

Seasonal self-care

Service for Sunday 18th December

“This is the season when people of all faiths and cultures are pushing back against the planetary darkness. We string bulbs, ignite bonfires, and light candles. And we sing.”

Good morning, everyone. It is an honour as always to be here with you. If you are new around here my name is Poppy and I am leading our worship today.

Let me extend an extra warm welcome to each of you on this cold December morning whether you are joining us in church via Zoom or are here in person. I also would like to remind you, - that you - yes *you* - are an essential part of our worship today - just as you are.

I will begin today’s service with our Unitarian custom of lighting our chalice. The chalice and its flame are a symbol of our free religious faith. I invite you to light a candle at home if you wish to do so and are able to.

**We meet for worship in a world of wonder and plenty,
But a world long-shadowed
By the folly and wickedness of our kind.
May our worship and our prayer not forget the shadow,
But by the power of the Spirit
Rise above it to bring peace, hope and light
to our lives and the world.**

Words by Unitarian Cliff Reed.

The opening quote this morning was from Jewish American Writer Anita Diamant. I chose it as I had recently been thinking about how the importance of light features in many December-based festivals and spiritual stories.

On Thursday 8th Buddhists celebrated **Bodhi Day** – the day when the Buddha gained enlightenment. Many Buddhists will have decorated their home with lights and lit candles to represent enlightenment to celebrate.

In the Northern Hemisphere Midwinter arrives on Wednesday 21st with the Pagan festival of **Yule** and the Winter Solstice - the shortest day or longest night of the year. Midwinter reminds us of the incredible cycle of nature and rebirth as the Sun (our source of heat and light) starts to return. Many people still welcome back the sun with a fire or Yule Log burning ritual – not of the chocolate sponge variety but a log traditionally from an evergreen conifer (i.e., pine, fir, cedar, juniper or spruce).

The eight-day Jewish celebration of **Hannukah**, also known as the **Festival of Lights** starts today and commemorates the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem as well as the miracle which saw a day's worth of oil keep the temple lamp lit for eight days.

Then there is December 25th - **Christmas Day** - the time many Christians celebrate the virgin birth of Jesus – a birth wise men were led to by the light of a star.

As you can see this time of year really is a celebration of light and miracles.

Let us now sing of this season with our first hymn.

Hymn no.1 - Purple (94) Let us welcome Channukah

**Let us welcome Yuletide
in this northern clime;
when in deep December
once again it's time
for us to make merry
and the long nights spurn,
bid the short days lengthen
and the sun return.**

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Peace on earth, goodwill everyone, Alleluia!

**Let us welcome Christmas
when an infant smiles
and from manger cradle
gently reconciles
all those hearts are broken,
or who live with pain,
so that every person
may be whole again.**

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Peace on earth, goodwill everyone, Alleluia!

**At this festive season
let us all rejoice,**

**send the world a message
with a common voice.
Let our festive greeting
be that wars shall cease
and that all earth's people
learn to live in peace.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
*Peace on earth, goodwill everyone, Alleluia!***

Andrew McKean Hill b. 1942

As I mentioned earlier, the chalice and its flame are symbols of our free religious faith. It is a beacon of light – bringing people who value truth, love and free thought together. It brings us together whether we are in the church in Plymouth or online in another county or country potentially! Unitarians and Universal Unitarians all around the world will be lighting chalices and candles today.

No matter what season, light is one of the most fundamentally positively regarded universal and spiritual symbols. Darkness however gets a bit of a bad rap but it shouldn't. The light needs the darkness - without the light there is no dark and so without the darkness there would be no light.

Kate will now share Stephanie Noble's poem *Winter Solstice too* where Stephanie considers the gift of Midwinter. Stephanie is a Buddhist teacher as well as a published poet.

Winter Solstice Too

Dear darkness, what am I to do with you?
Burrow under the eiderdown, close my eyes and dream?
Mmm, how sweet, how soft, how succulent, and yet

I toss off the covers, wishing (on a bright star) to share
this vast indigo expanse, to gather in festivity, to hear
oft-told tales from long-loved lips, to mingle merrily.

Some nights, yes, I settle: a bear in my winter cave.
But other evenings like a dormant rose, I tend my roots
so they may deepen and hold me true for flowering.

