



North Shore Unitarian Church
... discover meaning together

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WHAT IS ADVENT TO US?

It's getting very dark these days. Have you noticed? Or perhaps you're beyond noticing such constantly changing things; I can see that there might be no more point in noticing the days grow shorter than when they grow longer. I suppose it's possible to live with a healthy focus elsewhere: on loving relationships, or demanding responsibilities, or even on high ideals. I, unfortunately, am distracted from all those important aspects of life by paying attention to the ever-shortening hours of daylight.

All the years I lived in eastern Canada, I found the early onset of darkness cozy; at first, I also found it the unmistakable sign of Christmas coming with all the excitement that brought. Mind you, I'm talking about all those years before I had a car; the dread of snowfall, and shovelling, and wondering if I was applying my brakes at just the right time and distance from the car stopped at the corner ahead and downhill from me, or whether I'd be pushing my heart back down my throat into my chest one more time that week. None of that's cozy. But there was something that was about those long evenings.

Darkness is different here, though. Early winter nights out East are kind of satiny black with litters of stars in the sky, even in the city. Here, so many days, the darkness has the extra layer of gloom and murk that comes with our humidity, clouds and rainfall. Here, in this northwest rainforest climate, where we are so overseen by the forces of nature, we Unitarian Universalists who are so often moved deeply by nature, you'd think that we might be particularly in touch with the meanings of Advent. Yet so many of us aren't. I wonder why that is.

In my mind's ear right now, I can almost hear about half of you at least psychically yelling at me, "because we're not Christian!" Well... yes... I know that. I'm not either. And let me say that again: *I'm* not either. I imagine that, like some believe that Barak Obama is a secret Muslim, some of you suspect that I'm a kind of stealth Christian, plotting to impose not only God on you, but Jesus also – perhaps even the Holy Spirit, God forbid, er, um, Principles forbid! But I'm no Trinitarian mole.

Rather, I haven't had time here yet to help you see, if you will see, that there's a forest behind all those theological trees. Another way to put that more specifically today is

to help you see the *flame* burning in the wreath, that the point is the flame not the symbol. And what that really means is I hope I can tell you about the deeper meaning that underlies all the varieties of religious ideas, and symbols and festivals: a deeper meaning that speaks to or originates from universal aspects of human experience that we Unitarian Universalists *can* see and I think *must* value. If we don't value them, I fear that we lose touch with essential parts of what is human about us.

That's the big project I feel here. It's not an Olympic version goal to be faster, higher, stronger on one day; it's the deeper, longer, wider goal of becoming more human through a whole lifetime. That's a project that I can't say another word about today; it's almost frightening to think of taking it on, but I can work at a tiny piece of it here and now, and that's to talk about Advent, and why it's much more than Christian.

First though let's be clear about what Advent is within Christianity; we live in a society infused by Christian ideas, beliefs and history, so it's crucial that we understand it, just the way any minority does well truly to understand the majority that surrounds it. So, in Christian terms, Advent is the period starting four Sundays earlier than Christmas Eve. In medieval times, it was a period of penance and fasting leading up to the celebration and remembrance of Christmas Day, but at some point, it began to develop a brighter side of its own. The anticipation of retelling the miraculous stories of Christmas started making Advent also a time of joy and love. So, in the old days, Advent and Christmas were times starting with penance and ending in celebration. Somehow, in the modern world, we've turned that around; we start with the parties and end in January with the penance. (See, you're more Christian than you thought!)

In the Advent wreath, there are four candles, and in the centre is a white one. Each Advent Sunday, a candle is lit; over time these came to represent different emotions associated with the season: expectation, hope, joy and love, though I'll warn any purists among you that I'm playing with the order of them this year. On Christmas Eve, the white candle is lit to symbolize the arrival of the infant Jesus and all the eternal meanings that come with Him.

But what about the wreath? Where did that come from? Well, it's no surprise that it originated long prior to Christianity in the earth-centered religions of pre-historic Germany. That's a theme in early Christian history: pagan symbols and festivals were absorbed into Christian practices. It's true that this, along with persecution of disbelievers, were ways that early Christians lured so many into their fold, but there's another reason, too, that I'll get to later.

