

## LIGHT AND THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT

### Minister's Reflections on Christmas Day 2011

Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

As I was driving home after our Christmas Eve service last night, I was struck by the variety of colored light displays along the way. The commercial Christmas industry continues to provide new ways for people to light up their homes, their front yards, even their tractors with more sophisticated decorations, including dancing lights and **inflatable** Christmas figures. These displays are impressive when lit up at night, but they also seem oddly pathetic as they lie deflated on the ground during the daylight hours. But I also admire all the time and money that people—especially those of modest means—have invested in sending their light out to everyone who is passing by in the darkness.

Throughout human history, the winter holidays have celebrated the **triumph of light over darkness**. Contrary to the complaints of some contemporary Christians, celebrations of the winter solstice have always been multicultural—reflecting our common experiences since ancient times. The late UU minister Carl Seaburg offers an excellent summary in the introduction to his anthology titled *Celebrating Christmas*. “Elaborate ceremonies took place. As the critical moment approached, huge fires were kindled on the hilltops to imitate the light and warmth of the sun, and lure it back again by magical means. When it became apparent that the days were lengthening instead of shortening, that the sun was returning, the feelings of relief and rejoicing were expressed in the greatest celebration of the year. . . . In most parts of northern Europe the houses were decorated with greenery during this season. The symbolism here is the same as that of the fire of the Yulelog. Just as the fire and heat were supposed to attract the sun back, so the display of evergreens was designed to encourage the rebirth of the rest of nature, now lying stark in the chill of apparent death. The name used by the Romans for this celebration was Saturnalia.

“But the most significant date in the emergence of Christmas as we know it now was 46 B. C., when Julius Caesar introduced the Babylonian calendar into Rome, making it the so-called Julian calendar. ‘From that day onward,’ writes Arnold Toynbee, ‘December 25<sup>th</sup> became

*Natalis Invicti*, “the birthday of the Unconquered God” for all the inhabitants of the Roman world; and the festival already had, for them, part of the meaning it has today for Christians.’ . . . The symbol of the Unconquered God, naturally enough, was the sun itself, the giver of life to all on earth. It was portrayed as a flaming disc, sometimes with human features inscribed upon it. For several centuries this symbol and the festival of *Natalis Invicti* continued to play a very great part in the life of the Roman Empire.

“It was not until the fourth century of our era that there came the first attempt to put Christ into Christmas. The first mention of a celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25<sup>th</sup> dates from the year A. D. 336 [i.e., **three centuries** after the life of Jesus]. . . . Throughout the west the festival of *Natalis Invicti*, the rebirth of the Unconquered Sun on December 25, became Christmas Day. It retained many of the features of the earlier [pagan] festivals: the lights, the giving of presents (which had been a prominent feature of the Saturnalia) and the decorating of houses and churches with greenery. The process went ahead very successfully. The origins of the old pagan customs were largely forgotten, and they were all given a new Christian interpretation.” [Carl Seaburg (ed.), *Celebrating Christmas*, pp. 4-5, 7] I can imagine how conservative Romans of that time might have grumbled about how the **real meaning** of Saturnalia had been undermined by these upstart Christians, who were trying as it were to “take the Saturn out of Saturnalia.”

Of all the traditions that converge during the holiday season, the one symbol that unites them all is the symbolism of **light**. Here on the table are two symbols of light—one ancient and one modern. Today we will not be re-enacting the rituals that accompany them, but I would like to talk about their symbolic meaning. The Jewish observance of Hanukkah celebrates the restoration of Jewish customs when that tradition was threatened with extinction by external forces—Greek culture in general and the occupying army of Syria in particular. Like so much of ancient Jewish history, this story revolves around armed conflict, in this case a group of armed rebels, Judah and the Maccabees, who actively resisted the external threat to their religious way of life. By today’s standards, they would be labeled as insurrectionists or even terrorists, because they attacked and killed not only the foreign soldiers but also leaders within Jewish society who they thought were cooperating with the enemy to wipe out their religion and culture. As we have

seen in the recent uprisings in the Middle East, revolutionary change rarely happens without internal violence and civilian casualties.

