

Roger Jones

December 20, 2009

Family Minister

UU Society of Sacramento

Hymns: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,"
"Deck the Halls," "All Beautiful the March
of Days."

WORDS ON WINTER 1

I grew up in the Midwest, and lived in Indiana and Illinois until my mid-30s. We had cold winters there, but you could not count on a white Christmas—it didn't snow that often or stay that cold. Twelve years ago I moved west, to the San Jose area. That was where I learned that winter can happen without snow. One sunny afternoon in San Francisco I sat at an outdoor café, without a coat—it was too warm. I kept saying to myself: "It's December 31st! I can't believe it!" Winter in the Bay Area, as well as in Sacramento, has lots of fog early in the morning, clear sunny days, chilly nights, and rain.

It's pleasant here, and by now I'm used to our California climate. Yet Midwestern weather patterns are imprinted on my soul. This makes it hard for me to keep track of dates and seasons. Two weeks ago I strolled in my neighborhood where a strong wind had showered the streets with brown leaves, and kept enough yellow and red leaves on the branches of the big trees to play with the bright warm sunshine. The wind was strong and a bit chilly, so I walked on the sunny side of the street. I said to myself, "What a perfect October day." Then I remembered that it was December and there were 20 shopping days till Christmas.

Images of winter time in poetry, songs and essays are dominated by ice and snow. Memories are etched in frosty words and pictures, even though much of this country's population lives in regions where snow seldom falls.

The music and readings in our Unitarian Universalist hymnals reflect the New England origins of our faith tradition when it comes to climate and weather. Snow, snow, snow. Not many words to honor the rejuvenating rain of the western winters. No poetry to evoke the longings we feel in Sacramento during July and August: I mean longings like *Get Me Out of Here!* No lines about our summer night's cool release: our beloved Delta breeze.

In the Bay Area I came to love how the hills turn green in the winter, soaking up the rains after the summer heat has taken the moisture and color from the grasses. The poet Karl Shapiro wrote a poem of *his* appreciation of our Central Valley winters. Formerly a professor at the University of California, Davis, Shapiro called his poem *California Winter*¹, simply enough. Here's the last few stanzas:

And skiers from the snow line
driving home
Descend through almond orchards,
olive farms.
Fig tree and palm tree - everything
that warms
The imagination of the wintertime.
If the walls were older one would
think of Rome:
If the land were stonier one would
think of Spain.

But this land grows the oldest living
things,
Trees that were young when
Pharoahs ruled the world,
Trees whose new leaves are only just
unfurled.
Beautiful they are not; they oppress
the heart
With gigantism and with immortal
wings;
And yet one feels the sumptuousness
of this dirt.

It is raining in California, a straight
rain
Cleaning the heavy oranges on the
bough,
Filling the gardens till the gardens
flow,
Shining the olives, tiling the
gleaming tile,
Waxing the dark camellia leaves
more green,
Flooding the daylong valleys like the
Nile.

In appreciation of our own winter
wonderland, and the rains that renew the
land, let's make it rain today. As a minister
I do not claim the power of prayer to bring
on rain, or knowledge of any incantations,
but our other minister does. Doug, please
make it happen.

WORDS ON WINTER 2

I have a confession. I am a
Christmas-season crank. Why else would I
be wearing a tie with Dr. Seuss's "Grinch
Who Stole Christmas" on it? And why else
would a best friend have given it to me years
ago if she didn't know this about me!

"It's the most wonderful time of the
year," the song goes, but not for me. Every
December, as nights lengthen and
obligations pile up, I have bouts of feeling
overwhelmed, annoyed, sad, and downright
unspiritual. The reasons may include the
shortness of daylight, unhappy memories of
holiday seasons from my youth, and the race
to get so many things done before the
December 25th deadline. Most years I don't
feel ready for Christmas ...till February.

December makes me feel inadequate
as a minister. Our UU tradition validates
many kinds of religious observances as well
as civic and secular ones. However, to be as
inclusive as possible in making time for
those observances, we'd have to make time

for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany for
starters--but also Hanukkah, Kwanzaa,
Solstice, Human Rights Day, World AIDS
Day, Our Lady of Guadalupe's Day, Pearl
Harbor Day, New Year's Day, the Islamic
New Year and the Hindu observance of
Diwali, in years when it falls in December.
Maybe you've thought of a seasonal
observance that I've overlooked.

Last Monday I was leading an adult
enrichment class, and we included the
lighting of a Menorah, to acknowledge
Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights.
One member asked why we had put a
Christmas tree in the sanctuary so early in
December, but we didn't have a Menorah in
here last Sunday, right in the middle of the
eight days of Hanukkah. Trying to be non-
defensive, I explained that our tree trimming
party had been early this year because I was
organizing it and was going to be out of
town last Saturday. And the Menorah? This
year, it slipped by me. Last year, it didn't.
Fortunately tonight we have an enthusiastic
team of lay leaders organizing the Winter
Solstice ritual and potluck dinner, so I'm
confident it *will* happen. All I have to do is
remember to show up!