Here, candles cast a mellow glow, melting the dark beyond.
We, the long-intertwined vines of family born and family made
twinkle the night with laughter as we sip and sup and sing.

- *Stephanie Noble 2010*

The spiritual holidays of Bodhi Day, Yule, Hannukah and Christmas all have miracles and light at the heart of them. The retelling and honouring of them help sustain, heal and inspire us spiritually.

Today I want to invite you to join me in recognising and honouring another spiritual wonder – the miracle of you and the divine light within you.

Unitarians are part of a tradition which recognises the importance of personal religious experience. A tradition which recognises that our spirituality is a living flame, something to be lit, and re-lit, by every person. As our name suggests there is a focus on unity whereby historically God or the divine is seen within ourselves and nature.

We may not believe literally in the miracles retold at this time of year but the majority of us certainly recognise the timeless truths expressed by the stories.

Many of us may suspend our disbelief to enter into the festive spirit. For example, we see the story of the Nativity as a message of divine love for a world that needs it and the birth of Jesus as a symbol of the divinity inherent in every human birth.

The stories and the natural cycle of the seasons remind us of the miracle of our life – this life where we live on a floating planet which circles around a ball of fire alongside a natural satellite mass that causes the tides.

How about we sing about this miraculous life with our second hymn?

Hymn no. 2 – Green (148) The Miracle

**O what a piece of work are we,
How marvellously wrought;
The quick contrivance of the hand,
The wonder of our thought.**

**Why need to look for miracles
Outside of nature's law?
Humanity we wonder at
With every breath we draw!**

**But give us room to move and grow,
But give our spirit play.
And we can make a world of light
Out of the common clay.**

Malvina Reynolds. Copyright 1971.

Let us pray:

**God of many Names and none,
Let us recognise the light within and around us,
May we see you in the shadows and dark as well as the brightness.
Let us notice the holy in the quiet places between our breaths,
May we find you in the noise and joy of celebration,
In the cries of sadness,
And in the stillness of a moment.
This holiday season let us take time to be with ourselves and others,
Not with expectations of gifts,
but in a way that connects and soothes our spiritual selves.
May we have patience as the calendar races towards the year's end,
And compassion for those around us, knowing the stress that the season can
bring.
In moments where we are tired, scared or angry,
help us remember to simply return to our breath.
By focusing on our breath, we reconnect with our inner light
And are reunited with the sacred dwelling in each of us.
So may be it.**

**Prayer amended from one on the website of the Unitarian Universalist
Fellowship of Huntington (West Virginia), author unknown.**

Today's address focuses on seasonal self-care and will be sandwiched between a hymn.

December is one of the busiest times of year for many of us, making it easy for our light to fade. I believe that self-care is part of the essential fuel that keeps your light shining brightly.

We will spend time nourishing our spiritual self here today whilst reflecting on how we can continue to give our spiritual selves the gift of self-care this December.

Winter sees our world go into hibernation mode; for many animals it is a treasured retreat where they slow down to save energy during the cold dark months. Plants and flowers return to the earth to be born again in the spring. It is natural for us as part of nature to want to do this too.

We naturally rest during the dark hours of the day and during the darker months our bodies, mind and spirit are called to slow down.

There is great beauty in stillness and darkness. Taking time to be still during the darker mornings and nights helps define the light around and within us.

Over the next few weeks, I urge you to take time to slow down, to reflect and connect with something bigger than yourself – this may be the Universe, Nature, God or the Gods or Goddesses of your understanding.

The time devoted to this doesn't have to be long – it can be a few minutes; it can be an hour but the key is to take the time.

To make this connection you may decide to attend a religious service, pray, meditate, paint, walk in nature, decorate your home for the season, listen to music – there are so many possibilities. Perhaps you have something you already do at this time of year which achieves this. I will just share a couple of mine-

Going to carol services is a big one for me – since last Sunday I have been to two and have two lined up for later today. Singing carols lifts my mood in a way I cannot put into words. My light is beaming after a good sing-song.

I also find the scents of the season really help me stay mindful. When smelling cinnamon before adding it to my porridge I am taken out of myself. Similarly, having a scented candle or wax melt provides me with light and comfort. Frankincense is for perhaps obvious reasons a popular choice at this time of year but did you know it is noted for bringing feelings of peace and relaxation?

