

**A UU Advent Calendar**  
by Bill Graves Dec. 2009

**Part I**

Well my friends the days are getting short and the seasonal madness approacheth. There are twelve days until Christmas. It is the season of advent for children. Remember the advent calendars when you were young. Each day you opened the door and there was a little treat waiting inside. Advent invites us into a sort of countdown to Christmas. There is another countdown for many of us adults: It is the relentless message all around us: “just 12 shopping days left until Christmas, and counting.”

“O My God, when am I going to find time, or the money this year, to buy something special for all the nieces and nephews? Or, to get all those cards out, or bake the cookies and get the decorations up. “

“12 days you say; that’s all!” Well, good people, let me invite you to relax, to have a guilt free Christmas this year. I invite you to consider with me why we do Christmas at all. And then to be intentional about choosing those parts which will fill you with joy more than drain your spirits. Can we return to the delicious anticipation of each of the 12 Advent days that remain?

Since there are exactly 12 days until Christmas and since we are determined to be joyful this year, I would like to start by doing a little deconstruction of that delightful nonsense rhyme set to music: “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” Did you know there is something called the ‘Christmas Price Index’? It tallies the present cost of the single partridge in a pear tree up to the 12 drummers drumming. The 2000 cost is calculated at a mere \$86,609, up \$8,508 or 10% from \$78,100 last year. Even in a time of economic desperation it has never been more exorbitant to woo your true love. The greatest increase was in seven swans a-swimming, up 33% apparently due to their scarcity. As might be expected increases in shipping and food prices have driven up the price of the three French hens and six geese a-laying by about 25%. Unskilled workers like the eight maids a milking and starving artists like the pipers piping and the drummers drumming got only a modest cost-of-living raise of 3%.

The religiously literate among you probably know that the 12 days of Christmas usually refer to the 12 days immediately following Christmas leading up to the arrival of the Magi on the Day of Epiphany, rather than the 12 Advent days leading to Christmas. And, if you surf the web you will also find quite a number of Christian sites that claim “The Twelve Days of Christmas” song was actually a coded catechism of serious religious import. It is said that after Catholicism was outlawed in England in the 16th Century the song was used as a memory game to help children from closeted Catholic families remember the major tenets of their faith. So my children when you sing “The Twelve Days of Christmas”, in your little heads remember that:

Your true love in the song is not an earthly suitor; it’s God.

The partridge in a pear tree is Jesus on the cross.

2 turtle doves are the Old and New Testaments.

3 French Hens are Faith, Hope and Charity, the Theological Virtues.

- 4 Colly Birds are the Four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
- 5 Golden Rings are the first five books of the Old Testament—the “Pentateuch.”
- 6 Geese A-laying are the six days of creation.
- 7 Swans A-swimming are the seven Catholic sacraments.
- 8 Maids A-milking are the eight beatitudes.
- 9 Ladies Dancing are the nine Fruits of the Holy Spirit.
- 10 Lords A-leaping are the Ten Commandments.
- 11 Pipers Piping are the eleven faithful apostles.
- 12 Drummers Drumming are the twelve dogmas in the Apostle’s Creed.

But, wait a minute, another website called Snopes.com says this is an urban myth. Their investigation revealed the song is of French origin and not introduced to England until after the Catholic restrictions. So it looks like another example of some human need to claim cryptic, conspiratorial meaning everywhere in everyday life. It is nonsense worthy of inclusion in novels such as the bestselling “DaVinci Code.” More likely Snopes says, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” was a “memory-and-forfeits” game in which if you slipped up in repeating one of the verses, you had to offer up a kiss or a round of drinks.

In any event I bet the song will never be the same for you again. So let’s give it a try. Please stand, the words are with your order of service. However, you might wish to not look at the words and play the traditional memory-or-forfeit game.

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### **Part II**

One of the challenges I gave you in opening this sermon was to consider why are these 12 days anticipating Christmas different than any other days during the year. I have a little exercise to get your minds rolling on that. Picture yourself at the Westfield Mall doing your Christmas shopping. Perish the thought some of you may think, but do it anyway. So you decide to stop and have lunch at a little Mall café. You get your soup and sandwich and sit down at a table. But the tables are very crowded and soon a person (it doesn’t matter whether it’s a man or woman) asks if you mind sharing the table. And so you start visiting with the person and find he or she to be congenial and safe, even though you soon find out this is a homeless person. You go to church, and you reply: “Well, sort of, I attend All Souls UU Community.” Then comes this question: “I see you’re buying Christmas presents. I really don’t want to put you on the spot but, if you’re up to it, I’m curious why you, a UU, participate in this whole cockeyed, extravaganza?”

