

**November Theme: Gratitude**  
**The Spirituality of Waiting**  
Sunday, November 27, 2011

**Reflection**

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We come together here from many traditions and life experiences so it is always wise and welcoming to provide some explanation and definition of what we're doing in church on any particular day. For those who may be wondering why we celebrate a waiting period or what Advent even is, I offer this reading from the holy book of Wikipedia:

“Advent (from the Latin word *adventus* meaning "coming") is a season observed in many Western Christian churches, a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas. It is the beginning of the Western liturgical year and commences on Advent Sunday, called *Levavi*. (What today is.)

The Latin *adventus* is the translation of the Greek word *parousia*, commonly used in reference to the Second Coming of Christ. For Christians, the season of Advent serves as a reminder both of the original waiting that was done by the Hebrews for the birth of their Messiah as well as the waiting of Christians for Christ's return.”

This morning we are taking a look at the spiritual value of waiting, how we wait, and what we wait for.

It is a huge privilege to be standing in front of you on what is the most important Sunday of the year for me, my personal High Holy Day. It is the anniversary of my first Sunday in this sanctuary, in this beloved community. Today marks eleven years since I first sat down in one of those seats. I still feel like a newcomer because I find so much that is new to me every time I learn more about a friend or make a new one or I am exposed to a new way of looking at life, which happens all the time here. Back then, I didn't have any idea of what I might have to offer and so, no idea what I might be willing to give to this community. I didn't even know it was a community or what that might mean for me. I have since learned that it means ever-increasing fellowship and ever-increasing spiritual and personal growth.

11 years ago today, I was a newcomer. What did I like that made me come back and make it my home? Maybe it was the hints of Christmas soon to come. The garlands on the balcony, the lighting of candles.

The time leading up to Christmas has always been my favorite, even when the joy of anticipation began to be paired with the dread of all the activity and pressure in adulthood and the time went from being agonizingly long to regrettably short.

What about people who don't celebrate Christmas? What does this time of year mean to them?

My fourth grade teacher was Jewish. She still had to teach us to sing all the Christmas songs we sang at this time of the year. I heard, later in my life, that she wasn't all that crazy about it, either. The songs were part of the curriculum in those days. There weren't any Jewish songs. She wasn't a secular Jew, either. She was married to a Rabbi and later became a Rabbi herself. Was she, Helen Ruth Spitz, one of the best teachers I ever had, one of the many who find the Christmas Season way too long, boring, irrelevant, or even culturally oppressive?

We can easily see how the concept of waiting as a spiritual practice comes down to Unitarian Universalists from our Hebrew and Christian roots whether it involved either waiting for the Messiah or waiting for the Second Coming of Christ.

How far back does our universal human take on this season go? Three years ago, I was Worship Leader of this day's service for the first time. I wanted to include a pagan perspective on the season to reveal the deeper roots of our tradition that go beyond shopping malls, Santa Claus, Dickens, even beyond Jesus, even beyond Moses. I asked our Frank Farris to bring us some words on the subject. His was such a fine reflection that I wanted him to read it again today. Alas, he is in Minnesota until just after the Return of the Light but he agreed to let me share his reflection with you again today. Those of you who were here that day will miss his voice but I'll do my best. It's called, "Light in Winter

For thousands and thousands of years, we humans, frightened and discouraged by the apparent disappearance of the sun in winter, have been comforted by wise elders who tell the story of Light being born in the darkness. As Advent begins, we too look for the hopeful message that the Light really will return. Before I am ready to experience the miraculous birth of Light at the Solstice, I like first to follow the winter path into a welcome, quiet, soothing darkness.

I like pagan practices because they are based on realities we can see around us: the rhythms of life and the turning of the seasons. If anyone ever complains that California "has no seasons," I say, "How difficult it must be to be one of those people who never notice anything." The lessening of light is obvious and we can see nature's reaction. There is indeed a winter here.

The moon is always changing too. How many people greeted the new Yule moon last night just after sunset? As it grows to full, there will be parties and concerts; as it is waning, we'll have Christmas. I love this timepiece in the sky. Look for it tonight, near Jupiter and Venus in the Western sky just after sunset.

By some trick of chance or design, the stars we see in winter are especially bright. Aldeberan, Rigel, Sirius, Procyon, Pollux, and Capella form the great winter hexagon, with

Betelgeuse right in the middle. We live in a place where they can often be seen, so I like to spend time outdoors in the dark and cold looking at the stars. It prepares me for the coming of the Light.

What I don't like is the shrill merchandising of the season. The false merriment detracts from authentic noticing of what is really happening. I sympathize with Christians who feel there is too little space for Jesus among all the ho-ho-ho. But I do assert that the Reason for the Season is that you can see the reason in the sky.

When I see a seasonal excess of stuff, I like to remember the Mesopotamian Goddess Inanna, who in winter descended into the underworld. As she passed the seven gates of the underworld, she abandoned her jewels, her clothing and crown, leaving all she owned piece by piece, until, after the seventh gate, she stood naked. She was killed and hung on a wall to await the delivery of Enke, who revived her with the Bread and Water of Life.

