

O Holy Light

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And so it's begun.

Actually, it began a few weeks ago. My husband started perusing Hallmark Christmas and holiday movies and we even watched one. Though I'm loathe to admit it, this has become an annual ritual in our household. If you're not familiar with these movies, they generally feature either marginally famous and/or formerly well known, now "washed up" television actors in a predictable, formulaic love story which unfolds over Christmas, or sometimes more generically, "the holidays." They aim, I think, for nostalgia, but are more often saccharine, bursting with abundant, cringeworthy sentimentality.

Nevertheless, they're popular...very popular, attracting millions of viewers each season. And you'd be forgiven for thinking my characterization of these movies means I dislike them. While I wouldn't exactly describe myself as a fan, per se, I have to admit there is something appealing about them at times.

For me, I think it's that buried beneath the trite plots, corny dialogue, and other significant shortcomings, like gender stereotypes, unexamined class privilege, and an interesting attempt at diversity that has the curious effect of magnifying their uber-white, straightness, one still gets a glimpse of a world that, at least in other, perhaps equally significant ways, resembles one a lot of people, regardless of identity or socio-economic position, hope or long for. One that so-called "real life" seems to keep out of reach for many, if not most...

A world where we can freely trust, imagine, and sing.

A world where we give and receive without condition or judgement, a world filled with wonder and delight, where we might hear the music of mythical times, be cured of our cynicism and fear neither needing nor offering love.

A world shaped by, in Sara Moores Campbell's words, "The spirit of the child" rather than the more familiar cycle of production and consumption.

At the very least, the Christmas and holiday movies churned out by Hallmark offer the viewer a temporary reprieve from the world as it is and presents an

alternative. A vision of how, depending on your age and memories, it used to be or could yet be.

No wonder they are so popular.

Seemingly as popular are blogs exhorting the weary masses to slow down for the holidays. Which ironically are often accompanied by a list of anywhere from 3 to 25 ways...that is, things to do...to slow down and make the season, um, less stressful. These lists are remarkably similar and repetitive. One such list I came across read like a series of commands: Categorize! Budget! Shrink! Gather! Opt Out! Focus! Unplug! Reset! Stand Firm!...Sit!, Speak! Roll over!...You get the idea.

After perusing several of these blogs I was so frazzled by all I was told to do to slow down I felt I needed a Hallmark Christmas movie to calm my nerves! Of course, we laugh aloud or to ourselves because we recognize the absurdity of it all. And laughter is preferable to tears, I suppose, tears we might shed given tragedy is a frequent companion of comedy where absurdity is concerned.

Jane Rzepka gently gives voice to this comic/tragic connection in her delightful reflection, "Important Notice." our second reading this morning. We all know literally shouting our zip code instead of pulling our rip cord when skydiving is not going to end well. And Rzepka suggests the same is true metaphorically speaking.

Yet, the consequences of focusing on metaphoric zip codes.... replacement bulbs, the four sticks of butter, the fruit-by-mail catalogs, the party shoes....versus metaphoric rip cords...our inner quiet, the love we exchange, efforts to make the world more whole...seem less clearly understood. Less clearly understood, perhaps, but no less urgently felt, as the profusion and popularity of blogs and made for TV movies seemingly aimed at shifting our attention from those metaphoric zip codes to our rip cords would seem to indicate.

The movies, of course, take that urgently felt need and don't so much address it as provide an escape from the tension it creates. Spending a couple of hours watching other people live out what you, on some level long for, relocates the tension outside of ourselves, providing at least some temporary reprieve.

Blogs on the other hand seem hell bent on providing "practical solutions" to tackle that felt need to switch our focus from the zip codes of the season to our rip cords. But these too, which would have us, "Do this" and "try that", effectively redirect the tension outside ourselves, encouraging us to believe relief can be had by learning to manipulate or control external events.

Yet both amount to an outer balm for an internal ailment. As such, they don't provide effective or lasting relief. Spiritually speaking, one of the giveaways that something is an outer balm for an interior ailment is that it comes to us packaged as a solution. Watch this and you'll feel better. Do this you'll and be less stressed.

Now, there's nothing really wrong with solutions. Rather, their effectiveness is often diminished because we're presented with or arrive at them having skipped a crucial step: preparation.

Preparation lies at the heart of the Christian observance of Advent which begins today. Unitarian Universalism is firmly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition even as our wings have carried us beyond it. And so, whether our individual theologies today lean Christian or not, Advent remains a source for spiritual practice and inspiration reminding us that meaningful change in ourselves and in our relationship to others and the world is not simply a matter of seeking and adopting external solutions but begins with preparation within.

For our Christian friends Advent is a time purposely set aside to prepare for the advent or coming of the Christ, who, in the Christian tradition is a supreme manifestation of hope, love, joy and peace born into the world, interestingly enough, as a human child, among the most vulnerable forms of new life to be found in nature, requiring unceasing care and attention to survive and flourish.

If then, we wish and are to focus more on our rip cords, rather than our zip codes during this holiday season, the so-called season of light, which includes not only Christmas, but Hanukkah and the Winter Solstice too, some preparation is in order, lest we find ourselves, as Jane Rzepka writes, "flying through the air, picking up speed".

To get a sense of what that preparation might look like, it's helpful to remember that the birth the Advent season anticipates and which promises a deeper, transformative way of life, is recalled in the Judeo-Christian scriptures with a sense of awe and wonder, humility and humanity. Or, in the words of Sara Moores Campbell, "The spirit of the child." A spirit marked not by naïveté, as some assume, but by openness, radical openness, beyond what is to what may be. An openness natural for the child, but a source of tension for the adult.

For the adult then, preparation is living into the tension, not rushing to resolve it.

Living into the tension asks us to loosen up and look and listen inside, rather than outside first.

To recall moments when we were able to trust, imagine and sing so we might recognize them again going forward.

To open ourselves to opportunities to give and receive without condition, without judgement, so we experience freedom and mercy beyond that which social norms, laws and policies demand or provide.

To give ourselves permission to be wowed, to feel overwhelmed with awe and tickled with delight that we might once again feel a part rather than separate...or apart...from the world.

To hear the stories and songs of old with your heart, that is, to listen for and discern the wisdom that lives below the fact challenged surface, that literalism your brain gets stuck on and is so eager to refute or needs to explain away.

To risk believing maybe it's your light the world is waiting for this season.

And to have...and act... on faith we need not fear needing nor offering love to ourselves and others.

For many adults the light of the season, hope, love, joy and peace, has become at best conditioned on external events and at worst irrevocably commercialized. And that commercialized, transactional way of seeing and relating to the world becomes the world we reflect and ultimately live in.

Advent, attention to rip cords, the spirit of the child all turn this around, preparing us by challenging us to reflect and live into a world that might be. A world where hope, love, joy and peace indeed shines brightly.

For any Holy Night of which we sing and hope to truly experience, will ultimately be a projection of the Holy light that burns within; light we have received, tended, and reflect back all the seasons of our lives. May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be