

Making A List
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UFWC

Of all of the times of year when traditions come fully into our consciousness, the winter holiday season is it. Whether it is Christmas, Chanukah, the Solstice, or any other holiday that is celebrated. Whether it be a religious observance, a story-telling time, or just family rituals, this is the time of year that they are pulled out and dusted off for our re-enacting, re-telling, and sharing with friends and family old and new.

I moved to Boston for the first time in 1979. I can't recall whether or not I tuned into Chuck Kraemer's Ode to Christmas that early—probably not—but into the 1980's I remember him coming on the evening news on the ABC affiliate with this amazing 3 minute piece of writing and film editing, for as he read the words, pictures flashed behind him reflecting the names and items he carefully enunciated on the air. It was masterful. As the age of the VCR came into being, channel 5 would let us know a few days ahead of time when Chuck would be doing this year's version of the Ode so that we could be ready. I'm sure I have several iterations of it on various tapes in my library. When I went to Portland OR to do my internship I knew I would miss the Ode. But then, NPR brought delight to my ears when they started carrying the audio of the Ode on the Sat. morning program nearest Christmas.

Sadly, Chuck left the broadcasting business and 2002 was his last Ode to Christmas. I tell you all of this because waiting for and watching the annual edition of the Ode to Christmas was one of my traditions for many years. Aside from the fact that it was carefully crafted, it was always welcome to hear a little perspective added back into the frenzy that has become the holidays. What have we done to Christmas indeed!

The season of giving is fully upon us. It is the time of year for generosity, generosity of largesse and generosity of spirit. Each year we all go through the ritual of making out our Christmas lists. We list the people that are most important in our lives and try to imagine what the perfect gift would be for each person. Either we know exactly what that person wants or needs or we set our imaginations running wild to be as creative as we can to find ways of delighting them. In the midst of all of our list making, I would like us to take a few moments to think about some other very special kinds of lists that we may not be working on right now, but might want to think about.

The late Rev. Clark Wells elaborates on one of these lists. He wrote a piece called "The Nicest Gifts I Ever Got":

"During this season of gift giving, a good exercise is to make a list of the best gifts we ever got. That will tell us what is important, for ourselves and for people we want to give gifts to.

While I remember a Daniel Boone hat and a magician set with special affection, the nicest gifts I ever got are in quite another category: the carillonneur at Rockefeller Chapel who let me strike one of the largest tuned bells in the world during his playing of *Ein Feste Burg*; my mother giving me a complete Shakespeare for my 14th birthday; coach Al Terry saying "Little Wells, grab your bonnet," and permitting me to enter as a freshman into my first varsity football game; a beautiful lady on a ship when I was still an acned teenager who kissed my face all over and told me I was handsome; Dr. Henry Nelson Wieman telling me he had thought for several hours about a question I had raised and respond[ed] with a

written answer the next day in front of the whole class; night after night my father playing catch with me in the back yard until it got so dark we couldn't see the ball; A Unitarian minister in Kalamazoo who put his arm around me after my father died and kept it there for a long time; a friend who flew several hundred miles to visit me when I was sick; a buddy who went to see three movies with me on the same day.

The nicest gifts people have given me have been enabling, confirming gifts, bestowing understanding and self-esteem, help in time of trouble, and delight for ordinary days.

May I suggest that you, too, draw up your list of the nicest gifts you ever received. I think it will give some perspective to the kind of gifts we really want to give to others, this Christmas or anytime."¹

Our friend of Lake Wobegon fame was given an odd kind of gift on that cold December morning when he and his wife were robbed. The big black suitcase that was supposed to contain the Christmas cheer for all of the family was taken by a thief from the bus that brought them to the New York airport where they would depart for Copenhagen to spend Christmas with the Danish side of the family.

Throughout their traveling and into their arrival, there was that hole that the black suitcase had made in the Christmas cheer. It is probably not a hole with which we are unfamiliar. We think of the gifts we didn't get to, the things on our lists left undone, the inability to find that one special gift that we know someone wanted. We have probably all had our own black suitcase that dogged our celebration and interfered with our joy in the holiday. Garrison's gift was the ability to forget about that hole because it became so filled with spirit that the hole no longer existed. I would surmise that the theft of the black suitcase might find its way onto his list of the nicest gifts he ever got—were he to make such a list.

What is to be written on our own lists? I hope that you all take time this year to sit down and write this list, and beyond writing it, take time to share it with those you love. The telling of our stories to one another is one of the most precious gifts we can give. They help us live on in the lives of those we love. High among the things on my list right now is our having been welcomed into this community and the opportunities both Ralph and I have been given to share ourselves and our ministries with such a large variety of people over the years. We are pleased to be settling in not only for the winter but for years to come. That is a gift that cannot be measured.

Once we have taken the time to ponder the best gifts we have been given, there is another list to be looked at, the wish list. What is your real wish list? Not the one with things that you want on it, but the one with the things you value? The intangibles, the ideals, the hopes and dreams we have for our families, for our towns, for our society. This is a list that conceivably go on for pages and books and years, but it never comes about unless we start somewhere.

Let's take something simple, like world peace. Imagine waking up in the morning, reading the newspaper and finding only news stories about how people are working together to build and not destroy. Imagine that all of the land mines scattered over the globe were being disarmed and dismantled. That soldiers were coming home to their families and their lives. Think about how it would feel to hear about armies being used to fix roads and bridges, re-plant forests, distribute food where it was needed rather than what they currently are engaged in.

