

## *When Santa was a Shaman*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
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### **CHILDREN'S FOCUS**

There are candles lit in churches and synagogues and temples and shrines all over the world today, and every day. This is so because people all over are fascinated with fire. I know I am. I love to build fires, and light them, and watch them. But I'm also afraid of fires, because I've been burned. I love it that fire can keep me warm and cook my food and even make my car go. But I also know that fires can kill people and destroy forests and buildings and it can stink up the air we breathe. And still we like to light a fire when we come together.

*I want you to imagine what it was like the first time human beings saw a fire. Thousands, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of years ago. Before there were any towns or buildings. People maybe living in packs like any other animal...in the forest or plains or maybe in caves somewhere. Maybe they had seen the effects of fire before, when the lightning hit the forest, causing a fire so huge that both animals and people had to flee for their lives.*

But maybe this time it had been raining for days and days, or snowing. And the lightning hit a large tree one night and it burst into flames. And the people saw it and were afraid—except for a three year old who didn't know enough to be afraid—she went over and picked up a branch that had fallen onto the wet ground; she waved it over her head, and started to laugh!

*And maybe she brought the fire into the cave and accidentally started some other sticks on fire. And it felt better in the cave that night. And the people were still afraid but they knew that this little child was special, and fearless, and she had captured something from the powers of the sky.*

Perhaps she and her family or maybe the whole tribe of people became the keepers of the fire in that cave. And perhaps people from miles around came to visit and bow down and beg to be able to take some fire with them. And perhaps they became known as the children of the power of the sky and maybe they liked it that others were afraid of them and they began to tell stories about their knowledge of the powers of the sky.

*Maybe this happened over thousands of years...until the stories told about that first brave or foolish child had become nothing like the real story. But still the people had to tell the story and they had to re-live it with new stories and by lighting fires and maybe now candles.*

They had to keep telling this story because the story had changed them. Before this, the people were just a part of the landscape, not much different from the other animals. But now they had one of the greatest powers in the universe to use for themselves.

*So over these thousands of years, one of the ways that people have celebrated was to recreate that very first burning tree, or even to bring the tree into their homes, and add candles, or more recently, electric lights. And we have sung songs around the tree, and we have been joyful for the gifts of the*

*earth and sky that keep us full of life. And even this chalice that we light every Sunday can help us remember our story and our power and our responsibility to use these with care.*

And as we light the chalice we say together: *Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.*

## **GATHERING SONG**

*Round and Round the Earth is Turning /Turning always round till morning, and from morning round till night.*

## **READING** “The Miracle of Hanukkah” by Rev. Mark Belletini

*The miracle is not that oil lasts, but that our hope lasts, despite disappointment. Barukh atah, tiqvah! Blest are you, hope!*

*The miracle is not that the fire illumines, but that we grow brighter. Barukh atah, zohar! Blest are you, brightness!*

*The miracle is not that people tell ancient stories, but that people dare to live their own stories. Barukh atah, midrashim! Blest are you, stories!*

*The miracle is not that tyranny is resisted, but that resistance recreates us into new beings. Barukh atah, khadash. Blest are you, new being.*

*The miracle is not that courage exists, but that courage does not, every time, have to ball itself into a fist. Barukh atah, khayil. Blest are you, courage.*

## **MESSAGE**

A winter holiday tradition that I cherished as a child was the Christmas-tree-pick-up. It was always very cold, but we bundled up and jumped onto one of the many farm trucks, hay wagons, or flatbeds that were slowly crisscrossing the neighborhood streets of my small hometown in northern Minnesota. Every year by mid-January the streets were lined with Christmas trees which, having lost a lot of needles, were thrown into the large snow banks in every front yard. So we rode around on the back of the big trucks, and we jumped off with vigor to wrangle these trees—great and small—for the huge bonfire that would be lit that night at the public skating rink.

My memory of this enormous fire has probably expanded in my imagination over the years—but as I recall it, it lit up the sky and warmed up acres of revelers skating, playing hockey, and drinking cocoa.

