

Reflections & REminders
re: the Religious Exploration Program
at First Parish of Sudbury UU
week of Sunday, December 16, 2007

A note from Tracy Duncan, Direction of Religious Education:

I wish you blessings this holiday season! I hope you are all finding some breathing space amidst what is often a crazy time of year. Even 5 minutes a day to do nothing but look out at the ice and snow, or watch the birds at the feeder can help restore some sanity. The 7th and 8th graders in Breakfast Club just learned some basic Buddhist meditation.

Throughout this RE newsletter you'll periodically see a little prompt to
E-mail me to share!



Please do—I don't have a monopoly on good ideas—we are stronger together, you know. We can publish your name with your ideas, or you may share anonymously.

So how do you keep your center when life gets crazy?

In faith, Tracy



E-mail me to share!



"Beyond Sunday"--ways to participate this month

The theme of Revels this past week was "Wake Up!" The old earth-based traditions of dancing, stomping and clacking sticks are meant to awaken the sleeping earth so spring will come again. The ancients understood that the earth needs us just as we need the earth. Nowadays we know that spring will come again, whether we stomp it awake or not. What we need to do is to wake up ourselves—awaken to our connection with the earth and how we can express that connection in meaningful ways. Especially with children I have always found empowerment to be more potent than fear or focusing on what's wrong. We all are pretty aware of what's wrong—let's focus on what we can do to make it right!

We help what we love. Therefore, it's of paramount importance to nurture a love of Nature and to *experience* our connections with it. Anything you do, and do with the children in your life, to enhance that connection will foster deeper commitment to care. It's also interesting wonderful that the more time I spend paying attention to nature, the more I receive in peacefulness, wordless wonder and a deeper understanding of myself. Time with Nature is time well spent! Nature is not a luxury, but a necessity.

(REad on...)



What do you like to do to foster your friendship with Nature?



E-mail me to share!

Here are some of the things I do:

- Put my office desk in front of a window that looks out on the woods. The ambiance is instantly more peaceful. When I need a little break, I look up and see how little things have changed—the ice melting off the branches, new squirrel tracks, leaves recently golden are now brown. This little practice heightens my alertness when I set back to work. ☺
- Feed the birds (and keep binoculars by the window). I love taking a few moments to watch the birds—what species come in what order (and how pushy the blue jays are at any time), how each bird flies, how they eat (who taps the sunflower seed against a branch to open it, and who can just do it with their beak?).
- Walk or jog every morning past a nearby field and pond. I notice the sky, the sunrise, the little changes in the plant life along the roadside, the temperature and humidity of the air, and now, ice patterns. Along the way back I pick up little bits of trash.
- Keep houseplants. I am grateful for their beauty and for how they freshen the indoor air.

REquest

Make a Joyful Noise! Tracy is looking for 13 volunteers of all ages to create brief, easy sound effects for a reading at the service on December 23. The only requirement is the ability to come in on cue and to keep quiet for the rest of the reading. **E-mail or call Tracy at First Parish** if you would like to be part of the participatory reading. Thanks!



REminders:

- Keep inviting guests to your table. Again, we help what we care for. If you make a new friend, you will care more about his/her needs. Who is at your table?



E-mail me to share!

- We'll hold regular RE groups this week. Please read on to "Taking RE Home" to learn more about this week's curricular theme and the Wondering Questions for the week.
- Due to the proximity of Christmas Eve and Sunday this year, the 10:00 a.m. service on December 23 will be our Family Christmas service. The 5:00 p.m. Christmas Eve service will return next year, when the two days are farther apart. However, ALL ages are warmly invited to the 7:00 p.m. Christmas Eve service. And everyone is also welcome at the 10:00 a.m. Christmas morning service, an informal service held by the fireplace in the Brackett Room. Cozy. Cheery. Wonderful.



Register!!! It is important that we have current contact and medical information on all the children in our program. If you received a form in the mail, fill it out and mail it back (and then we won't keep bugging you about it. ☺)

Taking R.E. Home—Two Unitarian Charles' Who Influenced Christmas

The Flames Group (ages 4-8) will hear about Rev. **Charles Follen**, who is credited with popularizing the Christmas tree in the United States. The children will hear the story largely from the viewpoint of Rev. Follen's five-year-old son, Charley. They will hear of the wonder of the Christmas tree and of how the antislavery work of Rev. Follen got him into trouble with Harvard University, where he was the first German professor. The message they will receive is that sometimes it takes courage to hold onto your beliefs in justice.

They will also hear mention of Rev. Follen's friend, Harriet Martineau, the journalist who wrote about that Christmas tree for an American magazine, thus popularizing the idea. What is left out of the story for the children will be interesting to teens and adults. Harriet Martineau was at the Follen's house at that time, and wrote that article, for a specific reason. You see, Charles Follen was on the verge of losing his job at Harvard for his abolitionist views, which were not yet popular in the 1830s and 1840s, even in liberal Boston. Harriet had made her mark and fortune in England as a social reform author, and had come to America to assess its reform needs and movements. Needless to say, she was shocked that the US condoned slavery and was firmly in the abolitionist camp. While, unlike Follen, she had no job or livelihood to lose (being freelance and independently wealthy from her books), if she wrote or spoke out against slavery, she risked alienation by Americans whom she wished to interview for her new book; her project could fail completely.

