

**The Gift of Presence©**  
**A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz**  
**Sunday, December 11, 2016**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
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**fvuuf.org**

“Are you ready for Christmas?” I must have been asked that question a half dozen times this week. I understand that it’s one of those pleasantries that we exchange during this time of year, much like talking about the weather. In the West, there’s a cultural assumption that you’re going to celebrate Christmas in some way – regardless if you are actually a practicing Jew, Muslim, Wiccan or Buddhist. As Unitarian Universalists, we embrace Christmas both as a secular and religious celebration, but we also try to recognize the importance of other faith traditions holy days as well. One of those celebrations that barely gets a nod in Western culture is Bodhi Day on December 8<sup>th</sup>, the day of Buddha’s enlightenment.

Not to short change Jesus at this time of year, but honestly, he didn’t have to do much except—well, be born! His mother did all the work! But Buddha had to work pretty hard to become enlightened. As the story goes, Gautama, being weary of the world of money, prestige, power and alarmed by the endless cycle of suffering, old age and death, sat down under a fig tree and just waited, confronting everything that arose in his mind. Some say it was for forty days and forty nights, others think it was just one night, but whatever - Just think about all the stuff that goes on in YOUR mind. To-do lists, snatches of music, regret about an awkward conversation, anxiety about tomorrow – not to mention all the big things – why am I here? What’s my purpose in life? What, if anything happens after I die? Like Jesus when he was faced with temptations, so too was Gautama, only they were manifestations of his own mind – sex, power, greed, suffering, anxiety, every human emotion arose in him and he just acknowledged each thing as it arose – and then, let it go and kept sitting.

And then, it happened. As the morning star arose, he glanced up and he understood. He became aware of everything. It’s this moment in history that is celebrated, the moment when Buddha woke up to a reality that changed the world and gave the world the practice of zazen – of just sitting – as a path towards enlightenment.

So at first glance, it seems there is little comparison between the story of Jesus’ birth and Buddha’s enlightenment, but they do have one element in common – a wondrous star that plays a symbolic role in both stories. Most of you know the story of the Wise Men, who asked “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east when it rose and have come to worship him.” There’s a lot of speculation about this star – was it actually a comet, or the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn; who knows? But there was something that caught the attention of these Gentiles, these men of priestly caste, or mystic astrologers or students of prophecy; they became convinced that a divine event had happened in Bethlehem and so they went to check it out.

The journey of the magi as it’s now called is not like what happens in our own lives and in our own families; distant relatives arriving from afar, bearing gifts. Sometimes those gifts are spot on, but more often than not the gifts say more about the giver than the intended recipient of the gift. I mean, those Magi – what were they thinking? Instead of bringing something imminently practical, like diapers, formula and a rattle, these guys brought a baby the most useless gifts of all - frankincense, gold and myrrh. Christians have transformed these three things

into symbols of what Jesus' ministry would mean on earth: frankincense was a priestly incense and symbol of Jesus' divinity; gold the symbol of Jesus' kingship on earth and myrrh, an embalming incense and symbol of Jesus' humanity and mortality and a foreshadowing of his death and resurrection.

So, are you ready for Christmas? The Magi certainly weren't. They hadn't planned on stopping at Walmart to buy toys for tots; now, when this star emerged and they decided to follow it, they had no idea where it would point to. What they brought was not really important; what was important – and what's important to us – is what this season means; what kind of polestar we will chose to follow, even if we don't fully embrace all the religious and mythical implications of the Christmas story.

The star in both stories is not the person of Jesus or Buddha, but more importantly, what their lives pointed towards; that glimmering star in the night sky and in the early dawn becomes a symbol to represent the light of truth that both Buddha and Jesus' lives revealed. Buddha's star didn't lead anywhere; but it pointed to an awakening and to a new way of being – of what it means to be fully present to your life – to show up fully and completely for your life – every moment – every day – until the last minute of consciousness. That's the great gift that both Jesus and Buddha brought to us – the gift of presence. What a tall order! I think I'd rather just get a gift card, right? To be fully present to every moment of life is such an emotional chore sometimes, it's hard to sustain. Yet, that's what these two spiritual teachers' message and lives illuminate for us as examples to strive towards.

