

*Warmth in the Wintertime:
Gratitude for Family and Friends*
(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on December 18, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Patricia Montley)

*Darkness has vanished;
morning is dawning.
Black night is banished;
sunlight appears.
Welcome the new day;
welcome the sunrise.
Let the morn's new rays
cast out all fears.*

*Gone is the old year,
come is the new one.
Gone are the old tears,
gone with the night.
Kindle a new flare
deep in your heart's core.
Cherish the glow there,
make it grow bright.*

For all these things and more, we light our Flaming
Chalice this morning.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

Reading by Patricia Montley.¹

¹ Montley, Patricia. *In Nature's Honor: Myths and Rituals Celebrating the Earth.* (Boston: Skinner House, 2005.) p. 39.

READING: This is the Time of Waiting (Frances Manly)

This is the time of waiting.

This is the time of darkness.

This is the time of coming to birth.

Let the jingle bells be silent.

*Let the glaring lights and the bright colors go dim,
for they herald a season that is not yet here.*

This is the time of turning inward.

This is the time of longing,

this is the time of preparing,

this is the time of waiting.

What do you long for, O my soul?

What do you long for?

Nothing the eyes can see,

nothing the hands can touch,

nothing the ears can hear.

What do you long for, O my soul?

Where will you find it, O my soul?

Where will you find it?

*Deep, deep, deep down in the dark,
in the silence beyond all words,
beyond all thought.*

It will find you, O my soul.

It will find you.

When the time is ripe.

*When you have given yourself to the dark,
to the silence, to the waiting.*

This is the time of waiting.

This is the time of darkness.

This is the time of coming to birth.

- Rev. Frances Manly²

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

² Frances shared this poem on the UUMA-Chat several years ago; it is used by permission, when presented with attribution.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds.

We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

*Warmth in the Wintertime:
Gratitude for Family and Friends
Reverend Michael Walker*

In many cultures, across the world and through the centuries, it has become a cherished tradition for families to gather in the winter. It is a time for older and younger generations to catch-up on each others' lives, and also a time for the eldest generation to meet members of the very youngest, who may not even be walking and talking yet. It is in the popular imagination, as illustrated by such artists as Norman Rockwell, and as told in innumerable Christmas stories, that we find a little bit of that which we hope to experience at this time of year.

There is one story – you know the one I mean – that says:

*“’Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house / Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.”*³

There is much more to that story, but I bet that just saying those first two lines are enough to conjure an image in your minds.

These images say something about us. We are seeking some warmth in the wintertime — not just the warmth emanating from a fire... upon which we are roasting chestnuts, of course! But the warmth that arises from the gathering of family, friends, and all the loved ones in our lives.

But, when we are honest with ourselves, we recall that the wintertime is so very cold. The north winds

³ Moore, Clement C. “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” 1822.

blow, banks of snow drift, the firewood is soggy, and things don’t always go according to plan when we gather with our families. It is so very rare that the scene in your living room, or mine, looks anything like a scene painted by Rockwell.

There are times in our lives when grief outweighs celebration. I have heard it called a *Blue Christmas*. That first Christmas after someone we love has died. Or the first holiday spent as a broken family, following a divorce. Or, due to whatever life circumstances we may each be individually living, one or another of us finds ourselves alone during this season when people typically gather. This is one reason why I feel that spiritual communities, like our congregation, are so very

important. For some people here, *others* here are their chosen family. We are here for each other – any little trial or tribulation from the past year can be forgiven, perhaps even forgotten, as we gather each other in the embrace of community and share with each other our warmth in the wintertime.

It is in each other's company, in each other's care, that those of us who are facing a holiday after a recent loss do not do so alone. It is while being supported by others here, that one or another among us who has some past trauma, can face the day with some strength. For that is the Blue Christmas for some people. If someone had some horrible fight with a relative, or been the victim of some abuse by a family member, how does one reconnect with family during the traditional

winter gatherings? Too many times, one of us has had some negative experience with another member of our family, and rather than taking the chance of ever having to face that person again, we cut off our entire families. We forget that it may be other relatives who can be most helpful to us as we face a grief or trauma. However, even if we do not have a relative who can be so helpful, we are surrounded by chosen family in our spiritual communities who can support us and care for us during these times.

I think it's no small coincidence that the major story underpinning the so-called 'reason for the season' is all about family. With the ringing of bells in the church steeples, with whispers in many a manger, is told

the story of a child being born. A leader in Children's Religious Education for Unitarians, Sophia Lyon Fahs, reminded us that each child that is born is a miracle.

Long ago, she wrote:⁴

And so the children come.

And so they have been coming.

Always in the same way they come --

Born of the seed of man and woman.

No angels herald their beginnings,

No prophets predict their future courses,

No wise men see a star to point their way

To find a babe that may save humankind.

Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.

Fathers and Mothers --

Sitting beside their children's cribs --

Feel glory in the wond'rous sight of life beginning.

They ask: "When or how will this new life end?

Or will it ever end?"

Each night a child is born is a holy night.