You may have found your own spiritual lifts came to mind for this time of year just then – keep them close by as there will be time to share later. Let us now stoke our spiritual fires again with a good sing-song.

Our third song today is entitled *Midwinter*, which is no. 278 in the Green hymn book. You may know it more familiarly as I do when performed by Nat King Cole but entitled *Deck the Halls*. We only have the first two verses in this video version rather than all three you find in the hymn book.

Hymn no. 3 – Green (278) *Midwinter/Deck the Halls* (1 min.17)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97TYw8T0AeY>

**Deck the halls with boughs of holly,
Fa la la la la, La la la la
'Tis the season to be jolly,
Fa la la la la, La la la la,
Don we now our gay apparel,
Fa la la, Fa la la, La la la
Troll the ancient Yuletide carol;
Fa la la la la, La la la la.**

**See the blazing yule before us,
Fa la la la la, La la la la,
Strike the harp and join the chorus,
Fa la la la la, La la la la.
Follow me in merry measure,
Fa la la, Fa la la La la la,
While I tell of Yuletide treasure,
Fa la la la la, La la la la.**

Welsh Traditional

Another key way you can show spiritual self-care is by spending quality time with those with whom you care about. This can be friends, family, significant others, colleagues, animals or the natural world. Walks and food with loved ones features heavily in my spiritual self-care plan for the holiday season.

You may not have time to see everyone you'd like to during December but you can make plans to arrange an activity to enjoy together after the busy festive period – stretch it out to January and February.

It might even be for your spiritual self-care that the key is spending quality time with yourself by embracing solitude during key days. Like Stephanie Noble's poem you may be like a bear and settle in your cave. If you are happier spending time at home alone, reading or watching Christmas specials then embrace and enjoy – I encourage you to be where the love is. Self-care is not selfish – it is showing yourself love and compassion which is essential.

Another powerful way to refresh your spiritual light is appreciation through gratitude and giving back. Now I understand this may not be so straightforward for some of us.

For all of us, good and bad things will have happened throughout the year and they as part of life will continue to happen during the holiday period. You may not be in the jolly festive mood because of this – you may not be liking the holidays, the dark or the cold or you are currently struggling with something with has drained all of your

energy and light. By all means recognise how you are but I urge you to try to do this if it is at all available for you to do so.

In appreciating what we have and by sharing with others we can brighten our spirit and pass on the fuel to light other people's lamps. It isn't just me saying it – self-care and helping others has been scientifically proven through various studies to improve health and happiness! Sharing our light can banish feelings of loneliness and isolation. If you know someone who is struggling at the moment – perhaps take some time to drop them a message.

Everyone can show appreciation, be grateful and give back in a way that suits them and their circumstances – it doesn't have to be costly in time, energy or money but it can make a real difference.

An encouraging word, smile or compliment costs nothing but can bring and spread so much joy. Being present with someone who is experiencing difficulty can mean more than any material present. You can donate time, money or things to a local charity, cause or person you care deeply about. This includes you! Treat yourself – perhaps indulge in that festive overpriced beverage when next in town or get a new collection of poems from the bookshop or library.

Let us put this into practice right now by coming together and sharing.

I have brought with me the gift of light, well, of potential light in the form of tealights – these are ecological soy-based and the casing is made from recycled plastic and can be re-recycled – those of you in church are welcome to take one home to use over the holidays as you wish or pass it on to someone else to have light. Those of you online – I am sorry but I am unable to pass these through to you BUT I will send you links for virtual lit-candles for internet-linked screen devices and I will do that in a second. Alternatively, everyone - there are even apps where you can put a virtual candle on your phone or tablet. Good if you don't have a candle or lighting implement to hand or simply don't wish to have a naked flame.

In the opening quote Anita Diamant said we hang lights, light fires and candles and sing whereas Stephanie Noble in the poem talks of sharing stories, enjoying laughter in the company of family and friends. How about you?

Those of you joining us online. I invite you to share any ideas you have in the chat for practicing appreciation through gratitude, giving back and your spiritual connection go-tos.

If you are in the church, please do now come up to the lectern to share examples of giving back or ideas you have for practicing appreciation through gratitude, and your spiritual go-tos for this season. Your sharing may inspire someone to try it for themselves.

CHAT READING.

