

**May the Source Be With You**  
or  
**Why I Wish You Happy Holidays**  
**Reflections on the Parliament of the World Religions, Part 2**  
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**2018 December 16**

*This is the sound of all of us  
Singing with love and the will to trust  
Leave the rest behind it will turn to dust  
--“One Voice” by the Wailing Jennys*

**Call to Celebration:**

A popular ad some years back wished everyone a “Happy Christma-Solsti-Kwanza-kah.” We Unitarians, used to torturing the lingo of the season, guffawed in recognition. December brings an eclectic mix of expectations. While most of the religious world chooses their holy day from the mix, Unitarians, who draw inspiration from six sources including the whole and holy wealth of religious traditions, tend to conglomerate them. We pay tribute to our share of commercialism and simplicity; we embrace the Buddha’s enlightenment and we light up Christmas Trees; we’ll deck the halls and spin a dreidel; we celebrate the solstice and sing “Silent Night.” And even without Santa or any other omniscience eavesdropping, we people of (7) principles are ‘good for GOODNESS’ sakes’. It’s a Festivus Miracle!

Come, let us gather,  
Come, whatever your reason for the season,  
come let us celebrate together

**Reflection:** “May the Source Be With You or Why I Wish You Happy Holidays”

At the first Parliament of the World’s Religions, 125 years ago Swami Vivekananda told a story of a frog who used to live in a well. It was born in the well and brought up there and it used to think his well was the biggest body of water in the world. One day, a frog from the ocean came to that well. When the frog from the ocean told the frog of the well that the ocean is much bigger than that well, the frog of the well did not believe it and drove the frog of the ocean away from his well, obstinate in his denial. Vivekananda concluded– “That has been the difficulty all the while. I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Muslim sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world.”

Meanwhile, though it be contained differently, we all thirst for the same water.

Last month, at the 7<sup>th</sup> Parliament of the World’s Religions, Sikh leader Tarunjit Singh Butalia summarized the promise of such interfaith gatherings, saying: “We can be change agents, not from our ideologies but from drawing on strength of our diversity . . . we are frogs of one well, croaking . . . let’s croak together!”

And so we did – I was one of 8000 attendees from 80 countries representing 220 distinct faith communities. Together we soaked in the presence of Swamis and Rabbis, of Catholic Cardinals Tibetan Karmapas and Chinese Confucians; we heard rallying cries by Baptist preachers and Wiccan priestesses. We cheered the success of Water Rights activist Maude Barlow, heeded wisdom and wit from Margaret Atwood, and learned about history’s heresies from Indigenous elders.

Decked in my anonymous blue jeans and leather jacket, I walked through the vast halls of the Toronto Metro Convention Centre keeping pace with colleagues wearing hijab, burka, turbans, headdresses; among bald heads, dreadlocks and tonsures - adorned with collars, crowns, and crosses, fez and feathers, hoods and a Canadian toque here and there; beside Yoruban Argbadas and Hindu angarkhas, by Kurtahs and Kaftans. At a Zoroastrian service, a Buddhist monk in brilliant saffron robes sat next to me. On his feet he wore bright orange Puma sneakers and matching neon-coloured knee high socks.

This mosaic of human habiliment mirrored the kaleidoscope of theologies and eschatologies represented.

In more than one venue, speakers had to justify the value of pluralism:

A Yoruban practitioner (an Indigenous African tradition) suggested that such a gathering allowed us to collect a kind of “Air Miles” – not ‘air miles’ to be traded for cash, or time, or wisdom – which he noted were graced by the universe and not his to keep anyway. But such a gathering was a way to collect “spiritual air miles” instead.

Zul Kassamali, a Ugandan Muslim, assured the doubtful that pluralism is “not a dilution of one’s faith, but a way to **ensure** one’s identity is strong enough to engage with others in community” (paraphrased). He invited us to take the Pledge of Pluralism . . . so – if you are willing –

Please rise (in body or in spirit) raise your right hand, turn left –

Now, put your hand on shoulder of the person next to you

and say “You are doing GREAT!”

The pledge of pluralism . . . it’s that simple.

For some – this presence of pluralism was a unique endeavour;

For some – it presented the opportunity to proselytize;

And for Unitarian Universalists . . . well, to be honest some of my UU colleagues and I felt it all a bit redundant given our context.

That sense of “been there, doing that” was reinforced in a series of meetings and forums where I discovered that the Muslim speaker on interfaith justice was also a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation; many of the Wiccans and pagans had UU connections, and I lunched with a Buddhist nun who is a former staff member of a UU congregation. At one of the large plenary sessions, Bruce Knotts of the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office, was the presenter introducing his Buddhist teacher, Dharma Master Cheng Yen (how UU is that?).