The punch line of this sermon is not hard to anticipate so I'll just state the obvious here – the greatest gift you can give your children, your families, your friends and yourself is the gift of your presence; of really showing up in mind, body, heart and spirit. And let me state here it is such hard work! Especially if you tend to be introverted or shy or struggle with a social anxiety disorder, showing up and being fully present can be excruciating. But that's why the Buddha gave us the practice of meditation; and how Jesus gave us the gift of contemplative prayer as a way of strengthening our ability to show up for the best and the worst that life can give us. I know it's possible, because I have met sentient beings in this life who practice the Buddha way of being fully present.

In fact, about ten years ago, I had an opportunity to sit next to a Bodhisattva at a dive restaurant in downtown Cleveland. The church was hosting a large scale art show entitled "The Buddha Project." Wayne's teacher at the time, the Abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery, John Daido Loori had come into town to do a dharma talk and to introduce the art show. I was pretty nervous about meeting him, because in my mind I had built him up to be this great spiritual teacher; this giant of Zen and when he stepped into the restaurant, he was actually smaller than I imagined him to be. I engineered a seat next to him so that I could receive drops of wisdom that fell from his lips. "Could you please pass the salt?" he said. "Wow, this sushi is pretty good," was the extent of our conversation. Yet, when he turned to speak to me, I noticed how much he gave of his whole being and how completely accepted I felt in his presence. I didn't have to be clever or witty or intelligent – with him there was nothing to prove – no need to impress – he spoke to me and to everyone with the same degree of interest, curiosity, delight and what felt like a dispassionate but profound love. I knew that I was in the Presence of a Great Soul—a Bodhisattva—one of the many incarnations of the Buddha.

Sitting next to him drinking coffee, I was reminded of the story of when the Buddha began to wander around India shortly after his enlightenment; he encountered several people who recognized him to be a very extraordinary being. They asked him, "Are you a god?" "No,"

he replied. "Are you a reincarnation of god?" "No," he replied. "Are you a wizard, then?" "No." "Well, are you a man?" "No." "So what are you?" they asked, being very perplexed. "I am awake."

Although Jesus' story is not one of enlightenment, the fact that his life continues to fascinate and inspire people to this day is a testament to the power of his presence. Like the Buddha, neither one wrote their autobiography, so what we know of them is filtered through those closest to them, and written down for posterity. But we know from the stories written about him, he would show up in the places where a God-fearing Jew should not go; into the homes of Roman soldiers, the graveyard where a madman lived in chains; the home of the despised tax collectors; and he would just show up with his open, broken heart and teach and talk and touch and heal. People did not know what to make of this guy; this boy born of an unwed mother, who, for the first part of his life, lived as a refugee – what we would call today – as a Dreamer Child. They did not know what to make of a man who preached love and justice in the face of empire, who refused to stone a woman; who taught in parables and stories, who constantly came back to his relationship with God and the source of his strength. There was something about his presence that was so utterly compelling, he drew thousands to him, and he kept saying to them, "it's not about me – it's about God," trying to redirect their adoration to the source of his Presence.

This is the story of Jesus we tend to forget in this holiday season, focusing instead on the gifts because frankly, it's easier to shop for something than to show up with your full, naked presence. I get that – it's hard for me too. Yet, as difficult as that is – to be fully present – it's harder still to be half present to your life. It may seem in the moment like a good thing, not unlike texting and driving because heaven knows reading that facebook post is really important, but the spiritual cost of not being fully present can have consequences too. It's the child who stops talking to you because you aren't listening. It's the spouse from whom you've become estranged because you both stopped showing up to each other. It's your own inner sense of the divided self – of attending – but not being fully present for – your own life.

