

HOUSES OF HEAVEN  
First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis  
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Many people will say "happy holidays" or "merry Christmas" this month. It is a nice sentiment, but it raises the question, 'what is the source of happiness?' Many of us place decorations in our homes this season. But is it possible to bring the spirit of Christmas into our homes through decorations and gifts, songs and parties? In Buddhism there are certain mind-states that the Buddhists call 'brhamaviharas' or 'the houses of heaven'. What I say today is that if we build these houses in our hearts and minds then heaven will dwell there, the spirit of goodness will live in us. Then our bodies, our lives, our homes, and offices, will also become the abodes of heaven. This is ultimately the purpose of religion, of this church, and of this worship service today: to help each of us embody the spirit of ultimate peace, goodness, justice and compassion, joy and peace.

Speaking of Peace reminds me of Buddhism. The pinnacle of Buddhism is the Buddha, the enlightened one. The goal of that religion is thus to become a Buddha. At the same time they seek this goal Buddhists are also aware of the obvious realization that it is difficult, and thus extremely rare, to reach that pinnacle. They know that enlightenment is not an automatic result of meditation. No matter how peaceful and centered you feel in meditation that grumpy clerk, that troublesome person in line, that irritating family member will immediately bring you back to suffering and irritation. The American Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg, wrote "You can only do the practice. You cannot make it work." It is the grace of dharma, beyond your control, that awakens perfect peace in your living.

This irony is parallel to the tension in Christian faith between the command of Jesus to "be perfect as your father in heaven" and Paul recalling the words of a psalm "There is no one righteous, not even one." The goal for the Christian is union with God. If we are at peace with God then we can allow ourselves to fall short of perfection, and yet keep trying to reach it. Knowing we are at peace we can follow the path, and rely on grace to get us to its end.

To put it another way, I came across a blog the other day by someone who was reflecting on how Christmas time was not happy for her last year. Getting out her decorations this year, she remembered putting them away and feeling that the season had been busy, but not happy. She wrote, "Here's the deal. I have a lot of excellent history with Christmas, and I don't want the two of us to break up. That's why we're in couples' therapy right now, Christmas and I, and here's what I'm learning: [no one is perfect, thus] A person ought to pick the things she or he enjoys the most and then focus on those."

So, on what do we focus? Now many of you may know that this is the first Sunday of Advent in the Christian calendar. The idea of advent is to hold up the spiritual truths we should focus on during this month. The order and names of these vary across Christendom. What I choose is to focus on Hope, Joy,

Love and Peace. What is more, I tie these to the Buddhist Brahmaviharas. Compassion (karuna), Sympathetic Joy (mudita), Loving-kindness (metta), and Equanimity (upekkha). Thus, next week the Choir will sing Jewish songs of love and I will talk about how Love moves us. The week after we have two different services on Sunday, one is a set of lessons and carols about Universalist Hope and the Children will present a pageant full of hope. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> I will give a sermon about Joy and then that is followed by the peace, hope love and joy of Christmas eve.

Today we focus on Peace, spiritual peace, equanimity, because it is the foundation of all the others. When we feel at peace we are more open. Not threatened we can feel joy or affirmation rise in our hearts, when we are at peace there is more room in our minds for better things. The foundation of love, and empathy in joys and sorrows is equanimity, an equal spiritual response both to the pleasant and unpleasant in life. When we are able to accept our selves and others and the vicissitudes of life for good and ill, then we are free. Not pushed and pulled by desire and rejection we can claim the fullness of living; not judging others we have more compassion and can find love and joy in each relationship.

Imagine you hear some very bad news, the phone rings late at night and there has been an accident. Immediately your heart pounds, your breath tightens, muscles tense, your face frowns. Or, imagine you hear some good news. Your heart jumps, your muscles relax or move in pleasing ways, your face smiles. In both cases, your thoughts are turn from deep-peace and you lose your center. If you see something disgusting, or you think of something wonderful or see your favorite, delectable treat, in all these you can lose your anchor, your center, inwardly rushing toward or fleeing from what you have encountered. All this describes our ordinary mode of pre-programmed, automated, conditioned, and contingent living. Some people are so addicted to these feelings they seek them out. It is called “drama”, to feel slights and insults and raise a stink about it, or get really excited about some possibility and stir things up.

But in all places people have noticed a state of mind that is untroubled and unruffled by these conditioned states. For the ancient Greek Epicureans, their word for this state was not equanimity but *ataraxia*. It was synonymous with the only true happiness possible for a person. It signifies the state of robust tranquility that derives from eschewing faith in an afterlife, not fearing the gods because they are distant and unconcerned with us, avoiding politics and vexatious people, surrounding oneself with trustworthy and affectionate friends and, most importantly, being an affectionate, virtuous person, worthy of trust.

The Stoics, another set of ancient philosophers, decided that it was not tranquil emotions that were ideal but a state of dispassionate awareness, free from any emotional response. They called this *apatheia*, from which comes our word ‘apathy’. But equanimity, deep peace, is not this. It is not cool and distant, not cool, but radiantly warm, engaged and open-hearted.

It is, in Christian language, a reflection of the divine nature. In Buddhism, Sufism, and Kabbalah, equanimity appears as a precursor to and expression of enlightenment or spiritual attainment. It is seen as as a wonderful, and very necessary, quality of mind and heart. A mind which is built of equanimity is a spacious home. This graciously open mind-heart leaves room for all the difficulties and the attractions of life, for everything wanted and unwanted. Able to accept loss and gain, praise and blame, and success

and failure, Equanimity to regard every sentient being as equal. It is a clear-evenness of mind, unshakeable freedom; a state of inner poise that cannot be upset by gain and loss, honor and dishonor, praise and blame, pleasure and pain and instead is home to a greater power and presence, Dharma or God.

