

Keeping Christmas Part II
Presented by Rev. Martin Woulfe
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One of my joys of this season is receiving bright cheery card from friends separated by distance and time. It's a comfort to know that someone remembers you from afar. Typically, this is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, you hear about their career, marriage, children and so on. Invariably, though, you are reminded about your own past. For example: I once received a card from an old friend that says, in part: (pick up card & read:)

I still find it incredible that you're becoming a pastor because you were so much against religion at Loras College. What made you change? Anything special happen?

This was not the first time someone has expressed surprise at my present calling. When I was first accepted into theological school, I began to telephone some friends to share my good news. One of them, upon hearing that I had decided to become a minister, out-right laughed and exclaimed, "Martin, you're the most ungodly person I know!"

Looking back, I can appreciate their surprise. To quote from A Christmas Carol, I am not the man I was. People - including myself - can and do sometimes change. There's a Christmas story here: the events did not take place overnight, but much more gradually.

As should come as no surprise, I am one who has long yearned for truth and been intrigued with religion. For many years, I collected books the way some people collect shoes. The more I read, the less I believed in Christmas. By the time I was in college, I had thrown out the proverbial baby with the bath water. I knew that the reality of Jesus was hopelessly mixed with mythology and folklore, and I was beyond all that. As the Christmas card that I shared indicates, I was, on the face of it, openly hostile to religion. When people would ask me how I was, I would usually say, "I'm doing reasonably well." The emphasis was on "reasonably." This is the Martin that many of my friends from college remember.

Now, when I graduated from college, I struck out on my own, immediately got married, and in effect declared independence not only from my family, but also especially from superstition and mythology. I would not suffer any traditional icons, crucifix, bible, or Christmas tree in that home. I continued to collect books, and sought refuge in them. To be honest, this was not pleasant time for me - I wanted to believe in Christmas - or in something - that conveyed a sense of beauty, joy and hope.

As you might imagine, I was not an easy person to live with. Heaven knows I was desperate for a refuge. Life after college had taken the wind out of my sails. I hadn't thought much about it during my four years of higher education, but I discovered that a degree in creative writing was not an assured ticket to success. Worse, I discovered that marriage, even to someone you've convinced yourself to be your "soul-mate," can be a heart-wrenching enterprise.

One Christmas Eve, about 15 years ago, I was emotionally exhausted. The previous two years had been exceptionally hard to bear. My marriage, which had limped along for several

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years, had fallen apart. My grandmother had died, following a stroke; a man I had admired in college had been killed in an auto accident; the baby of another friend had died, and she, the mother, was on trial for murder; a man I knew from work was stricken with cancer, was almost entirely neglected by his family & I became one of his caretakers; I myself had been sick, stricken with asthma. I had moved listlessly from one disappointing job to another. Finally, I had swallowed my pride and asked my dad for a job that I dreaded but desperately needed. Then, on Christmas Eve, while racing to breakfast with some friends, I encountered a truck, head on – it demolished my car and left me shaken, and bruised, but alive.

That night, feeling quite sore, I again watched A Christmas Carol, like I had so many times before. That particular time, though, this Yuletide tale touched me deeper than I could have dreamed.

There's a wonderful exchange between Scrooge & his nephew which Shelley & I read for you. As I listened to that dialogue, watched the familiar scenes unfold, I reflected more on the events of Scrooge's life – ans, I had an epiphany, of a sort.

It was then that I first began to see Scrooge through a different light; and I really began to appreciate how he had come to be so hard. Ebenezer Scrooge was a man with a broken heart. He had certainly not been born that way. As a boy, you may recall, he had hopes and dreams, and even the capacity to love. But, life proved harsh. You will recall, his mother died giving him birth; his father shunned him ever after. He saw ruin visit those he cherished; his beloved sister died. All these things affected him greatly, and he saw that talk and songs of love did not abate his private grief. So he sought refuge in material security. If the world was harsh, he countered it by hardening his heart. As a consequence, old Scrooge's heart was like a lump of coal: dark, hard, infused with the potential for warmth, but that potential was trapped deep within.

It was then that I realized that for many years I had been wrestling with the ghost of Christmas past - the original ghost, if you will. As I had matured, I, like Ebenezer, had come to regard the world as irrevocably marred by tragedy. While a part of me still wanted to believe in the ideals of my youth, that faith had been soundly chastened by what I saw through the media and with my own eyes. Scrooge had used money to build a wall between him and the heartache; I had used books. My search for a good clean rationalistic faith, devoid of superstition and mythology, had carried me from book to book and a better understanding of reality. My goal was to be educated, nobody's fool. To a certain extent, I did succeed. Perhaps I succeeded too well. I could not love the reality that I found.

Mind you, I still went through the motions. I raised money for groups like INFACT, voted for liberal candidates, wrote letters on behalf of Amnesty International - but my heart was not in it; I did these things more out of anger and indignation than out of a sense of compassion or universal love.

Ruppert Lovely, a UU minister & one of my mentors, told me story back when I was serving an internship under him. It involves a rabbinical student who asks his rabbi why, in all

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the bible, does it only say once that God put love on someone's heart, while elsewhere it says God put love in people's hearts? The rabbi replied, God did that so that when his heart breaks, it would fall in.

In the case of Scrooge, and in my own case, that comes close to the mark. And for this, I have A Christmas Carol to thank - written by Charles Dickens, a Unitarian, wouldn't you know.

So now, I accept Christmas. I say this, and immediately am reminded of Margaret Fuller - also a 19th century Unitarian - who exclaimed: "I accept the universe!" To which Thomas Carlyle retorted, "By Gad, she'd better!"

So it is that I've made my peace with Christmas. Like many other UUs, I don't subscribe to the mythology & folklore of the day, but I have come to recognize that there is magic, and power, in what the day invites me to become. I think that Charles Dickens himself wrestled with some of the same issues that we do. You may be aware that A Christmas Carol waxes eloquent about the meaning of Christmas - yet never once directly mentions Jesus once.

Scrooge's nephew expresses well Dickens's sentiments when he says, and I think it is worth repeating: "I have always thought of Christmas time, when it comes round - apart from the veneration due its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that - as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys."

I thank Mr. Dickens, 160 years after the fact, for his insights into this day. Today, and every day, we in our turn are called to give witness in our lives to the power of this ideal, transforming, by simple measures, on a day by day basis, a world of sorrow and injustice into one of hope, love, and joy. May it be so - and, to the extent that we succeed, we will further the blessings of creation.