In the late 1970’s, however, the holy bonfire became a part of ancient history. There were perfectly good reasons, I’m sure. But all I remember is disappointment. The end of those lively innocent times came not with drama or trauma, but a simple announcement, one year, that we’d be dropping off the trees at the local zoo, where they would be chopped into bedding for the animals. I’m sure that this was much more environmentally responsible—but I sure did miss those magical evenings of fire.

So my last couple of years as a teenager, the ritual evolved so that instead of the bonfire we spent the rest of the day and evening at the VFW—with the men upstairs drinking, and the boys downstairs watching the NFL playoffs. (It wasn't so bad, the Vikings were pretty hot in the late 1970s.)

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Over the ages, all of our great social and religious rituals have adjusted to meet the needs and conditions of the people whom the rituals serve.

Perhaps it has always been true that people will party any chance they get. But we may be especially blessed now—that as a multicultural community—we get Halloween, Thanksgiving, St. Nicholas Day, Hanukkah, solstice, Christmas, new year's, the feast of the epiphany and the Superbowl, (among others) which in times past may have been variations on just one or two seasonal feasts: perhaps some combination of the harvest festival and the great slaughter, when much of the herd was butchered because grain to feed the animals was scarce, and spring was a long way off.

In different communities, the great festivals must have occurred on different days, even different seasons, depending upon the latitude. The timing could have changed over the millennia as harvests became more productive, enabling the animals to be fed longer. And then there was the changing of the empire every few centuries—each new system of rule bringing its own religious requirements, not to mention creating entirely new calendars. Still, it seems likely that, whatever the religious or imperial authorities may have decreed, enforcement of specific forms of worship and revelry throughout the hinterlands would have been a challenge. And so the people celebrated largely how they wished, and when it seemed most appropriate.

The best the authorities could do—and the Holy Roman Empire had many centuries to do it—was to co-opt the indigenous religious rites that already existed ...give these traditions new Christian names, and then as power shifted, replace the symbols and even the meaning of the celebrations. For example, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Gregory wrote to the Bishop Augustinius (in the land that was not yet England): *“Do not destroy their pagan temples, but make them into Christian churches named after saints. Out of custom people will continue to come and will venerate their new god. Their animal sacrifices should be maintained, but changed...to supply a Christian meal in the honor of God.”*

So the people continued to sacrifice oxen, pigs, and sheep, and those families for whom this practice was too expensive would simply make sacrifices of bread in the shape of the animals, and eventually animal shaped cookies... and even Eucharistic-like wafers. And the boar's head—draped with evergreen garlands, with an apple stuffed in its mouth—what had once been dedicated to the thunder god Thor—became Christmas dinner.

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Perhaps it started out as rough carousing at a time when people gathered for the harvest, the hunt, or the slaughter. People who lived in small isolated tribes and, without even knowing it, came to benefit from the pooling of human genes and other resources as they herded the animals and interbred with one another. Who knows how or when or why some prankster emerged to lead a dance in a form that was symbolic of the conditions and the needs and the unselfconscious aspirations of the people at that time.

No one knows. And that is why, as I tell this story, I *weave in time*... events from 1 or 2 thousand years ago, and back tens or hundreds of thousands of years ago. It is mostly speculation. And yet there is evidence that people have always sought explanations for the workings of the universe... that we have always sought re-assurance and hopeful predictions for the future... that we have long gathered to seek meaning, or control, or at least to ritually acknowledge the marvelous cycling of the seasons and the heavenly bodies.

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The ancient celebration of Yule commemorated the rebirth of the God through the agency of the Goddess. So the birth of the divine Christ-child by a virgin mother was easily superimposed—one myth upon another. And while it may have been easy to add new gods like Jesus and Mary to the existing pantheon, it was harder to get rid of an existing deity. In a book called, *When Santa Was a Shaman*, Tony van Renterghem argues that an indigenous earth god, now most commonly known as Pan, is the earliest ancestor of our modern Saint Nick.

Pan existed in different forms in different cultures, but always represented the whimsical, magical, and lustful essence of earth and life. Though godly, Pan was very animal-like (sometimes part human, part animal), sometimes cross-dressing, drinking and playing a flute... usually he sported fur, horns, a broom, an erection... and often, a menacing demeanor.