As I move into the dark time of the year, I remember Inanna's journey. I try to abandon my adornments and simplify my life. In order to transform myself and find hope, I do not need to be killed and hung on a wall. I just need to find the quiet in winter, to look away from the brightly lighted malls and tune out the piped-in rock carols. I need to have faith that it is safe to simplify, to give up in order to receive, to let lands lie fallow before the season of new growth comes again.

Singing was always central to my family practices at Christmas. My parents met as music education majors at UCLA. As the youngest of their four children, it's as if I was born into a choir and we sang together a lot, especially at Christmas. Some of our favorites were about the yearning darkness preparing to bear the Light. "In the bleak midwinter, frosted fields made moan. Earth stood cold as iron; water like a stone." And "To show God's love aright, She bore to men a Savior, when half-spent was the night." We weren't much of a Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer family. Instead, we sang about the wonder, about the miraculous truth that when the world is cold and dark, we can dare to hope that light will shine upon us.

So, my wish is not "May your days be merry and bright," nice as that song is. My wish is that you find some darkness and sit in it. Sit there long enough to prepare the way in your own frosted dark fields for the surprising and wonderful birth of Light."

THANK YOU, Frank Farris! I couldn't have said it better, so I didn't try.

So, what are we waiting for? Santa Claus? The return of the light? Just the return of comfortable routine? Normalcy? What am ***I*** waiting for? The Congress to approve extension of access to Unemployment Insurance benefits? The end of those benefits that will allow me to take a job again without actually losing income? How about the “return of the light” to the economy so maybe there will actually ***be*** some jobs for an older worker? Perhaps an even more important question is How will I wait?... With anxiety and worry or with patience and hope, enjoying every day **just as it is and one at a time?**

I think I'm starting to learn the latter without forgetting that waiting is not passive. We UU's strive to seek the truth in freedom. Advent is more about waiting than seeking; not so active, but not completely passive either. I must plant seeds for the future and wait for them to sprout with hope, faith and patience. Waiting much describes me at this time in my life. I must look far out toward the horizon and yet be present in every minute today in order to plant those seeds.

What have I discovered in the last year or so? I tried forcing myself toward a speedy repair of what I thought had gone wrong in my life--loss of a job. I've learned that I needed time to figure out what I need to do repair what was wrong in my life even when I had that job. The economy may be forcing me to wait but that waiting time is time to learn new things to avoid repeating past patterns that didn't work. Gratitude comes to me here in a big way when I realize that not everyone is in a position, however precarious, to use unemployment as an opportunity and a source of inspiration. I know I'm relatively lucky.

How do we wait? If you're you're a kid and waiting for Santa Claus, write him a letter; he's coming. If you're an adult waiting for the fulfillment of a dream, plant more seeds...it's coming!....if you are just waiting for more sunshine in your day to chase away the shadows this time of year may bring, it's coming! Meanwhile go to the beach in late morning and dance on wet sand.

The waning of the light has always been joyful for me. I remember coming home from school as the sun was setting and it was getting cold. I was in an afternoon class when my school was doing double sessions as Concord, California was growing faster than it could build schools. My mother would have a fire going in the fireplace and, maybe, a fresh warm batch of peanut butter cookies. Not long after, I would race down the street with our dog to meet my father where the bus from the Lawrence Radiation Lab in Livermore left him. When it got dark earlier it meant wonderful cozy things leading up to Christmas.

Even so, when I was little, I believe that I would have gladly fast-forwarded through those last few weeks of school and Catholic church life to get right to the finish line, the big payoff; Christmas morning and all those presents under the tree!

Now, it seems to me that to have this wondrous time of the year go by in a flash of busyness and stress is a great loss! I want to be that kid for whom it seems endless but

exciting. I want sugarplums dancing in my head every day of the full four weeks. Can I, can we, have that? Can we put on the brakes somehow now, fellow adults? Can we live every day of it and savor each of them?

I pledge to try!

This is my Advent Calendar. I bought it at Trader Joe's for 99 cents. It has chocolate in it, a piece for every day of Advent, if you don't start eating until December 1st. It's kind of a puzzle, too. You have to find the number of the day and open the little cardboard doors to get at the chocolate. The illustrations are a bit, well, maybe, almost psychedelic. Here is a gingerbread man riding in a sleigh pulled by a team of rabbits with antlers. Anyway, here I am with a 99 cent spiritual practice in my hands. Maybe it will remind me that every day of this season can be one of joyful anticipation, fully experienced.

The little piece of chocolate every day (and no, I'm NOT going to eat the whole thing later today, you people who think you know me!) will mark the sweetness of each ended day of the holiday season and stimulate my anticipation of the next. This is how I plan to slow down the rush of adult-paced Advent and recapture some of the exquisitely elongated pleasures of my childhood's precious WAITING!

And now, in the spirit of prayer, let us move into the silence for a little while, perhaps to ponder what it is we wait for and how we will wait for it.