Also on the list would be housing for the homeless, food for the hungry, medical care for all. As global perspectives get, that's is big and broad based as we can go. Let us bring the scale a little closer to home. When we, as Unitarian Universalists lift up our first principle, affirming the worth and dignity of every human being, we affirm that every person is deserving of love, of acceptance, of the basic necessities of life. Yet in our booming economy, many are still left out. How do we reconcile that? How do we go on with our daily lives and not examine our parts in the human struggle? We see the need for so much and we as individuals are incapable of fixing everything. But we as caring individuals can make a difference in the choices we make every day. We can choose how we treat one another in the home and in the workplace. We can make conscious decisions to live our values at home, where we work, where and how we shop, who we do business with.

With our list of values—those things we care about in our homes and our society—goes a parallel column, one where we explore what we can do to help. We can choose what is most important to us and find our own ways of making a difference.

This time of year we are all the recipients of mailboxes filled with two things—catalogues and appeals for help. Rarely do the two come integrated into one form. Being the people that we all are, we feel a tug at our heartstrings from more worthy causes than we knew even existed. There are appeals on behalf of the sick to help fund research and support for an endless number of illnesses. There are appeals on behalf of the poor in these times that are touted as being economically booming. There are appeals for food, clothing, shelter, and the environment. There are needs going unmet for the youngest and the oldest among us. Many of us, who are gifted with and surrounded by such abundance, are fortunate to be in a position to really do some good—to contribute in a variety of ways to organizations that help those who are most desolate. We all try to do our part and there will always be more needs yet unmet.

I have looked at the piles of catalogues that have come our way in the last month or two. There are delights for every sense available with the mere act of a phone call or a click on a web page. There are toys for children of every age, and, being a gadget lover, I can marvel at the ingenuity of our times. But we have come to a point in our lives that we have all the gadgets we need and we have beautiful things in abundance. So of the two piles, the appeals and the catalogues, the former is going to win out. I'm sure we are not alone in this. It grows from our sense of what is fundamentally important in the grand scheme of things.

For example, we wish for all to have food and water. There are local food pantries in need of donations. Sadly the needs are growing as the donations are unable to keep up. There are meals programs that this congregation already takes part in both at Safe Harbor and at the Salvation Army. Those are both short term and essential relief for those in immediate need. What can we do to help people help themselves? How can we reach out and really help with solutions?

Ralph and I have hardly begun our holiday planning this year. We intend to have a very low-key holiday. We have a very short Christmas list. This year, we have realized that our needs are satisfied and we would get far more pleasure and satisfaction from reaching out beyond ourselves. As we do every year, we will sit down and decide which organizations, charities, and causes we wish to donate to. I've added progressive candidates to my list since preserving our freedoms and Constitution is high on my list. By finding ways of making our money make a difference, our Christmas list has shortened considerably and so has our anxiety about it.

This season means far more to all of us than just appreciating the things we have accumulated. Once upon a time, as the story goes, a star shone bright in the sky and three kings were compelled to follow it. They brought with them gifts for the new born baby. Their gifts were of the most rare and precious possessions they owned, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. How that has translated itself into our modern ritual of crowding the malls and flooding the post offices would be a mystery to those wise men. Yet at the same time, we are finding ways to enrich our holiday season, not with material riches, but with the joy of being with those we love, with the hope that we can and are making a difference, and with the wonder that allows us to dream each time a child is born. This is a time to celebrate our values and share our stories.

I close with one last list. The list was written by the late Rev. Waldemar W. Argow. His list of "Christmas Wants" would not be too far from my own:

"Christmas Wants"

What do you want for Christmas? Of a truth, the answer to precious few questions serves so completely as a clue to the mystery of the human heart. At other times of the year we may dissemble and make-believe, but at Christmas our true nature reveals itself and we act from the hidden motives that dominate our lives.

Come with me this blessed Yuletide season and let the heart confess those wishes it has ever longed for, but never dared express. Aye, what is it we truly want?

I want a few faithful friends who understand my loneliness and who make it less, not by what they say but simply by what they are .

I want a growing capacity to appreciate and respond to the uncomplaining suffering of others, knowing that they fight as hard a battle against odds as ever I do.

I want a mind unafraid to travel, though the trail is not blazed, and a heart willing to trust, even when faith seems the most unreasonable of efforts.

I want a sense of duty tempered with compassion; a conception of work as a privilege ; an instinct for justice tempered with mercy; and a feeling that responsibility is my debt for the opportunity of living in a day when great ends are at stake.

I want tasks to do that have abiding value, that make my life a lot better and the world a little brighter .

I want a sense of humor, including a sense to laugh much, often at myself; the grace to forgive and the humility to be forgiven; the willingness to praise and the capacity to respond to greatness and glory.

I want a glimpse of verdant hillsides, the never-resting sea, the horizon-seeking plains and the sound of a bird lifting my spirit higher than any bird can fly.

I want a few wistful moments of quiet amidst the raucous noises and feverish fret of the day , and when twilight descends like a benediction I want a sense of an abiding and eternal reality whose other name is God."²

My wish for you is a holiday season where you are warm in body, and warm in spirit. Where you and your friends and family are gifts to one another. Where stories are shared, traditions are created and recreated. All in all, this is time for love and sharing. May you all find your way through the season with joy, warmth, compassion and love. That may be a very short list, but everything we need is on it.

¹ Seaburg, Carl, ed. Celebrating Christmas, An Anthology. (Boston, UUMA: 1983) p. 113.

² *ibid.* p, 170