

These Are the Moments of Our Lives

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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I was raised as a very Humanist UU in a family that never prayed or even mentioned the word god. So when I sat down to Thanksgiving dinner at my parents' house six years ago and said I would like to say a blessing, it was a big surprise to everyone. In fact there was a rather stunned silence before someone hesitantly said, "Well, sure." I imagined that my mother was wondering whether the short 9 weeks I had just spent at the very Christian Andover Newton Theological School had changed me that much from the daughter she thought she knew. My grandfather Adams had been the only other person through whose once-a-year prayers to Jesus Christ we had previously managed to endure in embarrassed discomfort; "Bless this food to our use and us to Thy service. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen." Were we embarrassed for him – or for us? In retrospect it wasn't such a bad prayer.

But this time it was I who wanted to say a blessing. I asked that we hold hands. I looked around at my family and said "I would like us to take an intentional moment, as we have each traveled a long distance to gather as a family around this table, to be reminded of the wise and true words of someone who may not actually have known the significance of what he was saying. I am referring to the great Reverend Kodak, who told us in always solicitous yet prophetic words, 'These are the moments of our lives.'" I just wanted, at that Thanksgiving dinner, to try to tell my family, without crying, that our time together is important and we should make the most of it. I think they got it. Humor usually works.

These are the moments of our lives. Of course this pithy little saying was meant to sell cameras and film to preserve each one of those memorable life moments on photographic paper. And well it did. I have boxes and boxes of pictures waiting to be sorted and catalogued, or sent to the kids, or pitched. It's incredible that I never seem to tire of taking more. But I have often wondered if the ad agency that decided to use that slogan knew how really *religious* it was? These *are* the moments of our lives, every one of them! Each moment, one after the next, each precious present bringing with it new possibility, hope. Unless we are paying attention, the moments are lost, unused, unappreciated, gone and forgotten....and then so are we. Or so are the people around us, and we are left behind with business unfinished.

The holiday season we have just entered presents us with a particularly concentrated set of opportunities to be with our families and our friends in purposeful ways. It is often said that meaningful lives cannot be lived in isolation. Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka writes that "Salvation is not a solo act." Where else but in our relationships do we experience life, all of it, its joy and its pain. I would invite you and yours in this flurry of parties and dinners and gift exchanges to follow the wise advice of the Reverend Kodak and make each moment a worthwhile and well lived moment in your lives. I don't want to dwell too much today, though, talking theory and theology. Let's dwell instead in the real and the personal, which will hopefully leave us each with some practical ideas for making the most of our holiday moments.

Is yours a family that could easily portray the characters in the many books and movies about disenchantment with the holidays? Are you Christmas with the Cranks? When you get together with your siblings and your parents, or with the neighbors, or with all the people in your office, are there elephants in the room about which no one wants to speak? Even though you really should? Did you cite your family at Thanksgiving dinner as something for which you are ever grateful yet at the same time know inside that they are also the biggest source of worry and grudges and guilt in your life? Do you wish, for example, you had never written that letter? Made that insulting comment? Are there hard feelings between you and someone else that have never been resolved? Do you wish you could tell him, or her, how much you have always admired and respected the way they handled a difficult situation? Do you just want to say “I love you,” but habits are hard to break and silence particularly so? Guilt, resentment, grudges, unsaid words, apologies. Gosh, just making this list is cathartic. Our lives are full of these things, and more.

The story I read earlier about the legend of the mistletoe illustrated one of the opportunities we might look for in the coming days. I had not heard this legend before and did not realize that the original custom of meeting under the mistletoe was not for romance and kissing, but rather for reconciliation and forgiveness. Now I am definitely in favor of romance and kissing, but perhaps for the benefit of family dynamics (maybe even world dynamics) we *could* use a whole lot more forgiveness and reconciliation.

I also found it significant that in the story it was the less powerful, less thought of brother who in the final analysis did the killing. Could it be that our unspoken resentments of each other have the potential to be more insidiously damaging than we imagine them to be? Could silent feelings have the power to effectively cut off members of a family from each other? I imagine grudge and forgiveness are at the heart of millions of human dramas that will be played out in the living rooms and over the dining tables of our families over the holidays. Robert Karen, in his book *The Forgiving Self*, writes that “No friendship, no marriage, no family connections of any kind would last if the silent reparative force of forgiveness were not working almost constantly to counteract the incessant corrosive effects of resentment and bitterness which would otherwise tear us apart. Without forgiveness there could be no allowance for human frailty.”

