

# *Spirituality for a Harried Season*

**Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach**

**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**

**December 5, 1999**

## **Reading**

Hanukkah means “the dedication.” The book of the ancient Hebrew prophet Zechariah (dating from the late 6th century BCE) foretold the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, following the rise of Darius the Persian to destroy the Babylonian empire and allow the return of the Jews to their homeland. His words first described the menorah, the many-branched candelabrum that is the central symbol of Judaism. To this day, at Hanukkah, the visionary words of Zechariah are read:

And the angel who talked with me came again, and waked me, like a man that is wakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see, and behold, a lamp-stand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps which are on the top of it. And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right and one on the left.” And I said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these, my lord?” ... Then he said to me, “This is the word of the Lord to Zerub-babel: Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. ... These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth.” [Zech. 4: 1-6, 10b]

The prophet’s words are replete with symbolism. The two olive trees provide oil for the menorah, with its seven flames, corresponding to the all-seeing eyes of God. The two trees stand for the Zerub-babel and Joshua, respectively the priestly and secular rulers to be established in the new Jerusalem. The Temple was rebuilt, and the cult of Yahweh was restored, but centuries would pass before anyone would arise to assume the mantle of Joshua. This is how it happened:

By the third century BCE, the empire of Alexander the Great had succeeded the Persians; now the ever-rebellious Palestinian Jews were under the heel of the Greco-Syrians. King Antiochus Epiphanes -- Antiochus the Illustrious -- sought finally to subjugate the Jews by stamping out their religion. On Dec. 15, 167, he erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of Yahweh in the Temple in Jerusalem, and there sacrificed a pig to the pagan god. This was the “abomination of desolation” of which the books of the Maccabees, Judith and Daniel all speak with intense hatred. The event marked the onset of the Maccabean revolt. If Antiochus could so act with impunity, the end of their already ancient Jewish faith was at hand. So it seemed to Matthias Maccabeus and his five sons.

The Maccabees, led by Matthias and by his son Judas, won a remarkable series of victories and established the Hasmonean dynasty in a revived Israel (short-lived though it was, for the Romans were not far behind). Three years to the day after the hateful

sacrifice to Zeus, the Temple was dedicated anew. It was the first Hanukkah. The Talmud tells the story of how Hanukkah also came to be known as the Feast of Lights:

“When the Greeks [that is, the Hellenistic Syrians] entered the temple they desecrated all the oil in the Temple. After the leaders of the House of the Hasmoneans had overcome and defeated them, they searched all over and finally found just one small cruse of oil still bearing the seal of the high priest -- just enough oil to last for one day [in the Temple candelabrum]. But a miracle happened. It burnt for eight days. The following years it was ordained that these days be observed with songs of praise and thanksgiving.” [Shabbat 21b]

The persisting light is declared a miracle, as if to say, *The persistence of our people and our faith is an inexplicable wonder. In the last analysis it is not the work of our own military might, but of the faith that inspired in us the will to fight and to endure. The perpetual light in the temple stands for God’s perpetual presence among us. This day we remember Zechariah’s prophecy, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit [you shall prevail], says the Lord of hosts.”*

## **Sermon**

Hanukkah, the Jewish Feast of Lights -- and the Dedication -- arrived early this year. Advent, the four Sundays leading up to Christmas -- a season of preparation for the Nativity of the Christ-child -- began already last week. The winter solstice -- marking the lowest path in the sun’s transit across our sky -- is fast approaching. (On my early evening walks, the sun’s retreat is palpable; we feel it in our bones.) Our culture rolls all these holy days into one and calls them the Holiday Season, and advertises them as “the season to be jolly.” But we know what they mean: “‘Tis the season to go shopping.” The season of great expectations becomes, in our heart of hearts, the season of great resistances.

Are you an expecter or a resister? Young children are high expecters, and some adults have managed to keep that child-like quality. But if you find yourself mumbling, “Am I supposed to get out those tattered decorations one more time?” -- face it, you’re a resister. Me, I’m a resister.

Some of our resistance is intellectual: We don’t *believe* that this season has a meaning worth taking seriously. Some of it is emotional: We put off preparations, or writing greeting cards, and would put it off forever if we thought we could. But surely we could scuttle the old habit if we really wanted to! Suppose we went with our hearts for once and called a moratorium on Christmas -- did none of it for, say, a whole week! Then ask yourself: What few things in particular does my heart bid me do? Which traditions are meaningful?

Simplify and decide. You may find, this way, renewed satisfactions in the season, and a spirituality that is not only for this season but for all the seasons of your life.