What then, are the things that keep us from being fully present? I once heard a spiritual teacher talk about the three things which keep us from being present to this very moment; they are: regret about the past; anxiety about the future and boredom with the present. Let's look at those three things briefly:

Regret about the past. How many of us live with regrets about the past? If you are alive and have a conscience, it's almost impossible not to. But think about how much time you spend thinking about the past; the words you said that you can't take back; the mistake you made that's haunted you for years; the ways in which you may have mis-used or unwisely used your health, your career, your money, your time. Buddha said that the way to deal with it is to stop and think about it – let it really sink into your bones; acknowledge the regret and then let it go. When you find yourself clinging to the regret, ask yourself "why" and let it go. Do this one time, do this a thousand times, and you'll eventually see that clinging to regret becomes like any other bad habit.

Anxiety about the future is in the air right now. Immigrants and refugees are frightened and wondering if they are going to get deported, LGBTQ friends are wondering if their rights and relationships will be protected; my Muslim and Jewish brethren are worried about violence directed towards them because of their faith. It's not that these fears are unfounded of course; we have heard statements made in public from one of the powerful pulpits in the world and so there is reason for vigilance. At the same time, living in anxiety about the future is just as unproductive as regretting the past. You cannot act on what has not happened yet. There are

enough things to protest in the present; and plenty of things to protect right now. So worrying about the future; whether it's related to your personal future or the state of the union, diminishes not only your ability to live in this moment, but frankly to fully enjoy living. Jesus knew this when he said: Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

When I was growing up, there were two forbidden words – words that as kids we were never allowed to speak – they were “I'm bored!” We learned that the minute we expressed boredom we were either given chores or plopped down in front of the Encyclopedia Britannica and told to read it from cover to cover. Boredom with the present means that we are always looking for something else – something out there to entertain or distract – something which is so much more exciting than what we have to do right now. Just being present to the moment – of being bored – of feeling out of sorts – is part of the spiritual practice of presence, of honoring the life that you have right here, right now.

(So) What gifts can you give yourself and others this season? To give the gift of yourself requires you to do just three simple things: Listen, Let Go and Repeat. As you might imagine from hearing the All Ages Focus this morning, listening is perhaps the most important spiritual practice of presence. Listening deeply, without interruption, without attempting to insert your own ideas into the conversation, is one of the greatest gifts you can give another. In an excerpt from his poem, “The Winter of Listening,” David Whyte writes, “All those years forgetting how easily you can belong to everything simply by listening...”

Letting Go. Connie demonstrated that principle so beautifully in the conversation with her daughter. She let go of her need to control, to advise, and to fix and simply – listened. She learned the healing power of listening and in the process, learned something about herself as well. One of the Buddha's greatest insights as he developed the practice of meditation is to watch the thoughts, fears, judgments about the past, present and/or future arise, greet them, sit with them for a moment, and then – let them go. Listen. Let Go. Repeat.

The irony of doing this practice over and over again is that it heightens your sense of what's right in front of you. That is what poets and artists and photographers know. Billy Collin's poem, “This Much I Do Remember,” is a snapshot in time, a still life we pass by each day; the oranges, the bean grinder, the cruets for vinegar and oil, but more so, the face talking and smiling and the way the voice rises and falls; moments, he says, “of the past which begin to line up behind that moment and all the moments to come... assembled in front of it in a long row... that *this* was the moment I had rescued from the millions that rush out of sight into a darkness behind the eyes...”

Being present to each moment means that you can recall such simple pleasures as these. And when time takes its toll on us, when age and memory begins to erase such unnecessary details such as what day it is, what time it is, we have these moments, he says “even after I have forgotten what year it is, my middle name, and the meaning of money, I will still carry in my pocket the small coin of that moment, minted in the kingdom that we pace through every day.”

May it be so. Let's take that moment now – to show up to whatever presents itself to you – today – right now – in this moment that we share together. *Silence for a time.*