In the darkness and cold of winter in central Europe before it was Europe – a darkness and cold that none of us has ever experienced – early religion was based partly on fear; naturally it was, for life was precarious. Among those fears was that this year, the winter would never end; the light would never return. The wreath as a circle symbolized the cycle of life and of the year; the evergreen symbolized the life in the midst of death, just as evergreens continue to live through the winter. The four candles symbolized the four directions and the four elements that constitute the substance of all matter. The wreaths themselves and the flames lit on them expressed the longing for spring and the hope of life renewed. It's easy to see how Christianity, in which the center of all hope and the point of all longing is the coming of the saviour, was able to use the ancient symbols as its own.

I'd like to take us one step further, or an infinite number of steps, whichever way you want to see it, towards the deeper meaning of Advent; that's the way in which it can illustrate the Great Story of the Universe itself, the story revealed to us through science and reason. For further beyond the ancient fear and awe of the darkness and the ecstasy in the return of the light are the facts about darkness and light, about space and matter, about inert materials and about life. And about how those facts shaped human reality.

And, as an aside, did you hear this week about a new geological theory about the 'evolution' of rock? Apparently, just as life on earth started small and simple before it burst into countless varieties, so did rocks and minerals over time become more complex; some of them were formed partly as a result of the changes in the environment that living organisms produced, and others were formed by the workings of early life forms. Isn't that an amazing idea? Not only did our planet and its forces affect the evolution of life, but life seems to have affected the evolution of the planet.

A fact like this brings about the kind of awe and wonder about the world as we know it scientifically that I think we can be reminded of at Advent. It's a time in which the year is at an extreme, so that wherever we are on the planet, something is coming to an end just before something else begins. It is close to the final ebbing of the tide of our immediate place in the world, and, just as on a beach, when the tide is low, parts of life are exposed that we don't usually see.

I come now to the aspect of this season that resonates deeply in our human experience: the fact of longing. We might call it a desire. Or a drive... or a compulsion... or a hunger... even a lust: but in some way virtually all of us feel, when we are honest with ourselves, a longing that we yearn to have fulfilled. It is this common and natural longing that is the other reason why it's easy for the symbols of one religion to be adopted by another; they speak to exactly the same experience, but through different metaphors.

At whatever point we find ourselves in our lives, the longing may have receded in importance, or certainly changed in quality. What we long for in youth is rarely still meaningful in older life, but then, we may have learned to long even more for that which was invisible to us in youth.

Some of us work throughout our lives to deal with this longing; after all, we must deal with it somehow. We learn to fit it into the frame of what we can attain, or to turn it in a direction that is more acceptable, or, too often, to cover it over with what is superficial, worldly or temporary. We find that snacks will suffice when a full-course meal seems beyond possibility. Some work directly to master it and to let go of all desire; a tiny few succeed, and many others do make headway. For a few, the longing is overwhelming, and we suffer it painfully, but almost all of us feel it, and that, in the end, is what saves us. We are not caught in the longing alone. It is not chance that makes most of us come together at this time of year, no matter what we believe, no matter where we are in the world.

We sit around a bonfire wrapped in furs and perform a ritual act to remind us we can survive and the world is not at an end. We come to believe that the Messiah is at hand to save us and we gather to rejoice. We set in our minds that life is a tiny biochemical accident in the grand scheme of things and that longing itself is meaningless, a fact we discuss together into the wee hours over mulled wine and Stilton. We comfort ourselves with the distraction of material things and surround ourselves with others who will with us ignore what is underneath. And sometimes we sit together living the truth – which is not tragic so much as it is unavoidable and, like everything, mutable and passing.

I do not mean to leave out those of us who seek solitude at this time of year, for we are animal enough also to have the urge to hibernate, withdraw or protect ourselves. For you, acknowledging Advent can be a reminder to seek inner peace. The time will go no faster if we fight it, but it can go more easily when we remember that connections with others are not really optional, though they are manageable. Maintaining basic love and respect for others can be a lifeline through this difficult season, even from a comfortable distance.

During Advent there are so many demands on us – whether they be social or existential, fashionable or timeless. At this time of year we can, if only for a moment now and then, if only for this moment now, pull ourselves in and wrap ourselves in the darkness, gaze at the flickering light and live in the deep comfort of patience.