There's been much discussion lately about how we Unitarian Universalists are changing. These days, words like "spirituality" and "grace" and "miracle" crop up among us more often than ever before. The bumper sticker GRACE HAPPENS appears on our cars; "Amazing Grace" becomes a favorite hymn. What's going on? Are we embracing emotionality and throwing rationality to the winds?

I say, reason *si!* Rationalism, the belief that everything is rationally comprehensible, *no!* We will always honor reason. We want our minds, as well as our emotions, fully engaged in our faith. We find that crisp, concise definitions illuminate: for instance, "miracle" means "wonder." What we call "miracles" are symbols of something surprising, or an inexplicable goodness, or a wonderful and happy event. Science does not banish authentic miracles, as rationalism imagines, but presents us with wonders that open our minds to new and deeper questions, new and deeper wonder.

But what about "spirituality"? How can we define this notoriously slippery word? Recovering the meaning in the holiday season means choosing more carefully and deliberately what you do -- the gifts you give, the songs you sing, the meals you plan, the decorations you put up. Think of "spirituality" as a practice, something you do that gives meaning to your life. Then think of how you give expression to that meaning -- how you sing it, how you reflect it in the way you greet and respond to others, how you show it in the stories you tell. Think of spirituality as the way you express your believing -- "believing" in the sense of "believing in," trusting in, placing your confidence in. To me, "believing" is the self-expression of the human spirit. It is the song of our very being.

Spirituality comes alive in symbols, and some symbols are especially luminous to us. They glow. They shine in the darkness. They illuminate. No wonder light is a master symbol of religious thought and feeling in virtually every religious tradition. At the Hindu festival called Divali, small lights are lit and set afloat on the rivers, representing the migration of many souls. Light is a kind of symbol of symbols, for it is not only something that we see, it is something *by which* we see. Just here we see why rationalism is a spiritual dead end: We do not clearly understand spiritual truths, and we cannot precisely say what a religious symbol means -- a menorah, a flaming chalice, a pagan bonfire, the candle-lighting of Christmas Eve. Rather, it is by the light of such symbols that we are enabled to see and to understand more fully than before. Faith is not that which we see; faith is that by which we see.

For me, the sea-change in the basic religious outlook among us was marked by the March 1995 convocation of Unitarian Universalist ministers in Hot Springs, Ark. It was the first such "convo" in some 20 years. In connection with the convocation, our ministers' association published a volume of essays. It was titled *The Transient and the Permanent in Liberal Religion*, signaling our joint quest for what is essential and "permanent" in our free and elusive faith. My own essay, "The Covenant of Spiritual Freedom," became the lead piece in the book. But at Convo '95 itself, it became clear that a younger generation had taken charge -- rather like John F. Kennedy's boast, years before -- leaving old you-know-whats like me on the sidelines. At the final session, we sought consensus, a written statement we could all agree to. Mmm. Risky business in a UU convocation. The debate

in our final plenary session was intense. It became, I think, a tug of war between the children of Spirituality and the children of Rationality. Seeing the rise to prominence of the former, there were anguished outcries about “exclusion” from the latter.

What did we finally adopt? Precisely this: “We covenant to affirm that at the heart of our faith is a profound sense of the holy and a critical trust in the power of reason.” Ain’t that wonderful! Both-and! True to our liberal propensities, we were finally willing to exclude no one.

But the sea-change was there nevertheless: A profound sense of the holy came first. It was evident in the worship services. Listen to the poem that Laurel Hallman, senior minister of the First Unitarian Church in Dallas, read, and commented upon, in the service she led. Here is D.H. Lawrence’s poem, “There Are No Gods”:

There are no gods, and you can please yourself  
have a game of tennis, go out in the car, do some shopping, sit and talk, talk, talk  
with a cigarette browning your fingers.

There are no gods, and you can please yourself --  
go and please yourself --

But leave me alone, leave me alone, to myself!  
And then in the room, whose is the presence  
that makes the air so still and lovely to me?

Who is it that softly touches the sides of my breast  
and touches me over the heart  
so that my heart beats soothed, soothed, soothed and at peace?

Who is it that smooths the bed-sheets like the cool  
smooth ocean where the fishes rest on edge  
in their own dream?

Who is it that clasps and kneads my naked feet, till they unfold,  
till all is well, till all is utterly well? The lotus-lilies of the feet!

I tell you, it is no woman, it is not man, for I am alone.  
And I fall asleep with the gods, the gods  
that are not, or that are  
according to the soul’s desire,  
like a pool into which we plunge, or do not plunge.