Indeed, The Unitarian Universalist Association recognizes continental-wide groups for Mystic UUs, Jew-UUs, and a hUUMANIST association; there is a Covenant of UU Pagans, the UU Christian Fellowship and a UU Buddhist fellowship (which I’ve been a member of for a couple of decades now). Many of us are hyphenated-UUs.

An assumption of pluralism and its benefits comes naturally to most UUs. Editor Charles Henry<sup>1</sup> notes: “A 2005 survey [of Unitarian Universalists] . . . found the following interesting facts: of UU members- 54% are Humanist, 33% Agnostic, 31% Earth centered, 18% Atheist, 17% Buddhist, 13% Pagan, 13% Christian. This totals 179%! Since participants were allowed multiple answers, one can see that diversity exists even within our individuals.”

Our congregation is not unusual in that when we conducted a survey last spring we asked about our theological diversity – ‘besides Unitarian Universalism’ nearly 25% of our members also identify with Christianity (that’s relatively high for a UU congregation in Canada); and 16% with Buddhism. When we asked people to choose their theological ‘viewpoints’ we allowed two answers – over half chose “humanism;” Earth-Centred Spirituality and Agnosticism were chosen by over 20%, Mysticism ranked as the 4th choice, and Atheism as 5th. *(So - - if you are going to ask me again why some of our hymns and readings use theological language that you personally dislike, please consider that to do so is a way to honour your neighbour’s perspective on the world).*

And this hyphenated understanding of the world is formalized in our statement of six sources which you can find printed on the back of today’s order of service. We are theologically diverse communities with members who are individually pluralistic as well. We gather with no creed (there is NO set of beliefs you must ascribe to in order to be a UU), and believe “we need not think alike to love alike.”

But there’s a shadow side to pluralism as our default.

In our well-meaning adoption and adaptation of religious rituals and spiritual technologies from other traditions as a way to expand our inclusivity, we UUs must be careful about misappropriation.

Misappropriation is the practice of using something that is culturally and/or religiously significant to one group of people, and -- without permission, or without acknowledging or understanding its fuller context, using it as our own.

Possibly because of the amount of interfaith work I’ve engaged in, at the Parliament of the World’s Religions, I felt uncomfortable in a number of spaces where it felt like instead of a meaningful engagement, we were encouraged to a kind of spiritual voyeurism. I was aware during one service that attendees were not wearing the requisite head coverings mandated by that tradition; in another, eager seekers took off their shoes to sit on the floor and aimed their feet at the altar; people sat or stood or yawned or chewed food or pecked at their cell phones during religious rites; some wore ritual clothing like scarves or personal décor. On the lowermost floor was a huge marketplace full of displays and pamphlets and family events, but also with ceremonial accoutrements and spiritual bling for sale.

This uneasy mix of inclusion and incursion was the subject of one interfaith panel discussion where an Indigenous speaker asked us to consider that “appropriation is an extension of colonialization” and a form of oppression. It’s led to some uneasy juxtapositions. One college campus offered a “Beer and Yoga” night . . . not a good mix. A Buddhist monk told about the time he decided to wander into a place called the “Buddha Bar” in his full robes where chanting set to an electronic beat accompanied mixed drinks. There are Halloween costumes that perpetuate stereotypes; and sports teams that mimic tomahawk chops (the USA still has a football team called the ‘Red Skins’).

An imam (that’s a Muslim leader) challenged us: “Religion is a relationship,” he said. Interfaith is people of faith working together for the common good. [Checking off “All of the Above” as your alleged faith tradition] shows a lack of respect and knowledge both of others’ AND one’s own tradition. It’s a sign of entitlement. Instead, the Imam advised us: consider: “What are the core priorities of YOUR faith?” Figure that out and “work with those” instead of indulging in some kind of shallow buffet style religion.

Opinions on where to draw the line varied among those on the panel, but all agreed that we should focus on building relationships rather than borrowing relics or rituals.

Hindu and Sikh representatives felt no particular ownership over their traditions which they see open to all with the caveat that they be treated with respect and appreciation with credit given to its origins. (“After all,” said one speaker, “these things are not ours anyway – they’re God’s”).

A Jewish Rabbi summed it up for us: He said to ask ourselves: “have you acquired these things legitimately?” And he also proclaimed that people of faith are “called to a generosity of sharing ‘spiritual technologies to get closer to divinity and clarity’ as we discern “Can [this practice help] you be a better YOU?” “Over [many] generations things have been adapted and borrowed. We necessarily ‘cross-pollinate.’”

