



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

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## “Finding Christmas”

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A reflection delivered on December 18, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Remembrance, like a candle, burns brightest at Christmastime.* Charles Dickens

*Our hearts grow tender with childhood memories and love of kindred, and we are better throughout the year for having, in spirit, become a child again at Christmas-time.*

Laura Ingalls Wilder

*Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.* Norman Vincent Peale

*Christmas is not only where you find it; it's what you make of it.* Trina Schart Hyman

**Reflection** (This followed an adapted telling of *How Six Found Christmas*, by Trina Schart Hyman.)

My husband, Paul, and I put up our Christmas tree this past Friday. The Fraser fir rests in its stand, but it hasn't been decorated yet. We wait at least a day to make sure it doesn't fall over—experience has taught us this caution. Earlier in the week I hung our stockings by the chimney with care, including a new one I finished sewing for my almost one-year-old grandson.

But that's not quite enough for me to feel like Christmas is coming. My five senses haven't fully detected Christmas yet.

Although the tree is up, it isn't giving off enough pine scent for me to notice it when I walk into the house. Like the dog in the story performed by some of our young adults, Christmas isn't Christmas without the right scent. To really smell the pine, I'm forced to stick my nose right into its branches.

During my childhood, Christmas included many wonderful aromas. My family always bought a balsam pine tree and, once inside the house, pine filled the air. Besides that wonderful scent, my mother always cooked special foods during the holidays, so the smell of freshly-baked cookies and pies, or roasting meat also filled the house. Scents like these told me then, and once I start my own holiday baking, will tell me now that Christmas is on its way.

Like the cat exploring the feel of a smooth green bottle, Christmas has a special feel for me, too. Pine pitch sticks to my fingers long after Paul and I wrestle the tree into its stand, and pine needles prick my fingers when I hang tiny ornaments. Even the feel of colder temperatures that encourage my wearing warm pajamas and wool sweaters helps me know Christmas is on its way.

The sonically-sensitive brown bat listened for signs of Christmas, and I do, too. Carols playing on the radio and in stores make it impossible to escape the coming of Christmas. I've also been known to shake a wrapped present or two to see if I can hear a clue about what hides inside. The sound of a crackling fire adds to my awareness of the holiday's coming, as well.

If the runaway chicken that asked what Christmas looked like could see the brightly colored Christmas wrapping papers, flashing tree lights, glittery ornaments, and snowy decorations, it would know what I know—that Christmas is coming.

But Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without its special tastes, which the raccoon wanted to know about. Growing up, I remember the cold taste of snow falling on my tongue and the sweet peppermint taste of a candy cane melted into my hot chocolate. I still enjoy the occasional hot chocolate, though you won't find me tasting snowflakes anymore. Some things are better left in the past.

Christmas doesn't come until all my senses are engaged. But the meaning of Christmas isn't found in the source of these sensations, nor in buying the perfect present for those I love. Instead, it's found in the act of creating meaningful memories with my family. It's found by our simply being together. My five senses may trigger happy memories of Christmas, but the time we spend together cooking the foods, decorating the tree, and going to Christmas Eve services tell me that Christmas is here, and these activities make up my happiest Christmas memories.

Not everyone shares my fairly traditional holiday story. For those whose past holidays aren't actually worth remembering, each new holiday season can offer a chance to create something new that will wipe away any old, difficult memories.

Those with painful pasts are not the only ones to find the holiday season lacking. For some, Christmas feels too commercial and gift-giving feels empty. For some, Christmas has lost its spirit and magic. For some, it has lost its focus on the birth of a messiah. For yet others, Christmas brings a sense of shame because there isn't enough money to buy all the things advertisers say we must have. For many, Christmas simply has lost all its meaning.

But I believe we can put meaning back into Christmas or any other holiday. We can create new memories, new joy, and new meaning for our selves, with our families, or with our friends. If your holiday spirit is lackluster, I encourage you to take time this season to put new meaning into it—whether it's the winter solstice, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or New Year's Day you wish to remake.

We can create that meaning whether or not we have a tree, colorfully-wrapped, expensive presents, or hear a single Christmas carol. We just need to be with people we care about and who

care about us in return. New experiences and new memories can be created with family, friends, or folks from this Fellowship.

Know that you're welcome to join the Fellowship at our 6 pm Christmas Eve service. And on Christmas Day, come to the Fellowship for a single service at 11 am, followed by a potluck lunch. In this way we'll be following more closely the ancients who gathered together during the dark, cold days of winter simply to enliven and brighten them up while they waited for the return of sunshine and warmth.

As Trina Schart Hyman reminds us at the end of her story, "Christmas is not only where you find it; it's what you make of it." However you find Christmas, remember, you have the magic necessary to create your own meaning for this or any other holiday.

May you have a Happy Solstice, Merry Christmas, and a Happy Hanukkah. May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What makes a holiday special and something you look forward to? What, if anything, makes you anxious about a holiday? How might you foster more specialness and lessen concerns?
2. How has a particular connection or relationship contributed to happy holiday memories? Share.
3. What holiday sights, sounds, scents, tastes, or feelings are most memorable for you?