends who gathered around the conference called, “World as Lover, World as Self.”

The work that we did at Rowe takes the form of a spiral, starting with feeling gratitude for the Earth and for life itself and then moves into feeling the pain of the Earth, the pain caused by us, understanding the Earth is a living being. Moving through the spiral permitted me to see with new eyes and connect with the lives that have preceded mine and to the future ones that will follow me. We then move out from the spiral to go forth with our newfound awareness and empathy to act on behalf of the Earth.

Jan:

It’s not just that you become attuned to a “less is more” ethic at this rampant season of consumerism. It’s that you become attuned to being one with the earth, air, water, and ground of being. Perhaps this is heightened at Christmas time as we, or *if* we, can take in the Christmas story without getting bogged down in that wrestling match of myth vs. reality.

The gifts that you’ve gleaned from Ellie and Joanna are lasting and priceless, Diane, and they resonate for you and through you again and again, most surely at this season.

A few years ago I was shopping—okay, Christmas shopping—with my daughter, Sarah, on the streets of Montpelier, Vermont, where she and her husband Robb have made their home with their now four-year-old son Forrest. Nestled on a shelf of the Bear Pond Bookstore was Bill McKibben’s little gem of a book, *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas*. McKibben is familiar to some of us as an eloquent advocate for greener living, for a sustainable approach to sustaining life on our planet. Encased in an eco-friendly cover, its slender size and convincing title sold me instantly. In the name of scaling down, I acquired. That evening I consumed every last page. No, I didn’t eat it; I read it, poring over the case made by McKibben for “a more joyful Christmas” with ready strategies for a “Hundred Dollar Holiday.”

I wonder how many of us made any of the gifts that we have given or will give this year—for Christmas, for Hanukkah, for whatever reason or no reason at all. I know that you, Diane, made chalices in a pottery class you took. While it helps to start out as the artist you are, your chalices are exquisite, and our goddaughter is receiving one. Somehow it seems symbolic of what you've been expressing that they're made of clay, of "ground."

Diane:

We return to our mother Earth, to the ground of our being. I think of one of the poems translated by Joanna. What a many-splendored gift she is—teacher, advocate, poet and translator. She translated the entirety of *The Book of Hours*, written and published just over a century ago by the Prague-born poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. One in particular surfaces, written like a prayer to the Earth:

Dear darkening ground,
you've endured so patiently the walls we've built,
perhaps you'll give the cities one more hour

and grant the churches and cloisters two.
And those that labor—let their work
grip them another five hours, or seven,

before you become forest again, and water, and widening wilderness
in that hour of inconceivable terror
when you take back your name
from all things.

Just give me a little more time!

I want to love the things
as no one has thought to love them,
until they're worthy of you and real.

"Dear darkening ground"—what an image as we wrap ourselves in the blankets of winter and darkness and hope for light and pause as we can through these holidays and holy days of light and hope.

Jan:

How I remember standing as a child next to my parents and brother and grandparents in a tiny Methodist church amid a vast cornfield, with the wind howling and snow blowing. But inside, on Christmas Eve, "all was calm; all was bright." That same Grandmother by whose side I stood singing carols in that modest farmland church where she had once played the organ *ironed* her Christmas wrappings year after year. She didn't know the term recycling, but nothing was wasted. She didn't know about being green; she knew about sustenance and survival. I recall too the Christmas my Mother sewed clothes for my favorite doll; I couldn't have been more thrilled. They taught me, however lamely I've heeded it, that we need not buy to be.

In the spirit of Saint Francis, that 12th century lover of animals and proponent of green sanctuaries meaning the sacred space of outdoors, Bill McKibben gathers his family and heads outdoors on Christmas morning. In the manner of St. Francis, they scatter grain and seed for the birds and other creatures whose daily task it is to forage their food from sites other than supermarkets. Granted, this is after emptying their stockings and enjoying breakfast, but how better to proclaim the good news of Christmas than by extending peace on earth to earth's more modestly consuming creatures—squirrels excepted perhaps, but it is Christmas!

Diane:

I anticipate this year a Christmas of less store-stuff. The chalices I made are stuff of the earth; and I drew such pleasure from working the clay, letting the shapes happen, and sharing the finished pieces with so many here who purchased them for holiday gifts. It's so easy to be consumed by consuming. Yet this year I look forward to a Christmas of a more, a different more—more singing, more walks, more time spent with people I love, more silence, more less.

My hope is that the promise of a child born with all the hope of each child ever born carries the promise that still shines through the child in each of us. It's a season tingling with promise and hope and reverence for the life-thread that binds us all to one another and this Earth on which we are guests.

My hope also is that you will take time to ponder ways to make your Christmas greener and simpler. You'll find a number of suggestions included as an insert in your orders of service.

My hope is that we can and will embrace the wonder of Earth and the promise of birth, the birth of new life in our midst.

Jan:

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

Mark Belletini, "Winter Sequence," in *Sonata for Voice and Silence*, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2008.

"It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," Words: Edmund Hamilton Sears (1810-1876); Music: Richard Storrs Willis (1819-1900), in *Singing the Journey: A Supplement to Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1993, 244-245.

Bill McKibben, *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1998.

Eleanore Milardo, "The Sacredness of the Rush," in *Sacred Journey, Healing Ourselves and Our Planet*, Running Water Press, 2008.

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Dear Darkening Ground," translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/joanna-macy-a-wild-love-for-the-world/extra/dear-darkening-ground-by-rainer-maria-rilke/7021>