**“Surviving the Winter Holidays”**

**The Unitarian Church of Lincoln**

**November 29, 2015**

“The color of springtime is in the flowers,

The color of winter is in the imagination.”

unknown

***Gathering of the Community***

**Ringing of Bell**

**Welcome and Announcements**

**Prelude:**

***Stating Intent***

**Chalice Lighting:** by G. Woods

**Opening words:** “Winter Meditation”

by Denise Levertov

**Hymn:** #255 “Deck the Hall”

***Time for all ages***

**Child Dedication:** Logan James Daniel Krafka

**Children’s Song:** #338 “I Seek the Spirit of a Child”

***Deepening***

**Reading:** “Winter” by Greta Crosby

**Musical Interlude:**

**Sermon:** “Surviving the Winter Holidays”

**Offering and Offertory:**

***Returning to Community: the work of the people***

**Sharing of Joys and Sorrows**

**Meditation**

***Integration and Release***

**Closing Hymn:** #226 “People Look East”

**Postlude:**

**Closing Words**: from “Reflections on the Resurgence of Joy” by Dori Jeannine Somers

***Stating Intent***

**Chalice Lighting:** by G. Woods

 As days grow darker and light recedes,

 As days grow colder and warmth recedes,

 We kindle flames for light and warmth,

 And even more to guide us through the unknown,

 So our community may emerge in spring

 Lighter, warmer, and in blessed solidarity,

 Prepared to do some great work

 For our selves and the world.

**Opening words:** “Winter Meditation”

by Denise Levertov

The bare trees have made up their seed bundles.

They are ready now. The warm brown light pauses

Briefly, shrugs and moves on.

They are ready now to play dead for a while.

I, human, have not as yet devised how to obtain

 such privilege.

Their spring will find them rested.

I and my kind battle a wakeful way to ours.

**Hymn:** #255 “Deck the Hall”

***Time for all ages***

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**Children’s Song:** #338 “I Seek the Spirit of a Child”

***Deepening***

**Reading:** “Winter” by Greta Crosby

Let us not wish away the winter. It is a season to itself, not simply a way to spring.

When trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light, they let in sky and trace themselves delicately against dawns and sunsets.

The clarity and brilliance of the winter sky delight.

The loom of fog softens edges,

lulls the eyes and ears of the quiet,

awakens by risk the unquiet.

A low dark sky can snow, emblem of individuality,

liberality, and aggregate power.

Snow invites to contemplation and to sport.

Winter is a table set with ice and starlight.

Winter dark tends to warm light:

fire and candle

winter cold to hugs and huddles;

winter want to gifts and sharing;

winter danger to visions, plans, and

common endeavoring –

and the zest of narrow escapes;

winter tedium to merry-making.

Let us therefore praise winter, rich in

beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities.

**Musical Interlude:**

**Sermon:** “Surviving the Winter Holidays”

How are your memories of the winter holiday season? Mine vary. There are the fine Thanksgiving dinners: first rabbit and squirrel pie, the game shot by my Pop-Pop, at my maternal grandparents house hidden back in the woods; then the huge turkey with all the trimmings, followed by endless football games on TV and sometimes the much loved slides of their travels, at my paternal grandparents home by the ocean.

There was the Christmas when I (yet again) insisted that I wanted - and finally got - my first cap pistol and holster. Shades of *The Christmas Story.* There was the Christmas when my next brother and I were assigned the job of putting up the lights on the front porch. We had a terrible fight over how to do it. I wanted to carefully place them with the middle of the string at the center of the porch. Gil wanted to start at one side without considering where they would end up. You can understand why some of us feared for our lives when Gil went into the chemistry lab! Oddly, I cannot remember how it turned out.

Then there were the Christmases when one or both parents got drunk, sometimes with humorous results, sometimes not so much. Holidays provide possibilities for varied emotions, to say the least. Fortunately, I get to choose which memories I focus upon. I especially choose to remember our family caroling every Christmas Eve. Invitations from neighbors to sing at their homes began rolling in on Thanksgiving. That is one way in which I not only survive, but celebrate the holidays: singing.

Several people who asked that, today, I share my thoughts on “getting through the holidays.” I know each one of us, even if we come from the same family, has very different memories and emotions, different needs during the holiday season. If nothing else, let us make room for those in all their variety, and let us care for one another. As Aldous Huxley suggested, “Of all things, let us be a little kinder.”

First, I would like to entertain ways to survive the holiday season. Now, I know some of you LOVE Black Friday and all the hustle and bustle of shopping, cooking, decorating, etc. I will get back to you in a few minutes. Right now, I want to acknowledge that, for some of you, this is all a huge nightmare from which you hope to awaken after New Year’s Day. I suspect most of us endure mixed emotions about it all, finding things that warm our hearts and things that make us want to gag. Surely those who are alone, perhaps for the first time in their lives, find this time of year challenging, to say the least.