This is the abode of the supreme, or heaven. Within the warmth of this vast inner space, equanimity permits us to live freely, allowing everything to have its place. Gautama Buddha described a mind filled with equanimity as “abundant, exalted, and immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will.”

If you have felt this quality of mind you may have wanted it to remain forever. However, there are many things that draw us away. The biggest cause of suffering, beyond the push and pull of pleasure and pain, is being hit by missed expectations.

The Christmas season triggers unrealistic expectations. We all know this is true, but somehow in our heart of hearts we still hope the dinner won't burn, the tree will stay ever fresh, the money won't run out, the butterflake rolls will rise, the gifts will be perfect, and no one in the family will fight. We hope for perfection, but that is a lot to ask of a holiday, or of each other.

I once heard of a middle aged couple who lived near a naval base. They decided to “adopt” two naval recruits who had to remain on base during the holidays and to make their home the perfect. Everything was going great until just a short while before they were to arrive; smoke began to fill the house. It turns out that the home-made rolls, which were on the top shelf, had been completely charred. When the young men arrived the couple apologized for the terrible smell and the ruined food. But the young men were completely happy. They just tore the black tops off the rolls and devoured them with lots of butter. They enjoyed the whole meal saying how great it was to have “real food!” They each told stories of something that burned when they were at home, and when they called their own families on the phone they were full of smiles talking about the wonderful hospitality. Their hearts were open to accept the rough edges as well as the good cooking and a happy peace was added to their lives.

Most suffering comes from missed expectations. I love the Grandma in our reading. Whatever had changed in her life, she no longer tried to control things, she no longer said “there should never be toothpaste on pretty towels, but was content, patient, willing to just to Let things be as they are in all their complexity.

You do not have the power to control anything but your own actions. We cannot even control our emotions or thoughts, only what we do in response to them. It's helpful during this season to watch for those little attempts to control, the imperative thought that, “*It's got go this way*” or “*It must be just like that.*” Step back from that feeling and thought. It is important to notice the compelling energy as unpleasant as it is. Is it sparking anger, or fear? Do you find in yourself a deep desire or aversion that is obscuring how you see things? If the experience is riddled with self-interest, you will feel off-balance. Equanimity allows us to abide beyond our preferences. When we abide beyond our preferences, desires and fears, and rest in equanimity, then we stop feeling selfish and alienated. We can be at peace with the world and with ourselves. Our minds become an abode of heaven.

Another good practice is to find time to be still: to sit by a tree and be quiet. It is why we take time each Sunday to be quiet with each other, all of use opening as individuals to the source of wholeness, the ground of all that is. The woman who joked of being “in couple’s therapy” with Christmas realized that her unhappiness last year came in part from never having been still. This year she took time to just sit quietly and enjoy her tree in all its imperfection.

Learning to plan, and to simplify, and to say ‘no’ to the myriad activities are also ways of developing peace in this busy season. But the most important is to find that center line, so that if your heart is breaking from sorrow or loneliness you can hold on to that line of peace that steadies you and carries you through. If you are being lifted by joy, always recall the peace that is its foundation, so that when it fades you are not dropped, but you find yourself connected to solid ground. You may call it ‘heaven’ or “Earth” you may speak of “God’s presence” or “The solid path of the Dharma”. There are so many names for the divine quality that dwells in equanimity, but ultimately it is one and indivisible.

There is a story I have long loved about living in a state of equanimity. The Zen Master Hakuin lived in a monastery near a village. A young woman in the village became pregnant. At first she told her parents she did not know how it happened. They kept pressing her about who else was responsible. She did not want to see her lover beaten in the streets and could not name anyone in the village who could easily defend themselves from any accusation, so she spoke the only other name she knew, Hakuin, “Hakuin, did it!” Of course her parents were ready to blame anyone so they stormed to the monastery and said “You have dishonored this fine young woman, and our whole family and our whole village!” His only response was “Is that so?” He said it in a way that was both accepting and challenging. They chose to hear the acceptance. Within a week the monks called a meeting with their master and told him he could not lead the monastery any more, he had broken his vows and was a disgrace. He only responded “Is that so?” When he had lived alone in a hermitage for a few months the baby was born and the parents brought the child saying, “You are now this child’s father and you must raise him.” “Is that so?” He said. Every day he cared for the child and carried him into town to beg for milk and food, clothing and diapers. Some glared, but most were willing to help and the child thrived. Finally the girl could stand it no longer, being divided from her child and lover. She revealed that it was Takahashi, the fishmonger’s son, who was her lover and so they forced a marriage and then went to fetch the child. When they arrived Hakuin said, “Look, my son has learned to sit by himself.” They responded, “You know perfectly well the child is not yours. He will now be raised by his real parents, happy forever.” Hakuin responded, “Is that so?”

Hakuin does not merely accept everything. His calm response is also an indictment of those who are swayed by drama without being caught up in it. So I hope you will be in this month like this, even if imperfectly: May you create room in your mind for all the difficulties and attractions of life, for everything wanted and unwanted. Within the warmth of this vast inner space, may equanimity permit you to live freely, allowing everything to have its place. Through all things may the peace that passes understanding abide within you and all you know.