Pan also symbolized fire, and knowledge; he played an enormous part in indigenous religions. Shamans or witches would dress as Pan when performing sacrifices and dances. When the Roman church came along, they were unable to push him aside, so instead they re-theologized Pan. He remained lord of the dark and sexuality ... but instead of recognizing as they had been—as essential parts of a greater whole—earth, darkness, and sexuality became the essence of evil. And the character represented by a horned shaman became the devil.

This is not to suggest that Pan was an innocent victim who became demonized. The shaman who played Pan was no more and no less a con-artist than any other religious, tribal, or civic leader, before or since.

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If we think back many thousands of years, we can imagine that whoever figured out such cosmic calculations as when the solstice would occur, or any other dramatic astronomical manifestation, that person might have used their knowledge in two very different ways. First, he or she might have *explained* it to the clan, and then celebrated with them whatever meaning they might choose to apply to these celestial events.

Or instead, that shaman/astronomer/priest might have created a ritual to make people believe that he or she was *personally responsible* for the astronomical events. Perhaps in some cases secret clans and societies or family lineages emerged, people who knew the secrets of the stars, clouded them with some mumbo jumbo, and then used these truths as personal magic to gain power.

Van Renterghem has an interesting, but circumstantial argument, that the qualities of the pre-Christian shaman have been twisted by the rise and fall of empires, and by accident, and by fruitful imaginations... to become the Santa Claus of today. For evidence he points to modern traditions and images which can be traced back through time in engravings and paintings that show similarities between these two semi-divine creatures.

Whether or not this particular theory is correct, it's hard to doubt that social, religious, commercial, and political dynamics have shaped our evolving myths. Whether or not Santa was a shaman, there have undoubtedly been—repeated throughout human history—processes of exerting social control by defining the meaning of things. Take for example, over the last several hundred years—with worshippers of the earth now having fallen to the margins—the unending cries of moral outrage to inflame society against pagans and witches. Or consider the fearful purges carried out in the name of God and sexual righteousness which have served to establish the dominion of church and/or state.

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And yet today I seek ritual to comfort me. Something at once grounded in an aura of time immemorial ... and yet nicely customized to my own moment in time ... something to give meaning to the astonishing, sometimes confusing cycles of light and darkness all around me.

Because tonight will surely be another long night—as we continue to watch the decimation of holy lands and people by ongoing firefights, fueled by tribalism and fears of which we are still a part. It will be a sad night because I am a part of all of this. Inextricably wed to the ancient struggles. Chilled by the collective inability of my human family to use our fire to heal instead of to harm.

And yet I pray in confidence for the return of the sun. Because there are some things—some unfolding processes, or cycles—in which I rest my ultimate faith. One is the cycle of nature, which, experience tells me, has an endless resiliency. Whether or not my human genetic lineage will persist into the millennia to come, life—which is my family—will endure.

And another undying spirit to which I bow in confidence, and adoration, is the cycle of generosity and reconciliation. Generosity and reconciliation. This too I know by experience, though the length of the full cycle may be well beyond my own lifetime... and so I can only believe in it with my heart.

My mind is limited in that I can only conceive of these interlinked cycles spiraling forward. And so, I believe that our global community *can* move onward to a greater shared consciousness—something beyond what we can even envision.

In the meantime, the rituals conducted by Santas and shamans... ceremonies enacted with pentagrams or by the pentagon ... observances marked by the president, the press and the preachers will have this in common: they shall occur in moments overflowing with the possibilities of insight. Whether insights into our collective fraudulence or insights into our collective beauty, may they light up our darkest nights.

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The tree-of-fire myth continues to teach us to wonder about nature; to be thankful for the miracles of fire, light, and knowledge, while reminding us to use our powers wisely, and lovingly. The tree of fire has come to us humans by accident, by theft from the gods, and through a creative dance with necessity. Its history warns us of the terrible responsibility which we bear as keepers of that flame.

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

### **SENDING SONG**

*What Wondrous Love* #18