Did we need a reminder that the day a baby is welcomed into a family is a miraculous day? Just as an aside, I recall an ironic newspaper headline some months ago: *A Woman in England Gives Birth*. Apparently sharing the sentiment of Sophia Lyon Fahs, the editors of that paper were somewhat sarcastic about all of the hoopla surrounding the birth of a new prince or princess, as if the birth of *every* child is not just as worthy of a huge celebration by his or her family.

⁴ http://womenshistory.about.com/library/etext/whx/bl_christmas_fahs.htm

I'd like to take us back to our earlier reading, by my colleague the Rev. Frances Manly, who wrote: *this is a time of waiting, a time of darkness, a time of coming to birth*. She was speaking about one of our greatest mysteries – and by *mysteries*, I mean a spiritual experience which we cannot fully articulate when speaking aloud. This poem conjures in my mind the vision of a baby growing in a womb. Perhaps the baby was me, or you... It is a place of darkness, and yet, this is not a scary darkness at all. This is a place and time in our lives in which we are held in a loving embrace. We are in a place of safety, where we are free to grow. We have nothing to do, but to wait for our birthdays.

I want to keep that vision in mind, as we continue

to consider the Blue Christmas that one or another of us may face. I see that vision, *in the silence beyond all words, beyond all thought*, as an invitation to one's own **rebirth**. Before someone starts twitching, thinking that I'm going to talk about being *born-again*, let's try to let go of that baggage and think about this *rebirth* in a different way.

Everyone here is long past the days in which we were growing in that place of darkness, the safety of the womb. *What does that possibly have to do with who we are today and what is happening in our lives now?* There is something beyond DNA, beyond blood ties, that connect us each to our families. There is also a lifetime of experiences. Some of those experiences were good,

some perhaps were not. In this season of charity, compassion, and forgiveness, we can find ways in which to be reborn into new relationships with family – whether that family be biological or chosen. It is only by choice that a person lives with unresolved grief or trauma. Wait! That is not to say that some things we grieve about will ever get better, and it is not to say that every trauma is forgivable. But we can choose how we live our lives in relation to those griefs and traumas – they need not control us. They need not dictate the directions of our lives.

So, this is an invitation into a new way of being, for some people, or an invitation to return to a way of being that one may have forgotten. This is an invitation to meditate upon that *silence beyond all words, beyond*

all thought. This is an invitation to accept that this is a *time for waiting, a time for darkness, and a time for coming to birth*. This is an invitation for you to re-examine your relationships with the people in your lives. If it happens to be that you are one person who has cut off your entire family, because of something that one person in the family did, this is an invitation to revisit your relationships with the non-offending family members. As the case may be, it is possible that you have already been through *a time of waiting, a time of darkness*, and now it is the time for your rebirth...

What is all this talk of rebirth? Perhaps it comes from my Pagan background, in which the Winter Solstice is that holiday on the Wheel of the Year that specifically celebrates rebirth. In some of the ancient mythologies,

stories at this time of year are about the cycle of the sun.

In the dark winter months, the sun has died and at the solstice it is reborn, leading us into springtime and the growth of new life... Shoots of green arise from the once frozen ground, bare trees begin to grow leaves, and people begin to feel warm again.

Of course, in our science- and tech-savvy world, we know that the sun does not die. But the myth is really a story, not about the sun, but about people and other life on earth. Such stories hearken to a time when life was more difficult and survival through the long winter was not a given. It is no wonder that families would gather in the winter, to know who still was among the living, to provide help to others that may need it, to remain connected to something bigger than their own little life.

We've come a long way since the days when people desperately relied on others to help each other survive. I don't believe that makes the winter gatherings of families any less important. We live life on many levels, and sometimes we try to avoid understanding what that means. There is nothing like the brutal honesty of a person who has known you since the day you were born, who will tell you things you need to hear, even if you don't want to hear them. There is nothing like the care they can offer – which is so very much like the care you can offer, the honesty that you can convey, just as they do. These are the longest relationships in our lives, and whether we are close to our families are not, those relationships continue to affect who we are as people from the beginning to the end of our lives.

So here we are, approaching Christmas and the Winter Solstice. Like every winter, it is *a time of waiting, a time of darkness, a time of coming to birth...*

Or a rebirth – and this is what I've invited us into. To consciously seek a rebirth in our understandings of our relationships with family and friends. There may be some relationships that are broken beyond repair; a trust that was so gravely betrayed. But, there are others in our families and circles of friends who will be there for each of us. And we should be there for them. *It will find you, O my soul. It will find you. When the time is right.*

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Every year, the seasons pitch into darkness.

Sometimes, so do our lives...

Let the darkness of this winter season

Come into the lightness of the bright new year.

And may your lives do so, too.

May this season of winter silence be not an end,

But a beginning: in spring, a budding of new life.

May it reside in your heart, and in your soul,

And be the best part of you,

For all your days and years to come.

May joyfulness and Christmas good cheer

Be infectious, like a child's laughter.

May you be filled with happiness and love,

And may you share that widely.

Thus, may you be blessed with all you need this year.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!