And so that’s my challenge to you. What would you say? Take a few moments of silence to contemplate that. ... Here are some suggestions:

Using my best ministerial training, I would initially would try to turn the question around. I might invite him or her to talk more about what it is that turns them off about the season; what has been their experience in the past? And I would try to listen with compassion knowing how utterly inadequate I am to really speak to the reality of being

homeless. And, also, I might tell him/her that our congregation at SUUF is committed to being there for less fortunate people. “We have a tree with names of people pinned to it and we try to make sure those people are not left out in the gift-giving. And, do you have a place to go on Christmas for dinner?”

But, assuming that he/she still wanted to hear what I thought this festival is worthy of 12 days of anticipation for, here are a few things I might say:

First, Christmas recalls a story. Once I delighted in detailing how the story is preposterous, how most Biblical scholars conclude it is pure myth, made up by several of the Gospel writers contradicting each other in efforts to contrive fulfillment of Hebrew Scriptural prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. Now, I want to tell it simply as a “once upon a time” story, but also as a story with meaning: A story about hope (because all babies are about hope for the future); a story for ordinary people (because the angels appeared to shepherds); a story about a star (a symbol of light in a dark world); a story about wise men (the search for wisdom); a story about love (Mary and Joseph’s love for their baby born in dubious circumstances and angels as messengers of love). Humans seem to have a universal need for stories of new birth of hope and light at this coldest and darkest time of the year, especially when they didn’t know for sure that the light would return. But perhaps most important of all, as well as most forgotten, is that it’s a story about justice birthing in this world. Consider the Magnificat of Mary, Luke 1:46. As Mary is contemplating why this pretty bizarre event that is about to happen to her, she realizes she is giving birth to a promise to:

“Scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts  
and have mercy on those who are faithful from generation to generation; to put  
down the mighty from their thrones and exalt  
those of low degree; to fill the hungry with good things, and  
the rich to send empty away.

One could get arrested by making such a proclamation. And the birth of this new order or dominion is not going to happen by fiat of Emperor, or by violent overthrow. It happens each time I am born and you are born with a new commitment toward justice for those that have the least. We are reminded of this dominion and commitment every year at this time and it fills us with hope and joy.

Second, for me Christmas is a time of remembering. Like Scrooge, I remember my Christmases past, the golden times of my growing up and finding the stocking from Santa by the fireside; I remember those no longer with us, even as we rejoice the new arrivals in my family. Each Christmas marks the passage of the years for each of us. I remember so well when my son age 3 saw behind our Christmas tree a plastic, battery-powered 4-wheeler that he could sit in and drive around the house crashing into furniture and walls. The tag said: “To Cory from Santa.” And he said, “ohhhh...I’m gonna love Santa every day.” So its commercial and its materialistic but when you get that “ohhh”, that’s good stuff.

Third, Christmas at its best is a time of beauty. And here I cannot resist the desire

to get in some UU promotions about how we have helped create much of this beauty. Unitarian Charles Dickens wrote the classic play “A Christmas Carol.” Unitarian Clement Moore wrote the classic Christmas poem that begins: “Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house not a creature was stirring not even a mouse.” Unitarian Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the wild and sweet words to “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” And, as we learned earlier, Unitarian James Pierpont wrote “Jingle Bells.” And, this beautiful hymn of peace and goodwill to all was written by the Unitarian minister of our church in Weston Mass., in 1849.

Please rise and join me in #244, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.”

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### Part III

There is a beautiful children’s book called “The Twelve Gifts of Birth” by Charlene Costanzo. It is a story for anyone, 6 or 86, rich or homeless. It is another once upon a time story, along time ago, in a faraway land. There, every royal child was given twelve special gifts when they were born. They were visited at their castle by twelve wise women. Each woman pronounced a noble gift upon the royal baby. As time went by the wise women realized that the twelve royal gifts of birth belong to every child born anywhere, at any time. They yearned to proclaim their secret but the customs of the land prohibited it. One day the wise women together made this prophesy:

*Some day all the children of the world will learn the truth about  
Their noble inheritance. When that happens a miracle will  
Unfold on the kingdom of Earth.*

Here is the secret they wanted us to know.

