

**A Season Full of Rituals**  
**Yule Sunday, December 18, 2022**

AN ALL-AGES SERVICE IN WHICH WE DECORATE OUR TREES ON THE CHANCEL

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Homily by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

This time of year is filled with rituals. Some are decidedly religious commemorations; other are secular celebrations, and many are a mix of both. Some rituals are centuries old, even though they may not look the same now as when they began. Other kinds of rituals are a few years old, perhaps just as old as the child whose arrival to a family spurred new traditions. There's a ritual in my Sacramento neighborhood which I think is a few decades old. I've gone to see it every year since I moved there. It's a few residential blocks featuring over-the-top Christmas lights. I enjoy taking visitors and newcomers who've never seen it.

For example, a few years ago, friends from Reno passed through Sacramento and stopped by to go out for dinner with me. They brought their sons—one was 4 and the other 10. After dinner, I walked them down the street to the area near the corner of S and 53<sup>rd</sup> Streets. Every December nearly all the neighbors hang holiday lights from their houses and cover the trees in their yards with more lights. There are some inflatable cartoon figures and painted wooden artworks of Santa's elves in the workshop. Please note, this area is not the Fabulous 40s, a famous holiday destination, which features lights hanging over long and wide boulevards and larger-than-life installments on deep, high lawns. This is a small-scale operation on modest yards for just a few blocks off the main street. Yet it is an extravaganza.

There are lighted arches twinkling over the sidewalks, which make it feel like you're going through a tunnel of light and color. You're not likely to find a tree without lights; same goes with the houses. As I walked my friends through this area, the parents ooh'ed and ahh'ed at the flashy displays almost as much as their kids did. "Look at that one!" they shouted. And they weren't the only ones—we shared the sidewalks with many people strolling, walking, and rolling to gawk at the sights. As we walked back to my place a few blocks away, the 10-year-old asked his parents if he could visit me at my house and stay for a week. "We'll see" was the answer.

In the company of these newcomers, what I felt was a vicarious experience of wonder. Watching their experience nudged me to appreciate my quirky neighborhood extravaganza once again. It is both familiar and magical. This is the role of rituals. If my neighbors left up their holiday displays all year long, it would be too familiar. It wouldn't be magical. Even when some of the displays don't have much that's religious about them other than the occasional glow-in-the-dark Nativity scene, there's something special, even something sacred, about this annual appearance of neighborly exuberance.

The Reverend Quinn Caldwell says that one of the reasons people love this time of year so much, is that it "lets us glimpse the world" from a sacred point of view.

In other words, rituals invite us to be open to those moments in our ordinary lives when we can behold the world as a blessing, as wondrous, abundant, filled with surprises. Rituals invite us to reconsider familiar things in life and appreciate them as special.

Think of lights and color, candles and gift-giving and of course, eating food. Eating a meal is an ordinary, daily activity if we are fortunate. And it's also a blessing. And think of the

simplicity of kindness. We should of course be kind and generous all year, but certain seasons provoke us to be sure to do so—like the season we’re in right now. Gestures of kindness, good will, generosity, or gratitude at a special time can remind us that these essential virtues are how we are called to live as human beings, all the time.

Whether any of the December traditions and rituals do it for you or not, the same effect can happen in other ways at other times of year. It is worth taking note of the seasons, occasions, and special times which nudge us to remember the values we seek to live by at all times.

By marking off a day or a set of days as special ones, such traditions invite us to consider what values are true, important, and sustaining. By marking time in a special way, a ritual can remind us that all times are sacred. All days are sacred because every day is a gift. This is an ordinary truth, and it is also a source of wonder. So may it be. Amen.

### Words for Lighting the Chalice

Now it is time to kindle the flame of our Chalice, the symbol of Unitarian Universalism. Today we light the Chalice in commemoration of Hanukkah. Tonight will be the first night of Hanukkah in the Jewish tradition. Known as the Festival of Lights, Hanukkah calls to mind an event 2,200 years ago, when the Jewish center of Jerusalem was occupied by the Syrian empire. The Jewish Maccabees were able to defeat the invaders and recover their temple in Jerusalem. Then, in order to resume the practice of their faith, they had to repair the temple and then rededicate it. The ritual of purification should take a week, but they had only a little bit of oil—only enough oil for the lamp to burn for just one night.

Each night, however, there was more oil in the lamp, so it could burn again for one more night. This took place for 8 nights. This is the Hanukkah miracle. For this reason, in Hanukkah, Jewish families light the candles in a Menorah. Every night an additional candle is lit to mark the progression of the 8 days. The story reminds us of the power of patience and persistence in our lives and in our communities.

These words are adapted from Amanda Udis-Kessler, Unitarian Universalist musician. We light the Hanukkah candles in wonder, joy, and gratitude, each candle a miracle.

When the Holy Temple was rededicated at the time of the Maccabean liberation battle, only one day’s worth of oil remained, yet it burned for eight days so we light candles in remembrance.

So, in a season of darkness and chill,  
let us rededicate ourselves to the miracle of light and warmth.  
to the miracle of trust and faith  
to the miracle of hope and love  
to the miracle of courage and commitment  
to the miracle of resistance and freedom.  
Yes, let us rededicate ourselves...  
to the miracle of healing and care  
to the miracle of peace  
to the miracle of love.

Reading: “The Moment of Magic” by Victoria E. Safford

This is a reading for the Winter Solstice and the festivals of Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and Christmas. The Reverend Victoria E. Safford has served UU congregations in Massachusetts and Minnesota.

Now is the moment of magic,  
when the whole, round earth turns again toward the sun,

*and here's a blessing:*  
the days will be longer and brighter now,  
even before the winter settles in to chill us.

Now is the moment of magic,  
when people beaten down and broken,  
with nothing left but misery and candles and their own clear voices,  
kindle tiny lights and whisper secret music,

*and here's a blessing:*  
the dark universe is suddenly illuminated by the lights of the menorah,  
suddenly ablaze with the lights of the kinara,  
and the whole world is glad and loud with winter singing.

Now is the moment of magic,  
when an eastern star beckons the ignorant toward an unknown goal,

*and here's a blessing:*  
they find nothing in the end but an ordinary baby,  
born at midnight, born in poverty, and the baby's cry, like bells ringing,  
makes people wonder as they wander through their lives,  
what human love might really look like,  
sound like,  
feel like.

Now is the moment of magic,  
*and here's a blessing:*  
we already possess all the gifts we need;  
we've already received our presents:  
ears to hear music,  
eyes to behold lights,  
hands to build true peace on earth  
and to hold each other tight in love.