

This Year I Will Be Intentional (I Hope): A Reflection for the Holidays
The Unitarian Church of Montreal
Rev. Diane Rollert, 14 December 2008

It seems as though it was only yesterday that we were marvelling at the greenness of the grass as the autumn leaves were falling. Now lawns and leaves are covered in snow and ice, and I have come to understand what Gilles Vigneault meant when he sang, 'Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver.' I can honestly say that I now understand both the seasonal reality and the political metaphor (but that's a story for another day – perhaps after January 26th?).

It isn't hard to believe that there are places in Florida where you can walk the beach for miles meeting only Quebecers. How short the spring, summer and fall can seem, a fleeting instant of time between snowstorms. How quickly the long nights and short days return. Wasn't it only yesterday that we rose at six to see the sun shining?

If it weren't for the holiday season how would we make it through these darkest days? Yet here we are again, feeling a bit stressed, wondering how, oh how, shall we mark the holiday season this year when so much else has kept our attention? There's so much advice floating out there about how to simplify and do with less. All that advice seems to ring as a reminder that the future is looming like a giant storm cloud waiting to burst at any moment.

Hope, where do we find you? In the promise of child born in a manger bringing world peace? In the oil lamps lit with a day's worth of oil and lasting for eight days? In the glowing, golden sun as it grows weaker and weaker, only to be reborn with renewed strength? Hope where do we find you? In miracles, in myths, or in science?

I come to this time of year and wish that my mother and mother-in-law were still here to take care of it all. There is an irony in that wish, since once upon a time I would have begrudged their fussiness. Yet they knew how to make this season splendid in a way that fails me.

My mother fried her potato latkes with laughter, sang the Hanukkah blessing over the menorah, and taught us special songs (*On this night let us light one little candle shining*). She opened the doors to our Christian neighbours and taught us to share what the season meant to us, even though we were less than observant Jews.

My mother-in-law made Christmas into an art form; her chocolate and vanilla pinwheel cookies, her tree for the children in one room, and the small tree in the living room decorated with her most precious ornaments. Having lived through the trauma of an adolescence in wartime Italy, Christmas was her way of making sure that her children and grandchildren would live lives touched by joy and magic.

Somehow, with our mothers gone, we've gotten tired in my family. Maybe the holiday season is still a time of grief that we haven't quite worked out yet. Life swirls around us

and we haven't found a way to create magic without burnout. And yes, things have changed now that our children are young adults. Perhaps it was easier when we had little ones padding about in their little red pyjamas with feet, truly believing that it was Santa who ate the cookies and drank the milk we left out on Christmas Eve. The abundance and wonder are gone now – and I'm not quite ready for grandchildren.

But this year, I've promised myself, I will be intentional. I'm not thinking of intention as dogged determination. I'm thinking of it in the way that the yoga or Zen master asks you to turn inward and become aware of your breath. I'm thinking of it in the way that some gurus call intention the force and energy that exists in all things. I'm thinking of intention as that invisible something that links miracles to myths to scientific wonders. What I mean is that I want to connect to the wonder, the mystery and the awe of this season.

Last week Caroline and I facilitated a workshop on Unplugging the Holiday Machine. At the beginning we asked everyone to take some reflective time to draw a picture or write about a favourite holiday memory. Some of us wrote words and some of us drew simple stick figures or fanciful indoor holiday scenes. But one participant took a dark piece of paper and drew the most wonderful winter landscape at night. He told us that his memory had transported him back to a cabin in the woods on a holiday night overlooking a frozen lake. Peace descended over the room. Everyone seemed to sigh with longing. "That's the holiday tradition we need. A winter cabin and a quiet night."

For me, this year, intention means acceptance of the beauty and the cold energy of the winter. Perhaps, I'm in more of a Solstice mood than a Christmas or Hanukkah mood -- as much as those two traditions have become so intertwined in my life. I want to learn to love the darkness and the snow. I want to feel connected to the earth, as much as I want to feel connected to humanity. Maybe this is something I've neglected recently, too caught up in a life that often leaves me indoors tied to a computer.

The other night I went out into the snowy darkness with the dog. The moon was full and the sky was clear. The trees encased in ice glittered and swayed in the moonlight, their branches singing like wind chimes. We walked toward a neighbouring courtyard, the narrow passageway bordered by low trees wrapped in white holiday lights, their bejewelled branches arching over us. Before us was a fountain, covered in ice and snow, like a frozen Roman ruin. Outside of the occasional sounding of a snowplough's alarm in the distance, all was quiet.