*At the wondrous moment each of us were born  
As we took our first breath  
Twelve magnificent gifts were granted to us.*

And here are the womens’ twelve gifts (You might want to follow along with the advent calendars supplied with your orders of service.):

The first gift, the gift for today, is *Strength*: May you remember to call upon it whenever your need it. Especially, right now, with the world hurting and cold with war and economic crisis. We need to have the strength to keep going this Christmas and do what we can for our families and friends. No matter what, we must not give up, offering nothing in return for the gift of life we have been given.

The second gift, the gift to recall tomorrow, is *Beauty*: May Your deeds reflect its depth. May the beauty of the music and memories and good will and hope of this season bring tears to your eyes whether you are 6 or 86, rich or homeless.

The third gift for Dec. 15 is *Courage*: May you speak and act with confidence and use courage to follow your own path.

The fourth gift is *Compassion*: On next Wednesday may you be gentle with yourself and others. May you forgive those who hurt you and yourself when you make

mistakes. Compassion sums up a world in need and a gift to that world that changes lives. There are friends and members of this congregation at nursing homes or alone in their own homes that rarely get visitors. It might be a day to visit one of them, bring them a cookie or a hug.

The fifth gift corresponding to Dec. 17 is *hope*: Through each passage and season, may you trust the goodness of life. And, if you arrive at the bottom of the pit where hope seems but a fragile ember, may there be someone with you that helps you recall a precious memory of Christmas past.

The sixth gift is *Joy*: On every advent day but particularly on Dec. 18, may it keep your heart open and filled with light.

The seventh gift is *Talent*: On Dec. 19, may you discover your own special abilities and contribute them toward a better world. Talent is a loaded word. The truth is in one of our favorite hymns: “If you cannot sing like angels, if you cannot speak before thousands, you can give from deep within you. You can change the world with your love.”

The eighth gift is *Imagination*: May it nourish your visions and dreams. We are now at next Sunday, Dec. 20. Imagination is poetry and through the lens of poetry is surely the way to view Christmas.

The ninth gift, the gift to contemplate on Dec. 21 is *Reverence*; “May you appreciate the wonder you are and the miracle of all creation.”

The tenth gift is *Wisdom*: “Guiding your way, wisdom will lead you through knowledge to understanding. May you hear its soft voice.”

The eleventh gift, for Dec. 23 is *Love*: “It will grow each time you give it away.” Angels are messengers of love as are the gifts we exchange on Christmas. Love isn’t easy because always those we love will hurt us or disappoint us. It is part of being human. May we have enough reserve of love acquired through years of Christmases past to not shut down, to not give up faith.

The twelfth gift 12 days from now is *Faith*: It is the wondrous gift that waits for Christmas Eve because only you can open it, and discern it, and it takes all the other 11 gifts to make it full. Faith may take your whole life to unpack but be open to it; give yourself a chance by listening and hearing, mostly in silence and reflection, but sometimes to words and music you may hear in this room. It is faith that, in the end, you are held the spirit of universal love.

The twelve gifts of birth are a different way to remember and symbolize the light and joy heard in the “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” It is a time to return to childish wonder, and of honoring what is most sacred to you. Here is the final secret of the

twelve wise women:

*Use your gifts well and you will discover others, among them a gift that is uniquely you. See these noble gifts in other people. Share the truth and be ready for the miracle to unfold as the prophesy of the wise women comes true.*

Amen, Blessed be.

Sources: An unpublished sermon delivered in Dec. 2007 by Rev. Alicia Grace.

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### BENEDICTION

Please join hands.

Consider the hand joined to your right hand.

Consider the hand joined to your left hand.

Both hands are from the earth and have worked the earth.

And both hands have created many good things.

Both hands have been clenched in agony and grief and have wiped away tears.

And both hands have held on tightly to what is loved and most precious.

Both hands are connected to a heart and a mind and a spirit,

And to a person who was blessed by the 12 noble gifts:

Strength, beauty, courage, compassion, hope, joy, talent, imagination, reverence, wisdom, love, faith.

You are connected to a miracle by your right and by your left hand.

And you are a part of that miracle.

May these next 12 days be a time for you of you a deeper realization of that miracle.

Give yourself and those you love the greatest gift: A life lived with a knowing of the gifts of your birth and of every birth.

May it be so, Shalom, Salaam, Amen,