So, survival: You could always purchase *Unplug the Christmas Machine,* by Jo Robinson and Jean C. Staeheli for $9.32 from Amazon.com. This is a marvelous counter to all the commercialism of the holidays. There are quite a number of other offerings of that ilk*: Hundred Dollar Holiday* by Bill McKibben, *A Simple Christmas* by Sharon Hanby-Robie, *Celebrate Simply* by Nancy Twigg, *Simplify Your Christmas* by Elaine St. James, etc. You can buy lots of ways to avoid the commercialism of Christmas. Does anyone else see a strange disjunct in this?? Someone is making money out of the notion of not spending money at Christmas! Oh well, the ideas in those books may help. Salvation by bibliography! Classic for Unitarian Universalists.

The message of all of these is pretty simple: stop spending so much money and anxious energy on shopping, and put more energy into your loved ones through other means. Most of it amounts to offering permission to do what you want to do and ignore expectations from other people. My first Christmas as a single parent, after my husband left our family, I realized I could not do it all alone. So I had a meeting with my two sons and asked what they really loved about the holiday. Then we did that: only two kinds of cookies, gifts we made ourselves, etc. After the youngest went off to college and both had plans with friends rather than Mom, I negotiated that I would at least get a dinner and a movie with my youngest. That became a tradition the memories of which I still treasure. The first one: Disney’s “Beauty and the Beast.” We both sat in the theater crying at the end. It was great!

Yes, bottom line to survival, “Have it your way.” If you hate turkey, have salmon. If you are allergic to “Yule fumes,” keep the tree and/or wreath outside. My swags always go outside anyway and brighten up our whole neighborhood. If you hate waking up to repetitive Christmas music, switch to NPR. We eliminated all of that as soon as our local radio stations began all Christmas music all the time after Hallowe’en. We use our IPhone for an alarm: church bells. Sigh . . . Even I, Christmas freak that I am, can wait until after Thanksgiving for the Christmas onslaught!

Perhaps the most important thing to do – and the most difficult – is to make time for the activities you love, despite all the expectations. Go to the gym, if that is your thing. Take the walks in the woods that refresh your spirit. Do not miss that coffee date with your best friend. You need it. Do it! You are worth it.

Those of you who adore the winter holidays (and I am one of you), please, do not be defensive. Let you holiday spirit enspirit others. Let your celebrations embrace, not only those you know well and love, but someone who might not have a holiday otherwise. My mother taught me this, and I continue to find it celebrative. I love that we have Thanksgiving Leftovers Fest here, so that people who might be alone do not need to be. I know some folks who also invite newcomers to their homes to assure a holiday for them. That is a super way to celebrate.

Consider seeing the lights in the neighborhoods. Maybe someone can revivify the Judy Cole tradition of trying to find the most tacky light display. Invite friends over for snacks and libations, with no expectations of fancy: don’t clean, just shut off the lights and light candles. Put a blue candle in your window on December 1 to honor World AIDS Day, or a green candle for homecoming vets of the ongoing wars we seem unable to end, or join us here for the Yule Celebration on Monday, December 21 at 7 p.m.

One of the best ways to both survive and celebrate is to count your blessings, whatever they may be. Maybe you have a cuddly cat or dog to warm your feet. Maybe you enjoy solitude, reading poetry or a good fantasy or “who-done-it.” Maybe you will travel to family and/or friends. Maybe you will come to the Christmas Service at 5 pm with thoughtful readings and carol singing. If you feel lonely, invite someone else you think might be lonely too to coffee or tea. Consider what lifts your spirits, then do it!

Ultimately, in these days when light is waning and cold is waxing, we need to remember that there is a light within us, light in and through all of life, that warms and supports us. Connect with that light, tend it, and send it out into the world. We need to remember that we can release sad memories and create new, happy memories. We may find that we need community, the warmth of one another as well as our solitude. This can be a both/and proposition, so long as you choose and are not forced into unwanted intimacy.

What I am suggesting is that we make space in our lives, whether we are simply surviving or actually celebrating, for LOVE, that power of life that lifts our spirits, connects us to one another and to all of life for the greater good of all. I have discovered that love really comes from within and does not depend upon being reciprocated. Reciprocation is the icing on the cake, but we can bring our love, our light, into the world. In doing so, we are enhanced, not diminished. It is my genuine belief that love does at least as much for the giver as it does for the receiver, and comes from a well that has no limit.

 I close with words by Dori Jeanine Somers, entitled “Reflections on the Resurgence of Joy”

How short the daylight hours have now become.

How gray the skies, how barren seem the trees.

A damp and chilling wind has gripped my mind

and made me gloomy, too.

But there is that in me which reaches up

toward light and laughter, bells, and carolers,

And knows that my religious myth and dream of

reborn joy and goodness must be true,

Because it speaks the truths of older myths;

that light returns to balance darkness,

life surges in the evergreen – and us,

and babes are hope, and saviours

of the world,

as miracles abound in common things.

Rejoice! And join in the gladness of Christmas.

So Be It! Blessed Be!

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