

BELIEVING IS SEEING

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REFLECTIONS FOR CHRISTMAS MULTIGENERATIONAL SUNDAY

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There is never enough. No matter how much we have, there is never enough.

Our culture is very clear, and very consistent, in giving us this message of scarcity. No matter how much we have of anything—money, possessions, success, friends, experiences, time—it will not be enough, we will somehow, at some point, run short, be lacking, find ourselves frustrated and unhappy because there is not enough.

Spiritual teachings, by contrast, are clear and consistent in giving us quite the opposite message: no matter how little we have, there is always enough, and more, more than enough. We may believe that we have too little to get by, too little to manage with, too little to accomplish what we set out to do, but we are mistaken. The message is not one of scarcity, but of abundance. Whatever is needed, there will be more than enough, an overflow.

The Hanukkah story, celebrated in the Jewish tradition later this week, provides an especially compelling account of how the perception of not enough is proved wrong, and what had seemed to be too little turns out to be more than enough. To remind you of the story, fighting had taken place in and around Jerusalem between the Jewish people and invading armies. At long last, the invaders had been driven out, and Jewish leaders went into the temple for a celebratory worship rededication the sacred space. Lighting

of lamps was traditionally part of the worship, much as we light our chalice whenever we gather for worship on Sunday.

One special lamp, the menorah, should have been kept burning continually as a symbol of the holiness of the temple. But when Jewish leaders prepared to light the menorah, they found only a tiny bit of oil remaining.

Because of the prolonged war, no other oil was available, and it would take some time to prepare more oil. But the leaders decided having the menorah lit even for a short time would be better than nothing, so they lit the lamp.

And it is then that the culture's teaching, that there is never enough, was changed into the spiritual teaching that there is always enough, and more than enough. That tiny amount of oil, surely only enough to keep the lamp lit for a few hours, maybe one day at most, kept the lamp burning for eight days—the amount of time needed to prepare more oil. Not one day, not two days, not five days, but eight days, longer than anyone would have believed possible.

So which is true: the belief that there is never enough, or the belief that there is always enough, more than enough?

And how much does your belief affect what actually happens to you?

We try so hard not to believe. We insist on facts and proofs and evidence, iron-clad and irrefutable evidence, and even then we remain skeptical, loath to take the step, make the move, open our hearts and minds, all those vulnerable, risky moves that accompany believing.

And can you really blame anyone of us for not believing?

The Christmas season always has required a real stretch, with its incredible stories of virgin birth, special stars, angels singing to shepherds, those wealthy and educated wise men actually traveling to see a peasant baby as if they could ever be motivated to do such a thing. Add to that all the cultural additions of red-nosed reindeer and Santas traveling the world in a single night with just the right presents, plus that

last straw of insisting that the same Creator God who shaped the entire universe might show up on earth in an infant—who would, could believe any of it?

But then something happens, something we never expected comes our way, a gift that makes us wonder whether we had it all wrong, that maybe, just maybe, there is more to reality than we originally understood, or there is more love than we originally expected, and our strong insistence on not believing starts to waver.

I once asked members of a congregation to tell about the best gift they ever received, either at Christmas or any other time, and I heard stories like this:

“My first baseball coach told me I had the best team spirit he had ever seen, even though I was a lousy player and dropped every ball that came my way.”

“My high school English teacher praised my writing so that I believed I actually could make it in college, despite coming from a home where my alcoholic father told me I was worthless.”

“The handsomest boy in class asked me to go to the homecoming dance with him. You have to understand, I had a terrible case of acne and could not even stand to look at myself in the mirror for very long.”

“My best friend flew across the country to be with me while I was undergoing chemo treatments that left me too nauseous to even sit up.”

“My little sister and I sat by Dad’s bed all night as he was dying, telling hilarious stories about our road trips with him growing up.

“My wife still says she loves me after all these years and so many struggles in our marriage.”

A gift like one of these, and the resistance to believing can fall away in an instant. And we find ourselves in a strange new place where angels and stars, reindeer and magic, no longer look impossible. Believing does not come easily in a jaded culture where irony and skepticism are

highly valued. But when it comes, a whole other world can open out before us.

Our fourth Unitarian Universalist principle commits us to a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Our new BUC mission statement describes us as a “free and welcoming community.” That repeated use of the word free suggests that it has a special importance for us whenever we try to describe what we are doing, are aspiring to be, as Unitarian Universalists.

I believe, whenever we talk about UUs as being free, that we mean we are not bound by any creed, those sets of beliefs that some traditions craft in order to set boundaries on what one must believe in order to be part of the tradition.

We have no creed, no absolute belief requirements, because we are convinced, in the words of UU minister Wallace Robbins, that we “dare not fence the Spirit,” that to be religious faithfully means not putting boundaries on beliefs because the very essence of spirituality is unbounded.

So we have no creed, not required beliefs, and that means we are free—for what, exactly? To do what, exactly?

Being free in our spiritual path sounds like a pretty good deal, doesn't it? And it is a pretty good deal, but it can also be a pretty hard deal, a pretty demanding deal, to use that freedom well.

I remember enjoying the work of the famous French mime, Marcel Marceau, whenever he would appear on different television variety shows. If you saw him in action, you remember how he could, with nothing but gestures and facial expressions, create an entire world on an empty stage.

Nothing concrete was there. But Marceau made his audience so convinced of the existence of a dog he was walking or a table he sat at or a bookshelf he leaned against that whenever something unexpected happened—the dog ran off, or Marceau seemed to trip on a table leg—the audience would gasp or laugh just as much as if an actual,

concrete object had been involved. Through his skill in engaging the imagination, Marceau convinced us that the imaginary objects he suggested through gestures actually were there, affecting his behavior and our reactions.

Though Unitarian Universalists have no creed spelling out what we do or do not believe, leaving us free to believe as we see fit, ours is not an easy kind of spirituality as a result. Just as the audience watching Marceau had to keep imagination and attention engaged while he constructed his imaginary world through mime, we are challenged to keep our imagination and attention engaged in the world about us, in our inner and outer experience, in all the chances and changes of our lives, to see the patterns and meanings unfolding before us. Nobody tells us where to look or what to see or how to think; instead, we do all the hard work of believing ourselves, encouraging one another and sharing possibilities, but ultimately making belief choices on our own, using the insights gained through our own imagination, our own understanding. And the beliefs that emerge from that sort of work, like the tables and bookshelves and dogs that emerged from the imagination elicited by Marceau, are every bit as powerful in shaping our lives as the beliefs that some traditions hand to their followers, maybe even more powerful because they come from our own efforts.

Our culture tends to teach us that “seeing is believing,” that arguments are given to us, facts are set forth, and then we accept what we are told. Spiritual truth, however, comes to us in the opposite direction: we believe, let our imaginations and insights be engaged by the events of our lives, and out of that engagement are formed the beliefs we embrace and live by. Believing is seeing. May the beliefs you hold about this holiday season, whatever they may be, enable you to open wide and embrace the magic that is all about, all the time, able to be seen once you believe.