

## **Intergenerational Holiday Service**

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Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden  
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### **“What’s your favorite?”**

#### **Opening Words and Guided Meditation – Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull**

##### **Opening Words:**

“Tell me a story.” How many times have you said it—as a child, maybe as an elder child.

“Sing me a song.” What a gift it is to be sung TO. And what a gift to sing.

“Light a candle.” Light a candle at the darkest time of year. So we will. So we will kindle a singular flame, and so we will light candles of anticipation.

Open your heart to the stories, the songs, the candlelight, and the hope of this time, this sacred time when we hover on the return of the light, the threshold of birth, the grace of rebirth, when we give voice to our deepest yearnings, and when we listen, when we simply listen.

##### **Guided Meditation:**

I invite you to close your eyes and breathe.

Breathe in...the stories you have heard, the songs you have sung, the silence you have held.

[Pause]

Go back, way back, to the first Christmas you remember. Perhaps it was not Christmas that you celebrated. Perhaps it was another holiday or no holiday at all. What are your earliest memories of this time? What fills your mind? What opens your heart?

[Pause]

What do you wonder at? What do you wrestle with? What makes you laugh, giggle even?

What makes you cry?

[Pause]

What is that smell? Fir trees waiting for someone to choose them, and there you are. “It’s this one,” you say, as your father, mother, spouse, child nods yes. You gather its branches, inhaling the pungent aroma, and lift it to the top of the car for the long ride home.

[Pause]

What is that taste? Cookies fresh out of the oven? A drumstick—one of the precious two that came with the turkey. Latkes slathered with sour cream, or was it applesauce? Perhaps there was precious little in your home. What does the palette of your heart serve up?

[Pause]

Sounds return, long-ago voices. Whose? Directed to you, to a sister or brother perhaps, or an aunt or uncle or grandma or grandpa? Perhaps a cross-conversation—impossible to know who was saying what to whom.

[Pause]

The faint echoes of singing. Christmas carols. Where are you? In the warmth of your home? In a church that you haven't visited for years? Or in a synagogue, where you're hearing not carols, but chants. Or on a street corner, and you're one of those singing, a caroler. On the side walk just outside a church with anthems of Christmas reaching your chilly ears, your waiting heart. Perhaps you're at a holiday concert, nestled into a chair or even a pew, and you find a tear rolling down your cheek.

[Pause]

The stories return in voices from across time, but familiar, so familiar. Your grandfather reading the story from Luke, your mother telling you tales of her childhood Christmases on a farm that no longer is, voices and images from a holiday drama entering your living room by television, or even radio, and the images are yours.

[Pause]

Your first Christmas with the new baby—yours? Or was she a brand-new sister or he a brand-new brother?

[Pause]

Your first Christmas without your mother, your father, or was it your spouse or your child, sprung from the nest, or somehow estranged, or no longer in this life as we know it. The carols couldn't even break through your sadness that year.

[Pause]

A star on the clearest of Christmas Eves. You're sure it's the one. Where is it pointing you?

[Pause]

Right there on the stage of your school, for schools had pageants back then, or your church filled to the rafters with parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and friends—all looking expectantly at you in your feature role as a shepherd, or was it a sheep?

[Pause]

It's bedtime. You're tucked in. Or do you snuggle under the covers all by yourself? You dream. It's snowing, gently, steadily. It's Christmas and it's snowing. Of course, Santa planned it this way, maybe with some help from his elves. You drift off.

[Pause]

Slowly you open your eyes. You sit up and look outside. The ground is covered in mounds of fluffy white. Sledding, yes! A snowman, yes! You're seven years old. You run downstairs. "Do I have to have breakfast first?" You're 17; you're still sleeping. You're 37, 47. You're the one making breakfast. You're 77. Breakfast? No time. You're eyes glisten. You break into a broad smile. You reach for your warmest coat. Forget catching a cold, you've caught the spirit.

### **A Non-Traditional Family Christmas – John Sepples**

The way my family celebrates Christmas has changed over the years. As a child, I went to Mass, exchanged gifts, and had breakfast with my nuclear family Christmas morning. In the afternoon, my parents typically hosted a feast and gift exchange for the extended family. Over time the family has changed. I have celebrated recent Christmases with Mom, Dad, sister, brother-in-law, niece, and nephew. In 2011, Mom and Dad decided to give the family a very special Christmas gift. They took the family to Walt Disney World to celebrate Christmas! Although we had all been there before, this time was special because it was the first time all three generations were going together, our first time with accommodations at a Disney resort, and we would be there on Christmas Day.

