

The Hard Parts, Too

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Reading: Don't Try So Hard

By Stephen Philbrick

It comes in a shiver sometimes,
Sometimes in a winter windowpane
Wild with the unseeable frozen there:
The shapes above clouds,
The score of wind and the words, too;
The plot of waves and the brain that
 lays and abandons them:
Don't try so hard.

Sometimes it falls,
A flake at a time,
Into your life when you're asleep.
Sometimes it comes as a winter blankness,
Waiting for storm, or ice, or thaw,
 or even wind.
And then the air by itself groans
And the trees speak out of themselves;
The swamp shudders and the woods come to.
Sometimes it comes when you least expect it;
And sometimes it doesn't.
Quiet, still, no voice (not even small),
No whirlwind, no reply, no burning.
Just a bare winter bush.

The space between stars,
Where noise goes to die;
And the space between atoms,
Where the charges thin out:
These are places, too.
The moment in the movement of the soul
When it all seems to stop, seized up.
This is true, too. Ice is, also. And dormancy.
I don't mean the stirring of seeds beneath
 the snow,
But the place between and the moment
 before.
And I don't mean a lightning bolt,
But what it passes through.
I don't mean a dream, but dumb sleep.

After the end and before the beginning
Is time, too.
Let it alone, don't try so hard.
This is God, too,
All of you is.

Sermon:

The holiday season,
With the back-to-back Thanksgiving to Christmas turnaround
Can be a bright line in the sand
Between those who are gleefully hanging lights
And making seasonal treats
And those who are bracing themselves, waiting for it to be over.
The “most wonderful time of the year”
Can also come with an undercurrent of pressure to get gifts, and get the right gifts,
The expectation to get your holiday cards sent out, early,
with a perfectly groomed family
And everyone smiling
With balancing family parties and trying to get everything done on time
And remain cheerful and grounded through it all
This season, well—
Between the expectations and the realities of our lives,
It can be a setup.

We are well acquainted with the cultural expectations we encounter in December
Peace on earth,
Or at least within our families,
Goodwill to all
Joyful joyful
All is calm
Merry and bright

This season can be a touchstone
A time of beloved traditions, of family connections,
Of generosity and gratitude.
But not always, and not for everyone, and not every year.
So if you are not feeling the Christmas spirit this year
Or if you are supporting a loved one who is not particularly merry and bright right now
Then this sermon is especially for you.
And if you are in the Christmas spirit this year
This sermon is certainly *not* to have you tamp down the cheer
Or to make you feel guilty,
This sermon is simply for you to tuck away for a time
When you need it

Because we all have days, or seasons, or years, that are harder for us.

This season,
Perhaps you, or someone you know, is
estranged from family
or spending time with family is particularly complicated
Perhaps this is your first Christmas without a loved one, like it is for me
Perhaps this is your first Christmas after a divorce
Perhaps you are struggling with depression, or anxiety
Perhaps you are not able to afford many gifts this year,
Perhaps you are feeling especially lonely this year
Perhaps you are far away from the people you love
Or perhaps you *just aren't feeling it*.

Perhaps it is the time of year
When you most feel the gulf between your life as it is
And what you wish for.
I think that sometimes, we suffer because we have a gap between our expectations, and
reality.
And when it comes to the holidays, there can be so much pressure—both within and
without
To have it look, and more so, feel, a certain way.
That gap can be a hard thing to reconcile, to come to peace with.

In my first year of ministry at UUAC
I led the Christmas Eve services here alone.
Nathan was on a family vacation, his first Christmas Eve off
in the more than a decade that he had been here
And that year we didn't have an intern.
So I was on deck to lead.

Now, for some context:
In my Dad's family, which is the larger side of my family,
Christmas Eve has always been the big family gathering of the season,
With my grandparents and my dad's six siblings and their families and my 17 first cousins
and all of their partners and kids... it's huge.
There's *two* yankee swaps and Santa comes and it's generally cacophonous and lovely.
And when I went in to ministry,
I knew that this was something that was going to be impacted
That my heart, from here on out,
would always be in two places on this night
And that I would enter the minister world
of Saturdays forever being a work night,
and Christmas Eve being at church.

So, back to my first year here,
And the 5:30 service of delightful chaos has just ended
And the building has cleared out

And remember—at this point I barely knew any of your names
And I had maybe 45 minutes until I needed to start getting ready for the next service.
I had left the house in a hurry earlier that day
Only barely realizing in time that I'd be here through dinnertime
And slapped together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich
(Which—full disclosure—I actually really dislike peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but they
are so convenient)
And I jumped in the car.
So after the first service had ended
I Facetimed my sister while I ate, to say hello at our family party
And as we said our goodbyes,
I started crying over my dry peanut butter and jelly sandwich.
Alone in my office,
And missing my family.

