

## Radical Hospitality

This year quite a few influential thinkers are again claiming that we human beings don't really need God, or that God doesn't really exist. Richard Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist at Oxford University and he published a book entitled The God Delusion. Dawkins is among the many emphasizing the need for more reason in our collective human endeavors. He argues against the belief that there is a God with a plan controlling everything. He says such beliefs can leave us in danger of abdicating the powers and responsibilities we each have as members of a wider community.

Mr. Dawkins says there should be an atheist/theist spectrum from 1 to 7: one representing the person completely convinced that there is no God and seven representing the person completely convinced there is a God. Mr. Dawkins identifies himself as a two. I'm probably a 4 myself. Among ourselves we UU's have a wide variety of numbers to identify our theologies. Our understandings of the divine and the good within us, around us, and beyond us are quite dynamic. We have many wonderfully religious theists, agnostics, and atheists.

Within the span of Christmas theologies many people in our neighboring faiths highlight a belief in the Immaculate Conception of Jesus, or how God preordained Jesus as King and Savior. For example, in some religions Christmas involves a belief in the Immaculate Conception of Jesus. Most UUs view these stories as religious myths. The method of conception and preordination of Jesus are not dominant in our faith tradition. But the birthday of Jesus has always been important for Unitarians and Universalists. Charles Dickens who wrote *A Christmas Carol* was a Unitarian, as was Edmund Hamilton Sears who wrote the words to *It Came upon the Midnight Clear*. Clement

Moore who wrote *The Night Before Christmas* and the guy who wrote *Jingle Bells* were both Unitarians. But we are not just about music. We hold up many of the holiday stories as beautiful sacred lessons.

Whether theist or not, whether Christian or not, in the Western world most everyone interfaces with Christmas. Many folks figure they might as well compromise and make something positive out of it. Mr. Dawkins enjoys a special Christmas meal with loved ones as well as having a decorated tree in their living room. Good for him. With the intense pulls of commercialism most of us find the need to pause every year and reflect upon what we want Christmas to mean to us. There are many choices and oh can it be confusing. Put aside the overeating and overbuying and you still have challenges.

For Unitarian Universalists Christmas is not about Jesus as the Messiah or Christ, but is about the teachings and life of the historical Jesus. The questions remains: which Jesus are you celebrating? For almost 2000 years people have debated his impact on society. Jesus has been used to defend and abolish slavery. Jesus has been used to support racial bigotry and as the spiritual core of the civil rights movement. Jesus has been used to embolden male superiority and feminism. Framed in Christian terms this year some used Jesus to support continued fighting in Iraq while others advocated bringing the troops home. Jesus has been used to try to fix gay people and He has been used to empower all to be who they are regardless of sexual orientation.

But in my opinion none of that can negate the fact that we are in the middle of a sacred, beautiful birthday celebration. Every year this story gives birth to the spirits of

peace, goodwill, justice, and love. There is no doubt that Jesus lived to be a spiritual giant who promoted these principles with a profound effect on the Western Civilization.

In our ongoing attempts to discern the best of what our religion has to offer last year we examined the lives and teachings of many of the great speakers who have visited this pulpit. Among them was the Rev. Andre Trocme, a great hero of the Underground Railroad during World War II and a man focused on the life & teachings of Jesus.

Trocme was a community leader in Le Chambon, France, where he and the people felt called to help Jewish refugees. I want to give two examples of their courage and commitment. In the summer of 1942 German officials came and publicly pulled Trocme into the town square. The Germans told Trocme they knew the details of the operations of saving Jews, they already had the names of those in hiding, and demanded that they be handed over. Trocme refused and the Germans left without ransacking the village. Immediately Trocme used two of his main resources: the Boy Scouts and the bible study groups (small group ministries) to go to every home notifying the villagers that Jews would not be safe that night and they should all hide in the forest until further notice. The danger passed.

Eight months later it was a cold, snowy evening in February of 1943 when the Vichy police- who were under the command of German troops and the Gestapo- knocked on the church door of Le Chambon. Rev. Trocme was out in the countryside visiting parishioners. His wife Magda knew that these officers represented danger and possibly death for herself, her husband and the entire village of citizens and refugees. Nonetheless, she invited the officers into her home, sat them in front of the fire, and offered them dinner. By the end of the evening Rev. Trocme and the assistant pastor, Theis,- two men

widely known as leaders of the Le Chambon resistance, which was saving the lives of thousands- were taken away to an internment camp.

After several months in the camp, the Vichy told both men they would be released and allowed to return to their village if they signed certain documents. By signing they would swear to follow all orders of the French Vichy government. The two men refused to sign. They would not renounce their past activities nor would they agree to cease trying to save human lives in the future. What happened next is an enigmatic incident in WW II history. Orders came from high up in the government freeing Trocme and Theis from the internment camp. The men returned to Le Chambon and continued their operations.

Later in life when he tried to explain about the core of his commitment Trocme highlighted how Jesus had taught, “one must not shoot. We must love our enemies. That is the good news. We should help, not hurt one another.” During the following years in interviews and speeches Trocme said he had never felt the work to be a dark or dreary set of obligations. Many visitors observed how the village did their scary work with an overall warm, friendly and happy demeanor. At times it was noted that they operated with seemingly ecstatic feelings of love, or Agape. And that, my friends, is a Christmas story about the power of the teachings and life of Jesus.

In my opinion it doesn't matter whether you believe in God or Love or where you fit on Dawkins' 1-7 scale. We can all be inspired by the life of Jesus who reached across social barriers to bandage wound and bind the broken. He taught us to soften our hearts, open our hands, and freely help those in need.

With plenty of opportunities to serve right here in our own communities, we are trying to respond with *Just Neighbors*, our all church homeless ministry. This year our board has encouraged every member and friend at USG to participate in some way by helping those living in homelessness or attacking the root causes of poverty. By preparing and sharing meals, spending the night at NPHIN, mentoring a family, or getting involved in advocacy for better jobs, fewer guns, better health care and fair housing we are trying to “help, not hurt one another.”

We can apply these spiritual inspirations we can examine all the layers of our lives. Magda Trocme often talked about the psychological signal that a closed or locked door would give to a refugee in search of safety. An open door meant welcome.

We are a sanctuary of love, courage, and hope. Let this Christmas season lead us to open doors to people who are suffering and in pain, who have holiday sadness and loneliness. How can we be more engaged in radical hospitality with one another? Where is there a broken relationship in your life that needs healing? Can you imagine the sacrifices the people of Le Chambon made in giving up their barns, kitchens, living rooms and beds? They sacrificed in order to simply do the right thing. In this Christmas season let us reflect on we can do more for somebody living on the margins. In this season we can rise above thinking of giving as a dreary sacrifice. When we open our hands and soften our hearts to embrace others we help create an atmosphere of light, warmth, and joy. Merry Christmas to all.