The Maccabean rebels eventually drove out the foreign invaders and restored control of the holy temple in Jerusalem to priests who were committed to preserving the ancient Jewish customs. The reconsecration of the temple was planned for eight days, but it was discovered that there was only a single day's supply of consecrated oil. Like the Christian story of Jesus' birth, there is a miracle at the heart of the Hanukkah story—in this case the miraculous replenishment each night of the sacred oil to fuel the candles for the entire eight-day celebration. Let me call your attention to the candle at the **center**, known as the *shammes*, which serves as the candle to light each of the others throughout Hanukkah. The word *shammes* is derived from the Hebrew word *shamash*, which means “to serve.” We might think of the *shammes* candle as the “pilot light” for the other candles.

There is a much more recent holiday tradition that also makes use of the symbolism of lighted candles: **Kwanzaa**. Kwanzaa is a non-religious African-American holiday celebrated December 26<sup>th</sup> through January 1<sup>st</sup>. It was introduced in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, and it interweaves African traditions with American customs. Like Hanukkah, the observance of Kwanzaa involves the lighting of candles on consecutive days. Each of the seven candles represents a cardinal virtue, expressed in both English and Swahili. There are three red, three green, and one black candle. The candle that attracts my attention is the black one in the center, which is lit on December 26<sup>th</sup>. Like the *shammes* candle of Hanukkah, the central black candle of *Umoja*, the Swahili word for **one-ness**, serves as a symbol of **unity**.

And of course we Unitarian Universalists have our own unifying symbol of light: the **flaming chalice**. Newcomers to our tradition sometimes wonder why we make such a big deal out of lighting the chalice at the beginning of our services. The lighted chalice has its own rich and complicated history. It was first designed by an Austrian artist named Hans Deutsch as an official-looking insignia that appeared on fake passport documents for Jewish refugees who were desperately trying to escape from the Holocaust during World War II. After the war, the flaming chalice was adopted as the official emblem of the Unitarian Service Committee as a symbol of

resilience in the face of injustice. Eventually it was adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association as an inclusive symbol for (in the words we often speak at the end of our services) “the light of truth, the warmth of community, and the fire of commitment.”

Last Sunday’s service included a simple ritual of smaller candles radiating outward from a central candle. Rev. Barbara Gadon, who spoke here last spring, offers an example of how powerful this symbolism can be. A family had lost their two-year-old son to leukemia after a valiant attempt to save him. At first they wanted only a brief graveside service. “Soon it became apparent that much more was needed, as scores and scores of people were going to come. We sometimes don’t know what a light we are, even in a brief span of time. They didn’t fully realize this about their son.” As Barbara describes the memorial service, “We ended with a large candle in the middle of a table to represent his life, and surrounded it with smaller candles. People were invited to come and light a candle from the larger one to express how his life touched their own. And so they came forward, silently, tearfully, some hesitantly. And when all 300 or so had come and lit a candle, we blew out the large candle, and said, ‘The light that was his life on earth has gone out; but look at the light he has left behind.’ . . . *Even if you only live less than two years, you are light*, those candles said. **You touch the world.**” [Barbara Gadon, “You Are the Light of the World,” *Quest*, Dec. 2011]

To me, light is a universal symbol of human hope and resilience. The burning light in the center of our chalice, the *shammes* candle in the the menorah, the unity candle in the Kwanzaa *kinara*, the center candle at the little boy’s memorial service—all serve as the source of light for others without being diminished in the process. That is the very nature of light. Unlike other forms of matter or energy, light **increases** as it spreads. **What a rich metaphor!** Deep within each of us there shines a candle. Sometimes it burns brightly. More often it flickers faintly like a pilot light. And sometimes it seems that it might disappear completely. In sharing our light with others, we nourish their light even as we brighten our own. Or we may need support from others in order to reignite our own inner light. “Sometimes we have to let go of the darkness to see the light.” [Eugene R. Widrick, in *Celebrating Christmas*, p. 135] My holiday wish is that you will use your inner light to light just **one other candle**. As Jesus told his followers, “You are the light of the world.” In the coming year, may each of us be a light to the world around us.