

Hannah Carey
Tapestry UU Congregation
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Winter Holiday Lessons

When I was asked to share for this service, I tried to consider the opportunity carefully instead of launching headlong into it. That's a new thing I'm trying. I asked my husband, Noah, "Can you think of a compelling reason why I shouldn't say yes?" He paused. "You have a...love/hate relationship with Christmas," he said, finally. I replied gleefully, "Oh, I hate Christmas!"

And here we are. I want to start by saying that I was a Christian as a child and teenager, so when I think of winter holidays past, most of my experiences were Christmas-related. As I got older, I expanded my friend group and began attending one friend's Hannukah celebrations, as well as an annual joint holiday venture called "Hanu-Yule-Istmas, which was epic. But most of my stories today are about Christmas. Now, let's find some lessons.

My first lesson is love. For me, Christmas comes with a lot of baggage. Like I said, I was raised Christian. The churches I attended talked about God's love, but it was mixed in with a lot of other things...often with an emphasis on the sinfulness and unworthiness of humans. We sang hymns that used words like "vile" and "wretch" to describe humans, to contrast human failings with God's holiness. Every December, the story of Jesus' birth was also infused with these messages. I'm paraphrasing here, but the messages I remember were something like, "Isn't it amazing that Jesus was willing to humble himself so much, and be born in a barn and then die on the cross for your sins because he loves you so much, even though you're basically garbage!" It's not great.

I have moved away from Christianity for a lot of reasons, and it's hard to disentangle Christmas from Christianity. At the same time, I find a lot of secular elements of western Christmas celebrations to be...grating. For example, I dislike a lot of secular Christmas music.

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Now, this is where it gets contradictory, because, there are several old Christmas *hymns* I enjoy.

Listen to this verse from *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*, written in 1849 by Edmund Sears who was a Unitarian, by the way!

*And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing; –
Oh, rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing!*

I love a song about hope. But as a non-Christian, I don't believe that Jesus' birth and death are the source for that hope. I believe that hope for our world lies in us humans making both internal and interpersonal changes and sweeping systemic changes. So even though I appreciate the imagery and poetry of some religious Christmas music, I am, overall, ambivalent about it.

You know what I am NOT ambivalent about? The 1992 cinematic masterpiece *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, which is one of my favorite movies of all time. With all my complicated feelings, I find some Christmas themes to be comforting and meaningful, like the idea of Christmas as a reminder for humans to be extra loving toward one another through service, generosity, and kindness. *The Muppet Christmas Carol* exemplifies these themes—maybe even more than the original story by Charles Dickens. Listen to this lyric sung by Tiny Tim, who is an adorable frog Muppet:

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*Bless us all
That as we live
We always comfort and forgive
We have so much
That we can share
With those in need
We see around us everywhere
Let us always love each other
Lead us to the light
Let us hear the voice of reason
Singing in the night
Let us run from anger
And catch us when we fall
Teach us in our dreams
And please yes please
Bless us one and all.*

That sounds positively UU! So that's the first lesson: choose love, even if you have a complicated relationship with winter holidays. Love by giving generously, looking out for those who are suffering, and serving others...honestly all year, but sure—at Christmas too.

Lesson two is: less is more. Winter holidays can be overwhelming. My memories of holidays past involve so much DOING and GOING: pageants, recitals, gift exchanges, parties, etc. It's exhausting! When I was little, my maternal grandparents had a small cut-your-own

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Christmas tree farm in North Georgia. When I think of Christmas, I remember spending weekends “helping” at the Christmas tree farm. My dad would help my grandpa with the actual work. We kids would mostly play hide and seek in the Christmas trees and make crafts and hot cocoa with my grandma. It was idyllic for us kids, but I know it was a lot of work for the adults.

At that time, gatherings with my extended family were a complicated system of name exchanges and gift buying and gift opening. As we all grew, large family gatherings evolved into simpler celebrations of family time. We’re here—we’re together—that’s enough. Eventually, my grandparents stopped selling Christmas trees, and we all spent more time around Christmas relaxing. These days, during the holiday season I try to do...less. I am thoughtful about what I commit to, and try to make sure the holiday season has plenty of down time to just...BE.

I have a less-is-more approach to gift giving too. For one thing, it’s better for the environment (less stuff = less manufacturing, less shipping, and less waste!). When Noah and I exchange gifts with family and friends, we try to give “consumables” like experiences or special food items.

For me, less-is-more also looks like minimal traditions. The idea of posting carefully curated photos of holiday activities every year stresses me out. I don’t want to *perform* the holidays; I just want to enjoy them. So that’s my lesson: Less is more. Release what does not serve you. Did you do something last year (or every year for the past 10 years) and you don’t want to do it this year? That’s okay. Don’t let traditions become a burden. The only holiday tradition I consistently follow is watching *The Muppet Christmas Carol*.

My third and final lesson is about loss. Christmas makes me sad. For many adults, there’s some sadness around the holidays. A little merry melancholy. A little wistfulness for times gone by. Messaging from ads and holiday movies emphasize JOY and MERRIMENT, but nothing is

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as simple or magical as it was when we were kids. As we grow older, so do our families. Cousins and siblings move away. Family members die. The longer we live, the more people we love, hopefully. And the more people we love, the more often we will experience loss.

My grandparents sold their farm years ago, and moved to an apartment in a retirement community. Within the last 6 years, my grandfather and both of Noah's grandmothers died. Many of our Christmas decorations came from their homes, so if we choose to decorate for the holidays, we have constant visible reminders of our grandparents. We can't be expected to experience Christmas without bittersweetness.

And sometimes, it's more complicated than that. About 10 years ago, my sister died. We were both in our early 20s. All my childhood holiday memories have her in them, and almost all my holiday memories as an adult have been marked by her absence. Sometimes I am surprised by the intensity of my grief at this time of year. Holiday commercials featuring happy families reuniting and hugging feel like a personal attack.

So here's my third holiday lesson: make space for the loss. Invite your grief to the gift exchange. You should know that your grief will bring a crappy gift. Mine usually brings general crankiness and unexpected crying.

One of my favorite podcasts is called *Terrible, Thanks for Asking*. Guests come on the show and speak candidly about difficult things they have experienced or are experiencing. The podcast has a winter tradition of creating an episode where people send in stories about their complicated relationships with winter holidays. They call the episode, "Happy-ish Holidays." *That* is what I aim for these days, and I invite you to try it: have the days you have. Feel your feelings. Don't punish yourself for not feeling festive enough. New traditions can sit alongside

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the familiar sadness. Take care of yourselves. Have Happy-ish Holidays, dear ones. And if you haven't seen it, please watch *The Muppet Christmas Carol*.