So she had come, at Follen's request, at Christmastime, to strategize. Harriet Martineau wrote the Christmas tree article in large part to show a lighter side of Follen. He was known as a fiery preacher and lecturer, and back in his native Germany, young Karl (his given name) had been pursued for arrest for allegedly belonging to a violent political movement that assassinated an official. (Although admitting he was part of the political group, he denied taking part in any violent act.) Harriet Martineau wanted to show the loving, paternal side of Charles Follen, who enjoyed entertaining and delighting children. To some extent, she succeeded. People today remember that Follen brought us the Christmas Tree and that he began German language studies and brought the sport of gymnastics in America.

Neither Follen nor Martineau relented in their abolitionist views or work. Harriet went on to write her social critique of America, which was a success in the English press. Harvard did indeed fire Follen, and he failed to secure a call at a prominent church because of his views. Instead he became a private tutor for a wealthy family in New York. But a new Unitarian congregation in the town of Lexington, Massachusetts, heard about the brilliant, passionate abolitionist preacher who would not back down on his beliefs, and called him to minister to the new church they were building. On the way from New York back to Massachusetts, the ferry Follen was on caught fire and sank, and he died before ever reaching his new congregation.

Well, the Follen Community Church is still active and vibrant today in neighboring Lexington, and they sell Christmas trees as a fundraiser each year in honor of Charles Follen's legacy. And of course, Follen's abolitionist cause ultimately won; he was simply ahead of his time. So if you have a Christmas tree in your home, remember Charles Follen and his courage of conviction...and his love of delighting children.

Please share the following wondering questions with your child this week:

Wondering Questions:

- I wonder what part/s of the story you liked.
- Rev. Follen brought a tradition—something his family did every year—to America. I wonder if your family has traditions from another country.
- I wonder how the slaves felt knowing that someone out there was working for their freedom.
- I wonder if there are people we need to be working to help?
- I wonder what Unitarian Universalist promises you recognize in the story?
- I wonder what you wonder about.

The Mystery Group (ages 8-12) will hear about **Charles Dickens**. A master storyteller, Dickens used his creative gifts and the lessons of his poverty-stricken childhood for social transformation. Whenever I read Dickens' biography, I have to wonder whether he would have done what he did had not his circumstances been so unique. He was born to a middle-class family who had the means to send the voracious reader and enthusiastic learner to school. Family fortunes took a turn for the worse, and, with his father in debtor's prison, young Charles was forced to leave school and go to work in a shoe-polish factory where he experienced first-hand the misery and cruelty of child labor. His eyes were also opened to the plight of children born into poverty who would never have the opportunity for a better life, for they would never get an education.

Luck intervened and the elder Dickens inherited enough money to be released from prison and to send Charles back to school. But it didn't last long; after two years Charles was again forced back to work, but this time was old enough and educated enough to secure a job as a law clerk and then as a newspaper reporter. He spent his spare time in the library of the British Museum, reading all he could. And of course, he went on to publish stories, books and plays, among them *A Christmas Carol*. Most of Dickens' writing illuminated the plight of the poor, especially poor children, and led to much-needed reforms in child labor laws and in work and housing for the poor.

Charles joined the Unitarian Church as a young adult because they worked for justice for all people. The Unitarian belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people was one Dickens embraced—Ebenezer Scrooge is arguably the most well-known characterization of “the gospel of the second chance” in all of English literature. Throughout his adult life, Dickens worked through his writing and philanthropy to ensure health care, poverty and housing reforms. He is buried in Westminster Cathedral, in the poet's corner—the highest honor an English author can receive.

Please share the following wondering questions with your family this week:

Wondering Questions:

- **I wonder what part/s of the story you liked.**
- **I wonder what UU promises you see in the story.**
- **I wonder why society made it so hard to be poor.**
- **It seemed like poor people were punished for being poor (being sent to debtor's prison and poor children being forced to work and not go to school). I wonder if people today are still punished for being poor.**
- **I wonder what would have happened to Charles if his family had never become poor.**
- **I wonder what would have happened to Charles if his family had always been poor and he had never had any chance to go to school.**
- **Charles used his writing and theater talents to help people in need. I wonder if you have talents you would like to use to help other people?**
- **Charles Dickens said he became a Unitarian because Unitarians were trying to make the world a better place and cared about all people. I wonder what things you like about being Unitarian Universalist.**
- **I wonder what you wonder about.**

Both Unitarian Charles' devoted their lives to social justice. We remember them at Christmastime, and in doing so, I hope their stories inspire you and refresh your spirit during this season when we remember the birth of a great teacher of radical love and justice who was born into abject poverty.

In faith, Tracy