

HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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The holiday season is the most poignant time of year—perhaps more so this year. The mother’s letter I read to you earlier illustrates that it can also be the most painful time of year, especially at times like these when thousands of American families are faced with wrenching financial hardship. As this single mother’s letter expresses so movingly, Christmas in America represents the convergence of two of the most powerful values in our cultural psyche: spiritual devotion and material consumption. In times of economic prosperity, these two value systems are interchangeable during the holiday season, expressed as “the Christmas Spirit”—the giving and receiving of gifts. Families can attend a religious service honoring the humble birth of Jesus, and then go home to celebrate their other religion of materialism by tearing open their Christmas gifts.

A value system such as this is called into serious question only when it fails badly enough to get everyone’s attention. There is little doubt that the part of our value system that is based on material success is in serious jeopardy. The god of the free market economy has failed millions of Americans, triggered by a tragic conspiracy between careless home buyers and the reckless lenders eager to exploit them. The champions of free-market competition who insisted on **privatizing their profits** without government “interference” are now begging the government to **socialize their losses**. The economic crisis we are now facing goes beyond the federal government’s role in bailing out financial institutions or American auto manufacturers. It is a crisis in the American value system that equates material success with spiritual meaning. It cuts to the heart of what values will guide our future. It is a crisis of the American spirit—a crisis that is felt most acutely during the holidays.

The Chinese ideograph for “crisis” combines the figure for “danger” with the one for “opportunity.” What are the dangers and opportunities in the crisis that dampens our spirits this holiday season? One of the dangers is familiar. It is the call to return to the golden past—to a time when the holiday season was defined exclusively by the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus. Its devoted followers resist what they call “the war on Christmas. Recently the conservative Christian organization Focus on the Family led by James Dobson launched a campaign titled “I stand for Christmas,” which encourages his followers to patronize only those stores that use “Merry Christmas” rather than “Happy Holidays” in their publicity. Apparently these folks are not aware that their Christian forebears hijacked the December date for Christmas from the popular Roman holiday of Saturnalia celebrating the birth of the sun god. (If we take seriously the Christmas story about shepherds tending their flock, it is most likely that Jesus was actually born sometime in the spring.) I consider the attempts to restore the holiday season as an exclusively Christian celebration to be a form of **religious imperialism**—the belief in the inherent superiority of one’s own religion combined with the attempt to impose that religion on others.

It is easy to identify the overt threats to the inclusiveness of the holiday spirit posed by groups such as Focus on the Family. But there is a second danger in the present crisis that is

more subtle yet more pervasive: **despair**. Day after day we hear wrenching stories from workers and their families whose lives have been turned upside down by the careless decision-making of industry executives. More than half a million Americans lost their jobs in November—the biggest monthly job loss in more than 30 years. Beginning in 1997, a team led by John de Graaf has produced a series of scathing books and documentary films organized around the theme of **affluenza**, which they define as “a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.”

“To produce goods at the lowest prices, we lay off thousands of workers and transfer their workplaces from country to country in search of cheap labor. We shatter the dreams of those workers who are discarded, and often shatter their families as well. The security of whole communities is considered expendable. Lives are disrupted without a second thought. . . . Indeed, no system seems as effective as the unrestrictive free market in delivering the most goods at the lowest prices to consumers. In the Age of Affluenza, such success has become the supreme measure of value. But human beings are more than consumers, more than stomachs craving to be filled. We are producers as well, looking to express ourselves through stable, meaningful work. We are members of families and communities, moral beings with interest in fairness and justice, living organisms dependent on a healthy and beautiful environment. We are parents and children.” [John de Graaf et al., *Affluenza* (2nd ed.), p. 53]

In this holiday season of 2008, I am most concerned about the impact of our present crisis on our children. The Great Depression of the 1930s left an indelible mark on everyone, but especially on those who experienced it as children. Surprisingly, what they recall is not so much the hardship and deprivation of that difficult period in their lives, but the **resiliency and mutual support** that carried them through it. We didn't have much, they say, but what we lacked in material goods we more than made up for by sharing what little we did have with one another. **We knew that we were in it together.**

I believe that same indomitable spirit of “in it together” will carry us through our present crisis. From that perspective, it may be viewed from the second meaning of the Chinese figure for crisis: as an **opportunity** for redefining our values during this holiday season. As Unitarian Universalists, we can play a part in several ways. December is the month for celebrating the fact that America is the most multicultural, multifaith nation in the world. Because we embrace religious pluralism wholeheartedly, we must oppose the attempts of religious imperialists from the Christian right wing to claim the holiday season as an exclusively Christian celebration. Even as we celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25th, we must also actively support the pagan celebration of Winter Solstice on December 21st, the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah on December 22nd, and the African-American celebration of Kwanzaa beginning on December 26th.

As a multifaith nation, we owe it to ourselves and our children to learn more about the many different faith traditions of the world. Many UUs pay lip service to religious diversity without bothering to learn more about what the major world religions are really about. Let me invite you to attend the adult religious education class that I will be offering once again starting in January. Recently I discovered an excellent resource for parents to explore religious diversity with their children. It's a book titled *Soul Sunday: A Family's Guide to Exploring Faith and Teaching Tolerance*, by Carrie Brown-Wolf, who was raised as a Protestant Christian and later

married a Jewish man. This book provides a summary of the world's major religious traditions, but more importantly, it offers a year-round guide for parents to explore spiritual issues with their children. After our service today, I will be discussing this book with the bimonthly parents group co-led by Fran Clark and me.

Let me also mention another valuable resource for parents: Debra Haffner, who is both a nationally recognized expert on parenting issues, as well as an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. Her article, "Raising a Mensch: The Importance of Ethics and Spirituality in Your Child's World," appeared in the Fall issue of *UU World* magazine. This article is a chapter from her book titled *What Every 21st Parent Needs to Know*, in which she describes four different parenting styles: permissive, authoritarian, uninvolved, and affirming. She strongly advocates the affirming approach. "Affirming Parents," she says, "are both nurturing and firm. They run their families as a 'limited democracy.' They love their children extravagantly, but it is clear that they are in charge. They are equally demanding and responsive. They set clear standards for their children's behaviors, but offer explanations for these standards and are open to give-and-take with their children about what the standards for present and future behavior should be. They affirm their child's good qualities. They are actively involved in their children's and teens' lives but allow their children age-appropriate independence. . . . One might call these Goldilocks parents: neither too strict nor too permissive, they seek to get it 'just right.' [pp. 28-29]

The most important thing that we can instill—in our children and in one another—is **hope**. Hope does **not** mean that we will get what we want eventually. It means that **together** we can transcend the difficulties that face us. Hope lies at the core of the human spirit. Hope is what sustained the survivors of the Holocaust. Hope for a better future is the animating force of the holiday spirit. In the words of Dorothy Day:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort.
They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.
A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions.
Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.
No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.
There's too much work to do. [*Singing the Living Tradition*, # 560]