

Advent for UUs  
A Sermon by Intern Minister Elizabeth Marsh  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville  
November 29, 2009

I don't know if you've noticed, but the Christmas season has begun. Friday was the big day, of course. This past week, I was visiting a household in Illinois where the TV is on a lot more than in my house here. And boy, if I didn't ever get a brain-full of advertisements and news stories about Black Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year. That day is also referred to as Buy Nothing Day, as you may know. This is an effort to counterbalance the epic consumerism by not spending any money at all during that day. For me, the day after Thanksgiving means that I let myself begin listening to Christmas music. Whatever you call it, Friday was certainly an official kick-off to the Christmas holiday season.

Today is, for Christians in the world, an official kick-off day, too. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is a liturgical time of year when Christians prepare themselves for the original birth of Jesus and for his second coming, as well. That latter part is significant for Christians whose theology is told in the Nicene Creed, which reads, "Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead." Christians who observe Advent will take this time to reflect on how their souls are ready to meet Jesus when he comes again.

Unitarian Universalists generally have a different understanding of Jesus, and when we recognize the season of Advent, it is not to prepare ourselves for the second coming of Christ. Unitarian theology squarely understands the historical and religious figure of Jesus as a man, a great prophet, and like all humans who die, he will stay buried but live on in the hearts and memories of those who love him. So, on Christmas, some Unitarian Universalists will celebrate the birth of an ancient, wise prophet named Jesus of Nazareth and remember the real and symbolic births in our lives.

Leading up to this celebration of birth, there's the liturgical season of Advent, which spans the four Sundays prior to Christmas. This season, at its roots, is about preparing. Just as it takes nine months for a family to prepare themselves for the birth of a child—and sometimes that doesn't even feel like enough time—this season of the year gives us a chance to prepare for those spiritually significant moments that are yet to arrive in our lives. Some of these moments we know are coming while others will arrive on our doorstep unannounced. Sometimes we receive the unexpected visitors of illness, untimely loss, or long lasting grief. Other visitors are more pleasant surprises. During this

season of Advent, we can examine how we prepare for the unfolding of our lives.

Many of us find ourselves getting ready for the upcoming winter holidays for both religious and secular reasons. There are so many kinds of preparation that can happen at this time of year. Some are directly holiday related: shopping for gifts and baking cookies; decorating the house inside and out; making the beds for out of town guests. Other kinds of preparation seem to happen at this time of year without fail: studying furiously for upcoming final exams; hauling out the sweaters, hats, and mittens from storage; adjusting our lives to the dwindling daylight hours. All of these things are preparation for this unique time of year.

Even though this can be a particularly full time of year for many of us, we all make preparations for life every day, regardless of season. We shower, dress, eat, and get ourselves ready for the day. We prepare meals for ourselves and others. We read and study, which gets us ready for writing reports or taking tests. We sleep, setting ourselves up for tomorrow. And those are just the practical things of life. There are also big, monumental things we prepare for, like births, weddings, and funerals.

If we are preparing for one thing or another during every day of our lives, then the season of Advent becomes relevant to us as Unitarian Universalists. We can take this time to reflect on preparation—how we ready ourselves for life. For it is in Life, with a capital L, that UUs find sacredness. We prepare our souls everyday for life, for the presence of life. We come together in congregations to create religious community. The people sitting with us in this sanctuary are often the people we call upon to accompany us through life. We do our best to prepare ourselves and each other for the multitude of experiences that life brings us. We know that illness and loss, as well as birth and joy, will be a part of our lives. This season of Advent, then, can be a time to assess our spiritual preparedness for Life.

Our first task is to articulate to ourselves and each other what we're getting ourselves ready for. Since many people in our congregation are still traveling and we're a smaller community this morning, I'd like to give you each a moment to share with your neighbors some of the things you're preparing for in your life right now. Big, medium, or small things, whatever you feel comfortable to share. I'll give you a moment to talk with each other and I'll ring the chime when the time is up....

[Conversation....]

Thank you, all of you, for sharing with each other. I'm sure there were many things told in this room. The intention of religious community is that we continue to bring the real stuff of our lives to

the table.

Our responsive reading for today gives an apt metaphor to reflect on how we strengthen our souls for living. “This being human is a guest house,” Rumi wrote. “Each morning a new arrival.”

So let us imagine that each of us is a house. The soul of yourself is a house, but not just a building standing alone. You are also the surrounding lot, including a yard, perhaps with trees, shrubs, and flowers. Your house definitely has a walkway of some kind leading up to it.

The appearance and function of the house is the way we meet and greet Life. How do we let Life know that we live here in our house? Perhaps some of us have very clear, accessible walkways and a great big “Welcome!” sign on the door. Is the path decorated with flowers, is it a simple gravel path, or is it grown over and barely discernible from the surrounding yard? Is the path shoveled clear after a snowstorm so that each visitor may easily find their way to your house, or is the path to the house of your soul left unshoveled and icy because why bother, the snow will melt soon anyhow?

How do we prepare the way to the house of our souls for visitors, both expected and unexpected?

Then we get to the house itself. Some of us might have the front door to our souls deadbolted three times over like in Manhattan. For others, the door is unlocked, ready to greet whatever guests arrive as guides from beyond. The house of your soul might be cluttered, maybe like my grandfather's old house, piled high with things and paths to get to and from each room. Perhaps your soul is in an apartment building, nestled snugly in close quarters with others. As we begin to understand our metaphoric houses, we come to know how we handle new developments in our lives.

