



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## Out of the Stars

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Were you one of those kids that obsessed over what you were going to get for Christmas from your parents? I was. That was the main mystery that had to do with Christmas, the mystery of what was in the box, the mystery of how to be patient and wait. There was also the magical feeling I got Christmas Eve, when the church service finally came to an end, the lights were dimmed, and all our candles were lit, as we sang Silent Night. As a child I knew, sitting next to my mother, how special that moment was. It was beautiful, and I knew how blessed, safe, and loved I was. As a young adult, before I started work as a minister, that moment would bring tears to my eyes, especially if I was sitting next to my mom. Now I miss sitting next to my mom Christmas Eve, but Jim and Sara aren't bad substitutes.

Embracing that mystery of Christmas was beautiful, but quite brief. Do you associate this time of year, this time of Advent, with mystery? Or are you too harried with your shopping list to make sure you're getting enough sleep and exercise, let alone nurturing your spiritual life? Christmastime is a real mixed bag - the highs get higher and the lows get lower. A lot of us get stuck in the lows and begrudge anyone who can feel good. I know I'm jealous, because the early stages of this pregnancy have got me feeling pretty nasty. I'm just glad the compost pile is nearby in case I have to go lose my breakfast!

My woes pale in comparison with anyone who is really feeling the blues right now. Depression is a common ailment of the modern era, and it's no joke. I have a Spiritual Director, the Rev. Cathleen Cox, another UU minister, who has an interesting take on it. She believes that most cases of depression can be resolved if the person makes every effort to come into spiritual alignment, to make adjustments in our lives that allow the sacred to shine forth from ourselves.

It's in this spirit that I challenge us this morning to consider what adjustments we need to make to become more spiritually aligned, so that we can experience the joy of this holiday season as authentically as possible. It is what Advent is all about; it's to prepare our spirits to receive joy, because we only experience as much joy as we allow ourselves to receive.

Finding our way from sadness to joy can be a mysterious process, but embracing mystery, and seeking within that mystery is one of the keys of spiritual development. Traditionally, UUs have had a dual relationship with mystery. On the one hand we embrace it. A lot of us are here because we're comfortable not knowing the answers to the big questions: why are we here, does God exist, what is the meaning and purpose of the universe? It's all a mystery, and that questions feel safer than answers is a common UU character trait.

We also have a tradition of embracing empirical science, science that expands our knowledge of 'what we know for sure.' The goal of this 'profane science,' as John Jenkins referred to it, would seem to be to stamp out mystery, to crack it, to solve it. But it's because we believe there are no easy answers to life's mysteries that we welcome the new knowledge we can gain from science. We tend to believe that great religious truths are no static affair, and we need the flexibility to change what we know, based on new information that arises.

That seems sensible, but it's important that, in our search for truth, we never lose our sense of awe and wonder. That's what I felt when I sat next to my mom on Christmas Eve - the awe and wonder of belonging, belonging to my family, to my church community, to the universe. Just like Jesus, I was a child of God, and while I could in no way comprehend that mystery, I could be in awe of it.

Jenkins may have rubbed some of us the wrong way when he referred to empirical science as profane, but it's a way to pull our attention toward this notion of sacred science. It's one of the more intriguing ideas I found in the 2012 Story. First, let me try to sum up Jenkins' take on 2012, so we can get to what might be of use to us.

Jenkins' concern is that we cut through the noise about 2012, the sensational doomsday scenarios and so-forth, and seek instead to gain wisdom from Maya teachings about our present moment in history. With a lot of research, Jenkins believes he has proven how a rare galactic alignment underlies the 2012 cycle-ending date, and is a concept deeply embedded within Maya traditions. He's referring to when the center of our sun aligns with the center of the galactic equator. Did you know that our solar system actually orbits around the center of the Milky Way Galaxy, traveling along a galactic equator? I just learned this, and it's remarkable how the cyclical movement of the cosmos is consistent from the macro to the micro. Granted it takes several hundred million years for our solar system to make this trip, so this alignment is not to be confused with that rotation. But as our solar system orbits around, we go up and down, above and below the galactic equator, and so this galactic alignment, when our sun is in direct alignment with the equator, occurs once every 26,000 years, and according to Jenkins, was what the ancient Maya were pointing to with the 2012 end-date of their Long Count calendar. This process of alignment could take a number of decades, and 2012 is perhaps the midpoint of this process.

Okay, so what? According to Jenkins' interpretation of Mayan philosophy, the 2012 date signals the beginning and the end of a world age. Jenkins urges us to place this all in a larger context of understanding, he urges us to see that this is where the greatest opportunity lies. He writes, "To state it bluntly, the Maya seem to have understood the nature of cycles, integrating celestial cycles with cycles of culture and consciousness here on earth. They achieved a profound metaphysical understanding of life and understood why and how era-2012 would signal a time of great change."

This great change has to do with sacred science, with finding our way back to a much healthier relationship with the natural rhythms of the earth. If we are in awe of nature, we are more likely to respect nature. The cycle that's ending (and in my view, appears to be alive and well), is this era of ego-driven materialism, of humanity dominating nature, of power and control. The new cycle, as predicted by the Maya, shall be one of ego-transcendence, of a more spiritually fit collective consciousness that works to mend what we have mucked up.

That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Is this all a bunch of New Age hokey and woo-woo? Probably. It reminds me of why I suspect the apocalyptic scenarios are so attractive to great numbers of Christians. Armageddon is a big part of their belief system, and while it may seem strange to us, there's a reason why it's so appealing. It's a kind of annihilating redemption, to wipe our existence clean off the planet. You say tomato, I say tomahto, let's just forget it and call the whole thing off. The world is so messed up, let's throw in the towel and be done with it. While it seems to acknowledge how clueless and selfish we've been, it offers no hope in humanity's ability to choose a different course. It strikes me as a deeply self-hating psychology, to say we're not worthy of being.

It seems to me that the 2012 business offers an 'apocalyptic-lite' scenario. It feels much more hopeful and realistic. Instead of life just ending on earth, *life as we know it* ends, but it ends by gradually changing, and continues on. If it's true, it's a very special and important time to be alive. If it's not true, I think the placebo effect of believing it's true, is still worthwhile. To close out one era, and begin another, can reasonably be considered a process we are all participating in regardless of some special date.

Let's do some micro and macro comparisons here. Another reason I thought this was an appropriate time of year to bring up 2012 is because it strikes me as a macro advent event – this time we have now is a time to prepare for the arrival of a new era, a *good* new era. You have two years to figure out what that means, go! Jenkins emphasizes that it's always a matter of free will, of free choice. We can welcome this opportunity or ignore it. That's true of Advent 2010 as well – we can choose to use this time to embrace the true meaning of Christmas, to get our spiritual house in order, or we can just go through the motions, numbly ignoring the real gifts spiritual fitness has to offer.

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\* *The 2012 Story The Myths, Fallacies, and Truth Behind the Most Intriguing Date in History*, John Major Jenkins, 2009, p. 285.

There is a reason why this is the *best* time of the year to turn our attention to our spiritual well-being. It's the end of the year, and it's dark and cold. It's time to cycle out of the previous year, to let go of what needs letting go of, and that takes quiet reflection and consideration. How convenient that the weather outside is frightful, giving us time inside for this respite. Giving us time inside ourselves is how we prepare. We prepare ourselves to pay attention to what really matters, honing our sensitivity to the awe and wonder of the gift of life. This is how we become a conscious and active participant in the universe, how we acknowledge the divine spark within us. It's how we learn to use this spark as a force for good in the world.

Jesus is just one player in our pantheon of inspirational prophets – Jesus happens to be the prophet that we celebrate at the end of year in this time and place, in this cultural location. Unitarian Universalism is a product of Christianity, and that's why it's natural for us to celebrate Christmas. A while back, it was the Pagan gods of the sun and agriculture that were celebrated around the Winter Solstice. Pope Julius the First declared December 25 to be the birth of Jesus, in the year 350. It was just one way the Western world retreated from a closer relationship with nature. Instead of celebrating the gift of food and life that the sun provides, we began to celebrate a man, a reflection of ourselves.

Be that as it may, Jesus has many redeeming qualities that can inspire us and change our lives – the teachings of Jesus are a part of the Perennial Philosophy, the universal divine ground of sacred knowledge. It's a great idea to study Jesus during Advent as a spiritual practice because his teachings are about the happiness we get as a result of compassion in action. We enter the Kingdom of God, which is as close to us as inside us, when we discover how much we have to give, how a spirit of generosity can be a gift to both ourselves and those we affect. We enter the Kingdom of God when we discover how much we have to give, and how little we actually need.

Little, at least, compared to what we think we need now. Christmas is an easy target for the 2012 assessment that our age is mired in materialism. While it's hard to disagree with that assessment, it's obviously a big problem I want to absolve us of somewhat. Every year, I tell you how much I love Christmas, everything about it, just as our culture defines it. There's nothing wrong with it, it's about joy, generosity, and family. Excess and ecstasy. At its most sacred, it's about awe and wonder. As I believe in the notion of Alice Walker, that God gets mad when you pass by the color purple in nature and don't notice it, I think God gets sad when you don't enjoy Christmas.

Christmas is our end of year festival, it's when we acknowledge that, as mysterious as it is, it is a miracle to be alive in this universe, in this galaxy, in this solar system, on this planet. It is a great gift. It's when we remember that it's, maybe not a sin, but a tragedy, to not know how to enjoy it. Let this time of advent be a time to receive the gift of life as openly as we can.

And, as we near the solstice of 2012, let us consider how we can prepare ourselves for a new age, a time that is not so dominated by material concerns. Clearly one of the transitions is figuring out how to keep Christmas special without all the stuff. Stuff that takes loads of energy to produce, package, and transport – the costs of such stuff to the environment is not anywhere close to our radar as it needs to be. Our heart is in the right place for Christmas now, to provide joy and delight for our children and family members – eventually, we're just going to need to figure out how joy and delight is sustained with sustainable consumerism.

The 2012 notion of beginning anew sounds really good to me, and while it probably won't involve cataclysmic events, I'd like to be a part of how we decide to change, and I wholeheartedly believe that religious liberals have a role to play here. We are already playing that role. Today and next Sunday here at Neighborhood we offer special events that address the need to transition to a more environmentally sustainable Christmas. Today is the first day of the Alternative Gift Market, when you can buy all kinds of things in your loved one's honor that help those in greater need. Check it out in the chapel after the service.

The Alternative Gift Market continues next Sunday too, and there will also be a 7<sup>th</sup> Principle event about how to have a Green Christmas.

Let's let 2012 inspire us to prepare ourselves for a new age. If we are the generations that prepare the next age, what kind of precedent do we want to set? We are the ones we have been waiting for. Let us prepare, prepare, prepare. Happy Advent!