Now, things have changed since then:
My family does their party earlier, and closer, so I generally go for a few hours
And our traditions have changed substantially in enough other ways
such that it all feels like part of the natural growth cycle
of my cousin's generation,
I've never made the mistake of a pathetic peanut butter and jelly sandwich on Christmas Eve
again,
As I now organize getting take out dinner for the church staff to eat together
And mostly, I've come to know you, this community,
And love you,
So that my heart is here, too, when I am with you.

But I think of this story,
When I think about the wide gulf that year
Between my expectations for what the holiday *should* feel like
And the reality of what *was* happening.

Mindfulness teacher Tara Brach writes:
The Buddha once asked a student,
“If a person is struck by an arrow, is it painful?”
The student replied, “It is.”
The Buddha then asked, “If the person is struck by a second arrow,
is that even more painful?”
The student replied again, “It is.”
The Buddha then explained,
“In life, we cannot always control the first arrow.
However, the second arrow is our reaction to the first.
And with this second arrow comes the possibility of choice.”

The first arrow, according to Buddhist teachings, is the arrow of pain.
Pain, they say, is inevitable.
The second arrow is the arrow of suffering.
Suffering, the Buddha teaches, is optional.

For me this year, the gap between my expectation of the holidays
and the reality of the holidays is much larger than ever before.
As many of you know, my Dad unexpectedly passed away last January
And this year will be the first Christmas without my dad.
I will actually be with my Dad's family on Christmas Eve this year
Which is where I need to be on this first year,
But my heart will still be in two places,
Here with all of you, who I love.
I look out and see many of you, too,
Who are facing the first holidays
After you have lost a beloved this year.
It is an understatement to say that a year ago, this was not my expectation
But it is my reality.
And all of my expectations
About what a future would look like with my dad in it
All of those shattered images
All of the memories of what our family used to do at Christmas,
All of the traditions and nostalgia
Come into clearer focus, I find, at this time of year
Because holidays are a touch point, a snapshot
As we mark the same day, year after year
With people added or people missing
Traditions added or traditions skipped
We can more clearly see the marching of time
The seasons that have gone
And feel their absence.

Our reading this morning was from Rev. Stephen Pilbrick,
And I kept returning to his words:

“And the space between atoms,
These are places, too.
The moment when your soul seems to seize up,
This is true, too. Ice is, also.
After the end and before the beginning
Is time, too.
Let it alone, don't try so hard.
This is God, too,
All of you is.”

The hard parts, too, are holy.
The hard parts, too, are part of this season.
The gap between your expectation and your reality
That is real, too.
Let it alone, don't try so hard.

In this time of the year
When we celebrate the bringing of good news to the earth
I want to remind us that the core message of Christmas is about gritty hope, not shiny happiness.

For Unitarian Universalists, the divinity of Jesus has historically
Been a complex question
But if we can agree, at least,
That Jesus was a great man and a great teacher
Who preached that we should love our neighbor as ourselves
Not just the neighbors who look like us, but all of our neighbors
Jesus, who challenged the empire of his day
And who swore allegiance to a higher law, a law of love,
Who represents the hope for a love and a salvation and a healing that can be so generous, so perfect, so grace-filled
Then reflecting on the Christmas story, to me, is about holding that hope
For love, for redemption, for salvation, for grace
In a world that is not yet there.
A world in which there is a gap
Between what our hearts long for
And what we see around us.
A world that is still living in the shadow of empire
A world that says, too often, that we have no room at the inn
To a poor brown woman who traveled an impossible journey
And is trying to find a safe place to raise her child.
The Christmas story reminds us
That we live in a broken world made up of broken people
And we know that there is a crack in everything
And that is how the light gets in.

The Christmas story is not merely a story of joy.
It is a story of fear, of worry,
And of the promise that love can be born amidst struggle.

This season is about holding hope that love can come amidst all of the difficulties
And for those who feel hopeless, or lonely, or lost,
For those who need a reminder that the light comes back slowly,
This message, of this season, is especially for you.
If you are struggling this season,
I hope that you can hear this in the message of Christmas:
The promise that love can be born amidst struggle, fear, and heartache

This season,
You do not need to be anywhere but where you are.
Don't try so hard.
Allow the pressures that say you have to manufacture
Your feelings
And put a smile on your face and joy in your heart,

Allow those pressures, those voices, to fall away.
Because the hard parts, too, are holy.
And when we do not struggle to be anywhere but where we are
We can lessen the sting of the second arrow
And trust that it will not always feel this hard.
Trust that the light will get in
And that the light will come back.

I close with the words of Jan Richardson, who I return to each advent season.
She writes,

I cannot tell you
how the light comes.
What I know
is that it is more ancient
than imagining.

That it travels
across an astounding expanse
to reach us.

That it loves
searching out
what is hidden
what is lost
what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That it has a fondness
for the body
for finding its way
toward flesh
for tracing the edges
of form
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.

That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,

though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
to let it find us.
May we bend our bodies
to follow the arc it makes.
May we open
and open more
and open still
to the blessed light
that comes.

My beloved people,
May you find moments of comfort
and gritty, courageous hope this season
May you trust that the light will return.
May it be so, and amen.