But to cross-pollinate is not an invitation to neglect the unique historical and theological foundations of our own tradition of Unitarian Universalism. I believe that our pluralism calls us to be even *more* intentional about understanding who we are as a community and why we are here as individuals. We need to know OUR story. It is imperative that we make a commitment to understand why and how we may practice “all of the above” in the context of a committed Unitarian Universalist identity.

Besides – it is the only way we can win the war on Christmas . . .

Oh, you know the drill . . . the time-honoured North American tradition of the “War on Christmas” began a few weeks ago with the displays and memes and editorials by those folks who declare with much tongue and finger-wagging that “Jesus is the Reason for the Season”, and the weirdly mixed displays of Santa bringing gifts to the manger. I was amused this year to read my first “War on Christmas” post on a community facebook page from someone who urged us to boycott businesses who as a policy wish people “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas” . . . she posted her plea on the first day of Hannukah.

I resisted sharing with her the lessons of this season of festivals of lights that a Kabbalist from the Parliament taught: should I light one candle, and then 10 or 10,000 more . . .that first candle is not diminished, but burns as brightly as ever. There is an inexhaustible energy available to us, and we are not diminished by any candle that dispels the darkness around us.” (*paraphrased*).

I resisted sharing the wisdom of Confucian speaker Dr. Tu Weiming who called us to a Global Ethic, professing: “Humanism may be what we have in common; humanism assumes diversity. In Spiritual Humanism, we are unique but inseparable.”

I resisted sharing with her the words of Rabbi David Rosen, an interfaith leader in Israel, who said reminded us we’ve gone terribly wrong when we think WE have the answers (and this is every bit as true for we UUs who can succumb to the equal and opposite temptation of deriding other belief systems as ‘mere superstition’. Rabbi Rosen said “to be understood we must *understand* – theological humility is imperative” – and the key to understanding is the word “UNDER” – we must put ourselves UNDER (not above) others and truly engage rather than try to explain. Arrogance is self-idolatry. Let’s leave room for ‘holy envy’ [of one another] – it is great to celebrate commonality, but let’s celebrate differences as well”.

And I especially resisted sharing the advice my stepfather often gives to my mother, who can be given to a bit of secular self-righteousness and seriousness. He will listen for awhile to her ranting and then declare: “*Lighten up, Johnson!*”

It’s my Holiday Wish for all of you this season that we give full permission to the many ways of observing this season of light – be it sacred or secular -- of honouring the end of the year, the giving of presents and presence, of celebrating family and the promise of birth, of welcoming wonder, and giving ourselves permission to indulge in its decorations and a little decadence.

And for these reasons, I will wish you Happy Holidays -May the Source be with you.

## Blessing:

We hear the dimstore Santas decree: Jesus is the reason for the season;  
But for Unitarian Universalists, we call instead for this to be  
a reasonable season—

reason enough for love and laughter  
reason enough for unity and hilarity  
reason enough for exploration and expectation.

And as we parse and piece our own reasons for this season,  
We pay tribute to the ancient Christmas story of the birth of the Son of Man  
in a stable under beckoning starlight;

We huddle under the early darkness of skies, summoning at Solstice the turning of the year's wheel  
in that birth of a very different "sun," summoned by our own light,

We heed the hope of Hannukah,  
lighting with lessening oil the heralding of days to come as days remembered.

We yearn toward the new year, resolved to learn the lessons of the past,  
to rest in the present, and seed the promise of a beginning and burgeoning future.

Yes, for Unitarian Universalists, these are reasons enough for the season;  
Perhaps, even, the *season* is the reason.

May we find the wisdom in all our six sources to celebrate wholeheartedly  
*all* of its rich gifts, embracing with our open minds, loving hearts, and helping hands that we be good for  
*goodness'* sakes.

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Summary of survey is from <https://uufv.freeyellow.com/id8.html> The full Commission on Appraisal report is available here:  
<https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/coa/engagingourtheodiversity.pdf>  
The full survey results for Grand River Unitarian Congregation are available here: <https://goo.gl/ZPzUXY>

<https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/coa/engagingourtheodiversity.pdf>

This sermon was also informed by *Consuming Religion* by Vincent J. Miller

To read, sign and support the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic visit <https://parliamentofreligions.org/content/toward-global-ethic-initial-declaration>.

At the first Parliament of the World's Religion in 1893 Swami Vivekenanda said: "The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant. Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth."