

Christmas, Hanukkah, and Solstice Celebrations and Traditions!

Most years on the Sunday before Christmas I would just focus on Christmas and our Christian roots, but since the Solstice occurs this afternoon and we are still in Hanukkah, it seemed unfair somehow to leave them out. We did talk about these 3 holidays along with several others last week during the Festivals of Light service, but these holidays are generally more important ones for modern Unitarian Universalists. We don't currently have either a Pagan group or a Jewish group, or for that matter a Christian UU group meeting within this congregation, but we do have some folks who would identify with each of those traditions. There are such groups in many UU congregations as well as a national UU group for each of those three and some other traditions.

During the 20th Century, Unitarian Universalism was mostly a religion of come-outers, made up primarily of persons who for one reason or another had left their Christian denominations of origin to explore various beliefs and eventually become UUs. Early in the 20th Century we offered refuge for those who could no longer believe in a loving involved God after the carnage of the First World War. That humanism came to dominate Unitarianism and that the Humanist Manifesto was written and signed mostly by Unitarian Ministers made perfect sense. Later the destruction of World War II and the success of the Unitarian Service Committee in helping Jews and others escape death by the Nazis in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere may have brought a greater awareness of our movement to Jews, many of whom had also lost faith in the Jewish views of God. Then and later in the Century, amidst the culture wars of the 1960s and beyond, many people were attracted to the Justice work of Unitarian Universalists. Even later nearer the end of the 20th Century, Wiccans and other Pagans found that in UU communities they were respected and accepted and that they could practice their beliefs more safely than elsewhere.

Each of these groups coming into Unitarian Universalism, as well as the merger between Unitarianism and Universalism changed the movement. The Unitarian Christianity first described by William Ellery Channing in 1819 which then absorbed Transcendental influences by the mid-19th Century under Ralph Waldo

Emerson and Theodore Parker continued to change and then became aware of World Religions by the time of the Congress of Religions at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, has continued to adapt and change throughout its history.

Since the turn of the 21st Century, various kinds of spirituality have become far more prominent within UU congregations, including more naturalistic influences not essentially unlike the beliefs of Emerson and Thoreau, as well various Pagan spiritualities, and Christian spiritual beliefs and practices. Since a large percentage of our UU Ministers have been trained in Christian seminaries, it should not be surprising that our movement has moved closer to Trinitarian Christianity in the last few decades. Where once there were more atheists, agnostics, and deists, there are currently probably more theists within most UU congregations. This leads us back to the celebrations of Christmas, Hanukkah, and Solstice which allow believers to worship God, Christ, or the Goddess depending on their beliefs.

Hanukkah, is really only a minor festival for Judaism, but it has become far more widely practiced in the western consumer societies, affording gift-giving similar to that of Christmas, but spread over 8 days. For UU families with Jewish roots, it has offered something to balance the craziness of Christmas. Hanukkah is recognized by many UUs, even if they do not talk much about its origins in the Maccabean Revolt which led to a brief period of freedom for the Jews, the rededication of the Temple and the discovery of a small supply of consecrated oil which kept the flame burning for 8 days until more consecrated oil arrived.

Solstice or Yule celebrations have been led by pagan individuals or pagan groups in most UU congregations. They often remind us that Christmas was moved to solstice to usurp the time of celebration, that Christmas trees have a longer history in pagan celebrations than Christian, and that other customs and practices have been taken from pagan beliefs and celebrations and Christened for Christian use. Solstice celebrations marking the change of seasons and the beginning of a period of lengthening days are based far more in natural occurrences than Christmas, Hanukkah, or many other holidays. Many pagans do worship the Goddess, or Goddess and God, so atheists are still on a different page theologically! Pagan worship focuses far more on nature and life force than otherworldly Christian or Jewish worship.

For myself, I am much more willing to worship the interconnected interdependent web of all life with the force or forces that keep all things connected than to ascribe true divinity to even ancient deities. I do appreciate, respect, and accept that many people are more comfortable believing in some divine being or beings. I remain fascinated by the Judeo-Christian scriptures and the development of those traditions.

The Maccabean Revolt which led to a brief period of freedom for the Jews less than 2 centuries before Jesus' birth, came out of the same energy that led some later Jews to see a fulfillment in Jesus. This energy, this Messianic expectation, came from a hope that the kingdom of David might be restored and the Jews returned to a place of prominence among the world's peoples. Some called Judas Maccabeus the Messiah and Judaism certainly flourished briefly during the time of independence. By the time of Jesus, Israel had been forced to acknowledge Roman power and the Messianic Expectation had been turned to future hopes.

Writings about the Maccabean Revolution, included by some Christians in the inter-testamental apocrypha, never became primary scriptures for the Jews, and consequently the Hanukkah miracle of the oil lasting 8 days from the cleansing and re-dedication of the temple could not become a very important festival, certainly not to the level of the high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In consumer society and in the season around solstice, Hanukkah has become popular anyway!

Christmas is an entirely different matter, though the winter solstice is integral to its growing popularity throughout Christian history. Early Christianity did not know when Jesus was born and until the 3rd Century Jesus' birth was seemingly inconsequential to the religion. The first calendar to put Jesus' birth in December appeared in the 4th Century, probably set to match the celebration of Sol Invictus. Mark, the earliest gospel, and John have no birth stories of Jesus. Matthew and Luke share brief birth stories with several miraculous components. Most scholars view the birth stories as relatively late additions to the Jesus tradition. They cannot reasonably be viewed as literal history, though many Christians find them important to incarnational theology. The birth stories have become an important part of Christian Mythos, such that some fundamentalists make belief in the

Virgin Birth of Jesus to Mary a test of faith. The theological compromise that declared Jesus to be fully human and divine at the council of Nicaea also required him to have been born human and so his actual birth became more important even if the date was unknown. Celebrating Jesus' birth on December 25th is both revisionist theology and revisionist history, but as a celebration it works!

Unitarian Universalists can celebrate whatever they choose, of course. Not that UUs can believe anything, as is sometimes alleged, since we are bound by the values described in the UUA Principles. We can practice whatever we genuinely believe so long as it does not harm others, whether it be in Santa Claus or the Spaghetti Monster. We do not usually ask for statements of beliefs anyway, but most UUs still seem to enjoy celebrating Christmas. Christmas, with its candlelight services, decorated trees and Christmas lights, melodic carols, tasty foods, gift-giving, general good spirits, and family gatherings provides a really nice celebration for the short days in Northern climes. With Santa Claus as an appealing alternative to religious celebrations, there is something for almost everyone. And even those who criticize Santa Claus and commercialism for obscuring the reason for the season should learn the history of the 4th Century Christian Bishop Nicholas's generosity which underlies the stories of St. Nick.

Since so many of us have enjoyed Christmas since our childhoods, it is not surprising that we wish to continue the holiday festivities by singing the carols, decorating the tree and our homes, and letting the goodwill of the season inspire us to generosity. What other traditions from this season have been or are important to us as we think about the Christmas Hanukkah Solstice season? Did we enjoy spending time with extended family over the holidays? Did we get together with special friends?

I would like to invite you to briefly share your favorite holiday traditions, as much as you are willing share now. What makes this season particularly special for you?

Thanks for sharing your favorite holiday traditions! May this holiday season shine especially bright with peace and joy and love! So may it be! Amen!