Thank you all for sharing <3

I will now read a piece on candles at Christmas by theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman from *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*:

**I will light candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present.
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that burn all year long.**

As mentioned earlier, our self-care regime needs periods of slowing down to reconnect. I would now like to share with you a guided meditation which provides us with an opportunity to do just that right now.

This meditation is adapted from Alison Davies' book *The Self-Care Year* and is called *Put Yourself in a Snowy Wonderland*.

Before we begin let's get comfy – you might like to have a stretch before setting down into a comfortable position. However, you like, feet on floor, on the couch – you do you.

- Okay – draw your attention to your body, feel where you connect to the ground however you are sat – feel the contact you have with the earth.
- Now - focus on your breathing. Take a long, slow breath in through your nose, then exhale slowly and fully through your mouth. Repeat this three times.
- If you wish you can close your eyes and keep breathing at a relaxed pace. Long, slow breaths.
- Picture a landscape in your mind. It can be whatever you choose it to be, so hills and valleys, a meadow or even a cityscape.
- Now within that landscape imagine that it's starting to snow.
- This snow is gentle with tiny, brittle flakes softly covering everything.
- See how the landscapes starts to change.

- The snow starts to fall heavier – this snow has more substance. The flakes become thicker and larger, as they settle upon the ground.
- Watch as the landscape continues to transform as the snow falls.
- Eventually the scene is covered in a thick blanket of snow. The sky is white, and everywhere you look you see dazzling brilliance.
- Breathe in the space. Breathe in the white, the light. Breathe in the brightness. The scene is relaxing and has a healing quality. You feel a sense of peace.
- Gently bring your mind back to your breathing.
- Now draw your attention to your breath as it comes in through your nose and is exhaled fully through your mouth.
- When you feel ready if you have your eyes closed, open them and breathe naturally.

Hopefully you found something of value, whether from observing your breath or the visualisation. You may like to return to this whenever you need to clear your mind, reconnect or ground yourself this winter.

Instead of a snowy wonderland you could focus on a flame – a real one, one in your mind or a digital one. Rather than a landscape being transformed by snow you can imagine the light filling you from within with sensations of warmth, joy and peace.

There will be a short period of silence for personal reflection in a moment. The silence will be followed by some music of about a minute and a half in length. This piece came to mind after I first read the Snowy Wonderland meditation.

But first, a blessing:

Spirit of Life, encourage us to love ourselves and

Celebrate in the divine miracles of Christmas, Hannukah and Yule.

May the blessing of peace rest upon us,

And all troubled hearts at this time.

May gratitude and appreciation fill us

And bring joy to those we hold dear.

May we have a sanctuary,

A place to slow down, recharge and reconnect.

For now, and into the New Year.

So may it be.

Silence for 45-60 seconds then...

Music to sooth the Soul

Danny Elfman's *The Ice Dance* (1 min: 33)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QhOt7zbbOY> harp arrangement by Elena Cacciagrano

That harp arrangement of Danny Elfman's *The Ice Dance* was by Elena Cacciagrano. It is from Tim Burton's film *Edward Scissorhands* in case you thought you recognised it but couldn't recall where from.

It is coming to the end of our time together in worship. Thank you for taking time for some spiritual self-care today. I hope you have enjoyed listening, singing, sharing and being in each other's company.

No matter how busy you get over the next few weeks, or what or who you believe in – please take some time to show the miracle of you and the festivals of the season some love. I have a heart to hang on our tree to remind us of this over the coming days, weeks and years.

Be your best friend, hibernate, reconnect with others and the universe in a way that nourishes your spirit and fuels your divine light so you and those you come into contact with continue to shine. I wish you a merry and bright holiday season.

Our closing video will be played in a minute, after the video we will have our notices and I invite those of you here to join in the hall for hot beverages and treats. Those of you joining on Zoom may wish to stay online and chat.

The video is one I was introduced to last week. It features artwork by William Kurelek, a Ukranian-Canadian writer and artist who converted to Catholicism a few weeks before his 30th birthday.

The art is from his 1973 book entitled *A Northern Nativity* telling the story of how a young boy dreams of what the nativity would have been like at that time.

The scenes are of simple rustic settings and they reminded me of how the divine, it's light and miracles are found in the everyday.

Namaste – the divine in me sees the sacred in you.

Extinguish chalice

Closing video =

A Northern Nativity to *In the Bleak Midwinter* (4 min: 36)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKR_mPYH0zQ