About eight years earlier, my best friend who is a former Disney employee, helped to give me an appreciation of how the built environment of Walt Disney World supports its storytelling. As a cast member, Kelly stayed overnight at the Animal Kingdom Lodge to commission it before it opened to guests. During our vacation to Florida in 2003, we returned to Animal Kingdom Lodge for dinner and to relax by the fire pit overlooking the Savannah. I admired all the design details of the resort that made it seem like we were in Africa instead of central Florida. This experience was influential a few years later in my choice to change careers from engineering to architecture.

Being our Christmas gift, my parents gave their children and grandchildren the opportunity to do a special activity of their choice. I chose the Keys to the Kingdom Tour, a behind the scenes tour of the Magic Kingdom theme park. I learned the Keys to the Kingdom are safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency. The tour guide showed examples of these as we walked down Main Street USA. Later we learned about special effects as we rode two attractions: The Jungle Cruise and Haunted Mansion. Lastly, we went backstage to see the reservoir that keeps the boats afloat on Splash Mountain and the production center where the parade floats are stored and maintained. Then we saw what's behind the storefronts on Main Street and the utility corridors below that allow cast members and materials to circulate through the park out of view of guests.

The family spent Christmas Day together, but our traditions were modified as you might expect. Instead of sitting around the fireplace dressed in jeans and sweatshirts, taking turns distributing gifts piled beneath a tree, we sat on beds in a hotel room wearing shorts and t-shirts. Each person had a few small gifts, just what we could carry with us in our suitcases. I appreciated this very much because I feel there is too much emphasis on material things in our typical Christmas celebration. Sometimes, I receive gifts (usually stocking stuffers) that I don't use. This is wasteful. It's really the thought that counts.

After a leisurely start to the day, we headed out to EPCOT Center. We rode the popular new attractions in Future World, including Soarin and Test Track. Then over at the world showcase, we celebrated Christmas Around the World. Each pavilion hosted a holiday character akin to our Santa Claus who described to visitors how Christmas is celebrated in their country. We did not attend Catholic mass, as we typically do. This tradition often felt awkward to me as an adult. I left the Church in my early twenties when I found my own identity at odds with Catholic doctrines. At EPCOT, the Candlelight Processional was our religious observance. We listened to the story of the birth of Jesus Christ narrated by Blair Underwood and accompanied in song by a mass choir. This was an uplifting way to celebrate the reason for the holiday without reopening my religious wounds.

On the final day of our vacation, we had the opportunity to be the Flag Family at Wilderness Lodge. This meant that we got to have a special breakfast before climbing the stairs to the roof of the lodge to raise the flags. I was happy that I was able to raise the Disney flag because visiting the parks and learning about their design had played an important role in decisions that led to starting my first job in an architecture firm just a few weeks earlier.

When I was a child I enjoyed my family's traditional Christmas celebration. I liked receiving gifts and indulging in delicious food. Now as an adult, I prefer quality time with my family and remembering the reason for the season. Our non-traditional celebration gave us an opportunity to shift our focus.

### **My Best Christmas Experience – Penny Barsch**

My best Christmas experience was last Christmas. My three adult children were all here for an overnight. My son Shane who is not ambulatory slept at my home for the first time in about 20 years. My son Michael lifted Shane onto and off of the couch and I slept on the floor next to him. My little dog Ruby slept on Shane's chest. She turned around at some point and I heard Shane giggling as Ruby's tail went back and forth on Shane's face. We spent most of that night giggling or whispering together. That Christmas eve with all my children back in my home is now held in my heart. I can smile at that memory and bring the spirit of Christmas back whenever I want to.

### **Gift of the Magi ala Sesame Street – Lisa Urso**

When I was a kid, I watched the special *Christmas Eve on Sesame Street* every single year. There is a subplot in the special where Ernie wants to get Bert something for his paper clip collection, and Bert wants to get Ernie a soap dish for his rubber duckie.

Sooo...the two friends go to Hooper's Store, where they each trade their most prized possessions for each other's gifts. Basically, it's *Sesame Street's* version of Gift of the Magi, but with a happier ending, as you're about to see:

[Sesame Street: Bert and Ernie Exchange Gifts](#)