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**“Gifts, Gratitude, and Abundance”**

Rev. Julie Kain

Whenever I have guests in my kitchen, they are likely to comment on my rather large magnet collection on my refrigerator. I've been collecting them for years, ever since my daughter was little and we used to play with those big plastic letters. Once she could spell the basic words, including her name, then we go created and we started inventing words of our own. Eventually we graduated to one of those poetry refrigerator sets. Maybe you've seen them. One of the magnets on my refrigerator came back to me from my father's house after he died several years ago. The magnet had been a gift from me to him. The magnet says, "Blessed are we who laugh at ourselves, for we shall never cease to be amused."

I remember the moment I saw it in the gift shop and I knew immediately that it was the perfect gift for my dad, basically for two reasons. One is that my father had a really corny sense of humor and he wasn't shy at all about using it. Maybe you know someone like this in your life. He often admitted to being a corny guy, kind of like he was proud of it, he would go around telling the same jokes for years to anyone and everyone who even appeared to be listening. He knew it was a little bit annoying but he chose to do it anyway because really he just liked to help people laugh, or maybe he did it to annoy people. I'm not sure. In retrospect I think my father also needed to tell silly jokes because over the years it actually helped him get through hard times, and there were plenty of those.

There were plenty of times he found himself, like most of us if not all of us at certain points in our lives, where he had no idea what he would do just to make it through. My parents had a marriage that ended in a tumultuous divorce. My mother wanted to protect me from the bitterness between them. I grew up separated from my father from the age of two until I met him briefly when I was eleven. For many years after that my father would only get in touch with me on an infrequent basis and I admit that it was hard for me to give him a chance. I only visited him a few times in my life. It wasn't until my father was fighting lung cancer that we really began to get closer in what would become our monthly phone calls. In addition to my father having lost his second wife to cancer a few years before, my father took care of my grandmother for nearly fifteen years in her failing health, including the time of his cancer treatments. There were many times indeed when he just didn't know what to do to make it through.

My father didn't go to church even though his mother had been a founding member of St. Anne's Episcopal in the town where he was born and spent most of his life, but my father did have a tenacious faith and one of the ways he seemed to hang onto it was with that corny sense of humor of his. The second reason that that magnet was so perfect for him was that one of his sayings was that when he didn't know what to do he'd pray on it and hope to find the answer posted on the refrigerator door the next morning. He never did find a piece of paper under a magnet with the perfect advice, but it kept him going; prayer and corny jokes.

As we find ourselves in the midst of yet another holiday season, I'm reminded frequently how difficult this time is for many of us. Just below the sparkling lights and glistening decorations bringing the feel of winter to a place in perpetual summer, there is something amiss. Just underneath the listmaking of gifts and parties and places to shop is a restlessness of spirit that has something to do with the perennial challenges of this season. Many of us experience a deep recognition that the pressures of the holidays seem somehow to be in a fundamental contradiction to the original religious and spiritual purposes within the celebrations of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa. How do we celebrate a harvest meal when we are trying to watch our weight? How do we celebrate a meal with our families as we think of the hundreds of thousands of people displaced from their home and loved ones by Katrina this year? How do we celebrate a message of peace on earth among all people, when we are a nation at war? How do we celebrate ancient miracles when the day to day political struggles in our world seem to never end? How do we celebrate families and communities becoming self-determining and financially viable when we see a growing disparity of wealth?

Yikes! The holiday season is rife with contradictions, if we allow ourselves to think about it too long. It's a real challenge for many of us to stay in touch with what is most meaningful in the holiday season. Even optimists are known to experience melancholy at this time of year and I don't think it's just about how much daylight we have. I know that for me while we were growing up, our family never matched the image of the traditional one celebrating holidays and so for years and years we have found our own way of celebrating. For example, when I was in the restaurant business there were lots of Thanksgivings where anyone who was not going home for any reason whatsoever would gather together and we would have huge potluck feasts. I also think about the Thanksgiving when I just started seminary, my daughter and I had moved to Berkeley and we didn't know anyone so we decided to get a couple of those jumbo turkey t.v. dinners as an alternative. I think we as Unitarian Universalists have a creative license when it comes to the holidays. I encourage you to think creatively through this season and find your own ways of keeping in touch with what is most meaningful in your life.

In the current issue of the UU World magazine there's an article about our shared faith as UUs. It highlights the results of the UUA's Commission on Appraisals study trying to find common ground among our UU theological diversity. There were a handful of findings that I think are important for us as we think about the holidays. One is that as a people of faith, we believe that experience, our experience of the world, matters much more than our beliefs, especially when beliefs that we are asked to accept contradict our own experience. We value our free faith because it encourages us to recognize our own authenticity and integrity and encourages us to compose our own faith that articulates what we value most. As UUs we are deeply touched by the interconnection of all life. It leads us to cherish the earth and recognize that we humans have created most of the injustices on this earth and it's up to us, our responsibility, to steward our resources and to address suffering in our world by creating justice wherever we can. Honor our covenant rather than a creed that keeps us together. We choose to be in community and

we value what each of us has to teach and learn from each other. The popularity of covenant groups is an indication of that in our UU congregations. One of the core values found in the study was that more than anything we value our relationships with each other. We're characterized as curious, imaginative, and we aspire to open-minded and open-hearted. It's a faith with hope in the human potential to create a Commonwealth of God, as it used to be referred to, and more recently we like to say the Beloved Community. Do you recognize any of the qualities listed here that you hold dear?

I see many of the same values reflected in the lyrics of Louis Armstrong's song, "What a Wonderful World." My father was a big fan of Louis'. He was a jazz historian and the son of a jazz musician who was a contemporary of Armstrong's. It was that kind of ever-optimistic attitude and faith in the goodness of people that helped my dad through the hard years. You see, my father spent most of my life wondering if he'd ever see me again. He worked very hard to make up for lost time with me and, if you couldn't tell by now, he made up for it for the most part. It was a huge gift for both of us.

In this holiday season and whenever it happens in our lives, when heartbreak comes our way, do we harden our hearts and retreat and pull back from the fullness of life, or can we find a way to gently accept the brokenness of our world and keep our hearts open to the fullness of life with all its tragedy, its mystery, and its joy. Through the holiday season many of us will be wrestling with the perennial challenges of either being in a family or being outside a family. So, may we celebrate the genuine friendship and steadfast caring in our lives wherever they may happen as one of the most meaningful rituals of this holiday season. Even when our hearts are broken by our own limitations or the limitations of others, even when we have done all that we know to do, may we remember that there is an abiding love that has never broken faith with us and never will. In this way we may truly find a way to celebrate the season as a season of hope.

Amen. and Blessed Be.