I know how lucky we are that this storm was gentle and beautiful in comparison with the treacherousness we have known in the past and the treacherousness that has effected our neighbours in New England. But for the moment, I could set aside fear, still knowing how closely it is related to awe.

The sound of my feet and the dog's paws softly crunching in the snow brought back a precious memory. Five years ago, a dear friend decided to invite all of his friends and family to celebrate his 50th birthday at the Ice Hotel in Jukkasjärvi, Sweden. My friend

had never lived an easy life, having been abandoned by his father when he was very young. But a twist of fate reunited him with his father when he was a grown man. At the same time that he inherited his father's business and wealth, my friend lost his wife to cancer.

Deep reflection brought him to a decision that his greatest desire in life was to bring together everyone he loved to see his beloved Sweden. He always said that his life and his sanity had been saved by a small village in southern Sweden that had adopted him as if he were a native son when he had studied there as an exchange student during a year of high school. It was there that he returned in times of transition, going back when he was a college graduate seeking purpose in his life, and again returning to purchase a home after his wife died.

"Come to Sweden as my guests," he said. He chartered a restored antique train and together sixty of us travelled in January from Stockholm to the edge of the Arctic Circle. For 21 hours we travelled nearly the length of Sweden, mostly in the darkness, celebrating, singing and talking. Most of us began the trip as strangers with only our host in common. His wife had been a dear friend of mine until they had moved to California and we had stayed in the East. We had kept in touch for years through Christmas letters. She had been the first of our friends to have a baby, and the first to be lost so young.

Like many of us on the train, I had been too far away to attend my friend's wife's memorial service. How can I describe it? We stepped out of time and routine, and we found sacred closure. We shared our memories, we rejoiced in our friend's new life, his new love, his Swedish fiancée, his son who was now in college, grown up and full of promise.

21 and some hours later, we were suited up at the Ice Hotel, an army of sixty in matching blue snowsuits and reindeer fur-lined hats, ready to withstand the temperature of 40 degrees below zero. Inside, the hotel was a balmy -5 C. It was beautiful to behold beyond description, but very cold -- a bit like sleeping in a refrigerator snuggled up to the most gorgeous ice sculpture you can imagine.

The next day we gathered at the edge of the frozen Torne River to ride by dog sled north across the Arctic Circle. It was four in the afternoon, but the Northern Lights were dancing in the deep darkness. They blazed down to the horizon in waves of red, green and yellow, more intense and vibrant than had been seen in Jukkasjärvi in fifteen years.

We rode, four of us to a sled, feeling as though any moment we would be able to reach out and touch the brilliance of that northern sky. The deepest silence enveloped us, and the only sounds we heard were the soft drumming of the dogs paws and the blades of the sled running in the snow.

In the dark winter barrenness, beneath the blazing sky, I felt that sense of the ultimate, of being part of the cosmos, of being energy and atoms held together by something as improbably as skin. We were so small, this revelling party of new friends and old

friends. There, on the edge of the earth, where day nearly ceased to exist, where summer seemed an impossibility, we became something more than who we were in our everyday lives. We had a sense of the human capacity to survive the impossible, to brave the harshest elements, and to find beauty in the frozen tundra. We were witnesses to the strength of the Sami, the first people who tamed the land and still herded their reindeer in the frozen vastness.

Our own spirits mingled with the dancing lights, danced and met the spirit of our friend's wife and all the spirits that we had each known and loved in our lives. It was close, infinite and yet finite.

That, I think is intention, as holy as it gets.

This is how I want to approach the holiday season and the long winter that stretches out before us. I want to go out into the cold with those I love and I want to revel in the beauty of being alive, even in the winter.

At the end of our workshop last week, Caroline gave each participant a copy of a holiday pledge (adapted from *Unplug the Christmas Machine* by Jo Robinson and Jean C. Staeheli). It simply said the following:

A Holiday Pledge

Believing in the true spirit of the
holiday season, I commit myself to

Remember those people/groups
who truly need my gifts

Express my love
in more direct ways than gifts

Examine my holiday activities
in the light of my deepest values

Be a peacemaker
within my circle of family and friends

Rededicate myself
to my spiritual growth

May we each glide through the holiday season and the winter with intention, as thoughtfully and as lovingly as we can – even if imperfectly. May we find the holy in the promise of a new born babe that reminds us that all things are possible, in the glowing of candles that remind us of the price and value of freedom, and in the gradual returning of the sun that reminds us that the earth and her seasons are gifts to be cherished.