I have heard that reconciliation consists of forgiveness and *truth*. The truth in most cases is that who needs to forgive and who needs to apologize is not always so clear. The truth is that forgiving someone else often means first letting go of some precious story we tell about ourselves, risking awareness of a larger, perhaps less self-justifying truth. In accepting our own imperfections we become more understanding of others’ imperfections as well. Forrest Church, in his book called *Freedom From Fear*, insightfully calls perfectionism a form of self-abuse. “When we impose on others the same impossible set of standards that we inflict on ourselves, we jeopardize everyone’s happiness.” He says we should lighten up a little bit on the guilt trips to which we are so prone, without taking ourselves off the moral hook, so to speak. Guilt can paralyze us, but it can also force us to change our lives for the better.

Forrest Church's book is excellent, by the way, in case you are interested in further pursuing the subject of fear. *Freedom From Fear*. Here is another of his insights that I have personally taken to heart and that may catch your attention as well. Church writes that "Insecurity is a form of narcissism." When we are unsure of ourselves we become self-conscious, and therefore less conscious of others. Absorbed in ourselves we connect less with those around us. We truly *live* fewer of those precious moments of our lives about which we are talking this morning. Quoting Church: "Those of us who suffer from acute insecurity do only those things that will guarantee our emotional safety. We languish in private gardens with walls so high that nothing can grow there."

Forrest Church's suggestions for handling the fears that can keep us from full lives begin with moving from a position of personal pain to one of personal power. Rather than remain victimized by the inherent fears that cause misunderstandings and grudges and hostility in our families and relationships, empower yourself through a self-forgiveness that leads to courage. The courage to act (because performing is a gutsy thing to do), the courage to love (because open hearts break easily), and finally the courage to be (because, all by itself, life can be frightening). Three short imperatives sum up the wisdom behind creating this courage in yourself. They are: do what you can, want what you have, and be who you are. As he puts it, "It is that simple. And also that difficult."

What are the opportunities for which we can be watching this holiday season? I would put it simply: to make connections that mean something. Go deeper than small-talk. Create bridges to better relationships by practicing both self-forgiveness and compassion toward the imperfections of others. Sometimes the meaningful connection needs to be with oneself – being honest about our own potential for the negative. Without self-knowledge there can be no self-forgiveness, no growth. But begin the process with ourselves and it will automatically extend to include the people around us. In the mistletoe legend, Baldur's mother Frigga declares "I will be the first to open my heart," to secure the return of her son.

Whatever your stories, however complicated your family relationships, surely there is some way to engage with someone who needs you as much as you need them. Maeve Binchy has a book of short stories called *This Year It Will Be Different*, full of enough different holiday scenerios that we can all identify with at least one. This is a time of year when feelings cannot so easily be hidden – nor should they be! We have created these celebratory times, these moments of our lives, for the purpose, it seems to me, of having occasion, justification if you need it, and opportunity to connect and make sure we have said what we need to have said – before it is too late. It sometimes seems trite – but it sure is true: life is short. If you don't say it now, when will it be? "We are sensitive beings," writes Robert Karen. "We are vulnerable. We are defended and stuck in our defenses in ways we do not see. Sparks fly in every relationship. Hurt is inevitable. So is estrangement. But for how long?" Will it be different this year for you? If not now, when?

Regardless of our affiliation with the specifics of Christianity, there is nevertheless a message in the season. The weeks leading up to Christmas are called Advent, a time of preparation and anticipation of the birth of Jesus, a person who brought

a simple message of radical inclusivity, love, and compassion to our world. Would that we could first bring this message to fruition within our own hearts and our own families that it could grow to heal the whole world.

There are gifts in this season, in the religious messages of many religious traditions. Earth-based solstice celebrations remind us of our infinite connections to this awesome web of existence. The lighting of the Mehorah and the Jewish celebration of Hannukah carry messages of freedom to worship, justice and human rights amidst our eternal gratitude for the providence in which we exist. Christianity brings us the hope that comes with the birth of each new child and the joy of giving of our hearts and hands to others.

There are also gifts in this season in the opportunities we have to connect with and sometimes to make amends with our families and friends. Today, I bring you the gift of a simple little expression that may help you remember what it is you really want to do with your one precious life. These are the moments of our lives. Treasure them, in both their brevity and their possibility. And meet someone special under the mistletoe this year.

I wish you and yours the happiest of holidays.