As Rumi wrote, preparing for spiritual guests is like preparing for house guests. In the coming weeks, some of us will either host or be those visitors. In my life, I've recently begun participating regularly in the preparation of a house for guests. I've begun attending classes at a local yoga studio, and each week I participate in the studio's work exchange program. In exchange for cleaning the bathrooms or vacuuming the carpet once a week, I receive a discount on passes to class.

Receiving discounted classes is, of course, an especially excellent program for students such as myself. It is also a time for me to participate in the preparation of the studio for my fellow yogis. Each person who comes to classes is a guest in this house of yoga. When I replace the wet bath mats at the showers with dry ones, empty out the waste baskets, and move a bench out of the way so I can vacuum dust out of the corners, I am preparing the studio for the next wave of yogis to find an orderly, clean environment in which to practice their yoga.

While guests to a yoga studio are generally an amicable bunch, Rumi reminds us that not all

house guests are pleasant. His poem has some challenges and perhaps limits to it. Rumi writes, “The dark thought, the shame, the malice / meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.” The challenge in his words is to remain open to spiritual transformation that comes even from grief and loss. This is an important idea, however, makes me think of another adage, which says that “life doesn't give you anything you can't handle.”

I don't believe that saying, given the stark reality of tragedies in our world, especially in suicides that devastate families every year. Sometimes the ability to meet adversaries with laughter not only seems impossible but becomes impossible. Sometimes, to meet adversity with lightness takes interventions of medicine, therapy, and community support.

Certainly it is counter-intuitive to welcome grief and emptiness. Universalist theologians have proclaimed that heaven and hell are not places we go after we die; instead, they exist on earth, here and now. We can create heaven and hell for each other, and we live them in this life. For my relatives who were alone on Thanksgiving this year, Thursday was a difficult day. They weren't exactly eager to welcome the empty chairs around the dinner table. Sometimes the loneliness in our hearts can be all too real.

When this happens, Rumi is issuing us a challenge—not just to change our mood or look on the bright side, but to be deeply transformed by the crowd of sorrows that might arrive at our house. Winston Churchill is credited with saying, “If you're going through hell, keep going.” Don't stop in the middle of hell and admit defeat. Keep going, find your way out, he meant. By letting the dark thought, the shame, the malice accompany us for a while, we might begin to understand what these visitors can teach us.

When there are periods of hell in our lives, certainly there are periods of heaven, too. These moments of joy and sorrow are often mixed together. Sometimes we find them sitting right next to each other at the kitchen table of our lives, sipping coffee and chatting over cinnamon rolls. To remind us that these joyful visitors also arrive at our doorstep, the reading this morning by Jan Richardson asks, “What are the acts of preparation that bring delight to my daily life?” Delight still happens, every day. In this season of Advent, we also reflect on those preparations that bring us joy.

Sometimes we all too often put aside those things that bring us delight for the obligations of our lives. I know I'm one to do this. We might begin to believe that joy and obligations are separate from each other. Richardson also writes in the reading from today, “Chances are, if we don't enjoy the process of getting ready, we won't enjoy the event we are getting ready for.” In this way, the task becomes to find delight whatever we are preparing for. Enjoying the *process* of preparing is key.

Anyone who's ever tried to write a ten page research paper in a day or get kids out the door for school, knows that getting ready is a process. And part of the process is practice. The more we practice something, the better we get at it. Practice helps strengthen our spiritual muscles for the times when our spirits will be used to their utmost.

Our spiritual muscles are like our physical muscles. Athletes preparing for a big game know they must show up on game day with their skills well honed. They've lifted weights, run laps, and practiced the skills necessary for their game. We, too, can prepare for life by strengthening our souls to greet life as it comes to us. This morning, on the NPR program Speaking of Faith, UU minister Kate Braestrup was interviewed, and something she said fit so well with this message. "We are all practicing all the time," she said. "But we don't know what our final test will be." Our spiritual practices can help us build up our spirits for whatever is to come. Perhaps some of us meditate or pray; play music or dance; raise a family or practice mindfulness; and certainly, when we come together weekly in this sanctuary—these spiritual practices are ways we prepare our souls for life.

As Unitarian Universalists, we recognize that Life with a capital L is here, right now. It's not coming after we pass from this world into whatever might come next. This is the only chance that we know for sure that we've got. We prepare for life at the same time that we live it.

As we get ready for upcoming holiday events, the manner in which we prepare will in turn prepare us for life. If we can find delight in the process, our souls are strengthened. If we can find ways to treat a crowd of sorrows with honor, our souls are strengthened. This Advent season could be time to connect with others to lessen the pang of grief, or at least to find others who will hold the emptiness with us.

Cultivating a soul that is ready for both difficulty and delight takes practice. Each visitor to the house of our soul has been sent as a guide, Rumi says. Let us remember that each person we encounter this holiday season can teach us a lesson that our soul needs. In long lines at store checkout counters, may we learn patience. In the flurry of too many activities, may we learn to give and receive help. In the grief and loneliness that can accompany people during holidays, may we learn to be company for them, too. And in this religious community, may our souls be strengthened for whatever life may bring.

Blessed be, and amen.