Lawrence’s words spit any sense of “the holy” right back at us: “There are no gods, and you can please yourself...” How deftly he captures the profane temper of our times. The words evoke in me an almost visceral sense of revulsion. They admit of no sacred limit, and therefore they denigrate, even desecrate, my sense of my own humanity.

But then the poem takes an astonishing turn. Lawrence describes a mystical experience -- "a presence" that comes to this one who has protested, "But leave me alone, leave me alone, to myself!" Yet it comes, comes unbidden, unexpected. It is felt as soothing and healing. It is not a human presence that he feels, he says, "for I am alone." It is a sacred presence that gives him to himself, when he "takes the plunge" and gives himself wholly to it.

At least that's what I make of the paradoxical last lines of the poem: "And I fall asleep with the gods, the gods / that are not, or that are / according to the soul's desire." I hope I have not wandered too far from my theme: these holiday season weeks as a time to prepare our hearts and minds -- for surprises, even miracles. To say "Expect a miracle" is like saying "Expect the unexpected" -- which seems self-contradictory and absurd, until we realize that there's no other way to negotiate this life, whole and well, than to live with questions and uncertainties. To see this and to accept it is to hold back no longer, but to dive into the waiting pool. Faith has often been called a "leap," with good reason, I think, though it alarm us in our desire for rational control. But we should ask, What is it that holds us back from actually taking the plunge? Is it fear, or cynicism, or resentment, or despair? I see these things in myself all the time, and know I must choose not to give them power over my life.

In her sermon, Laurel Hallman said Lawrence's poem had moved her to place a phone call to a young Olympic diver, Cheryl Santini, a college senior in Dallas she'd read about in the paper. "When you dive," Ms. Santini said, "you're always afraid. You don't know how you're going to land, so there's always fear. ... But the fear is important, because it helps you focus. ... You want to have enough fear to help you concentrate."

So you have to prepare yourself to concentrate, simply to do the dive you already know how to do. "Sometimes," she said, "my mind starts to race and I start thinking, 'What if? What if I come too close to the board and hit it?'" "Which seemed a reasonable fear to me," Laurel said. Me, too, I thought. "What if I forget how to do the dive? I start second-guessing myself." Then she must stop and center herself in the present moment and task. She said, "My coach tells me that when fear starts to paralyze me, it is usually because I am indulging in overanalysis. I have to learn to think of the whole, and let my body dive."

We only have to think about the whole, and let our whole selves do the dive. To be prepared, I think, is to work long and hard, to practice diligently and do all your homework. But finally it is to let go. It is to stop asking "Am I ready?" and to "just do it." Laurel reported one more thing that Cheryl Santini said. She spoke of the moment toward which the whole dive aims, the moment when you enter the water: "You have to put all your muscle into the water," she said. "If you work with the water it will be beautiful."

There is a wisdom in the ancient tradition of Advent. It recognizes that, if we are going to celebrate Christmas in a meaningful way, we are going to have to take some time, and make some spiritual effort, to prepare ourselves. Otherwise, we will be drawn into the

rush of shopping and decorating and partying. We will overspend and overeat and oversocialize, to the point where the season only exhausts us. When that happens, we like to blame it on external pressures; we complain of “the commercialization of Christmas” or whatever. But often, I suspect, we have invited the very thing we complain about. Secretly we think: At least the distractions of the season fill my sense of emptiness; they mask my “quiet desperation.”

How, then, can we prepare ourselves? How shall we again “expect miracles”? By being attentive to the spirituality -- the meaning-giving practices -- of this season, and letting go all the rest. Some suggestions: Learn again to do things you actually enjoy, rather than things you think others expect of you. Do something every day that feeds and frees your spirit. So will you relearn optimism and joy. Spend an evening, or a day, regularly, with your beloved, with your children, with your parents, with your close friend. So will you relearn love and caring. Also, act upon your sense of compassion, wherever pain or neediness or disability appears: strangers who come to you, causes and community groups that appeal to you, the hungry birds in wintertime. So shall we relearn kindness and justice.

Finally, take time to attend to the spiritual needs of your own soul. In Cheryl Santini’s words, the act of diving becomes a luminous symbol of spiritual practice. To attend to your own spiritual needs requires you to prepare yourself by daily practice. And in the performance of life, it requires you not to let fear paralyze you, nor to wish it (or wash it) away. Every challenge entails anxiety, so let it work for you. Let it be the tension you need to be entirely focused on the task before you. Then you will be ready to let go and put all your muscle into the water, all your heart and mind and strength into the great, deep, refreshing pool of life. “If you work with the water it will be beautiful.”