The month of December is an
accumulation of celebrations, a month when
holidays are added but not replaced. But
there were simpler times! After the Puritan
revolt in England in 1645, Christmas was
cancelled. When Massachusetts was a
Puritan colony, Christmas was against the
law from 1659 to 1681 And "anyone
exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined
five shillings."ⁱⁱ And I thought that I was
cranky!

In years past—long past—winter
was a time to start slowing down, at least in
cold northern climates. The growing
darkness and harsh weather would force
people to ease their pace, huddle together,

stay close to home, and gather round the fireplace, the hearth. A century ago in many parts of the country, the wood-burning fireplace was a household's center of life, drawing folks together for warmth. Now the wood-burning fireplace is not usually a source of heat or a place for cooking in a house, but an architectural decoration. It's a source of nostalgia for an era that many of us didn't experience. Also in earlier times, winter provided obstacles to traveling large distances—this kept life simpler and slower too, if no less difficult. Now, the speed of modern travel and the comfort of warm cars has made it easy to become “heedless of the wind and weather.” Of course, we're *lucky* to be able to travel—except for the times we're like those poor people now snarled in the snowfall on the East Coast.

So, noting such dramatic exceptions, I still think that in our time the winter cannot *require* us to slow down, especially in this local climate. Winter can't make us--but it still invites us--to take some time, stay inside, and go inward personally, to reflect and rest.

Sometimes the only thing that can make us pause or slow down is not our conscious choice but a crisis, like freezing rain, a power outage, an illness. A hardworking friend has told me that he rarely has to take sick time and stay home, but when he does get sick it gives him permission to let go. It *insists* that he let go. Being sick enough to have to stay home in bed--but not so ill that you are totally out of it--can be like a vacation, only you don't get frequent flier miles for it. Of course, many workers have no paid sick time for family needs or personal illness, and for those without health insurance, an illness can be a disaster, rather than a break from hard work.

Maybe it's better not to count on a crisis to slow us down. It takes intention and effort to take a break from our

demanding lives. How about that—it takes effort to let go! For example, I try to counteract my December stress by keeping to my morning meditation and to my exercise routine as much as I can. I try to get a good night's sleep. I'm not sure *any* of it works. Even with all this, I still feel crazy, chaotic and cranky! I can barely imagine how much worse off I would be without some ways to ground myself. Actually I can remember Decembers when I was much more frenzied. Once I backed into someone in a parking lot. Another time, I filled my gas tank at a self-serve station and drove a mile down the road before I realized that I hadn't paid.

I guess I'm better now. I still dislike the early sunsets of this time of year, but I try to counteract my resentment by getting up from my desk in the afternoon at 4:30 or 5:00 and going for a short walk in the neighborhood. It's a way to ease myself into the evening, to greet the darkness instead of cursing it, as well as to get one last glimpse of daylight. This helps me think of winter as an gentle invitation, rather than as a curse. A song written by Shelley Jackson Denham says: “Dark of winter, soft and still, your quiet calm surrounds me. Let my thoughts go where they will; ease my mind profoundly. And then my soul will sing a song, a blessed song of love eternal. Gentle darkness, soft and still, bring your quiet to me.”

I can't say for sure that any spiritual practice makes a big difference in my experience of the season, but I trust that it helps, even I'm not able to do it every day. It's act of faith that something is going on under the surface of life, something is worth waiting for. That's the message of our UU spiritual heritage: Something is worth waiting for--in every single person, in each one of us. The late Andrew Wyeth, a painter from Pennsylvania, said he preferred the landscape of a northern winter to that of

spring. He said: "Something waits beneath it -- the whole story doesn't show."

By the time Christmas is here, I *may not* have accomplished all my tasks and goals for the month, and I will have had my sad, anxious and cranky times. But I am surprised now and then, when I can see a bigger picture, can feel that things are okay however they are happening, however they might happen. If I don't spend energy fighting against the unpleasant moments of life, I make room for the hidden, pleasant moments to emerge. I make room for gladness and grace.

I've been thinking of life as a garden, in particular a west-coast winter garden. Rosalie Wright has written that winter "is the quietest time in a garden. But just because it looks quiet doesn't mean that nothing is happening. The soil, open to the sky, absorbs the pure rainfall while microorganisms convert tilled-under fodder into usable nutrients for the next crop of plants. The feasting earthworms tunnel along... preparing [the soil] to welcome the seeds and bare roots to come."

Maybe some of you can find a simple practice to give yourself: taking a break, sitting in silence, noticing the breath, giving thanks, or otherwise choosing to give yourself a moment before doing the next thing. To me, that's the wisdom of the season—an invitation to tend our lives as gently as gardener in the winter.

Winter is a time of preparation—of watching as well as tending. This means both activity and waiting, motion and rest. Life's gifts can't be ripped open like a wrapped package. If we watch and wait, and give some attention and faith to what is under the surface of life, its gifts open themselves.

Every person's life is a reason for gratitude. It's a gift. Life is a gift worthy of tending like a winter garden, worth our patience and our attention. May you make

room for blessings this coming week, this winter season, and in all the days to come. May you be blessed.

So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/california-winter/>

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<http://www.history.com/content/christmas/the-real-story-of-christmas/an-outlaw-christmas>