

Minister's Musings for December 2011

I used to love Christmas trees. I still do, but things are different now.

Over the years I have collected an array of tree ornaments that remind me of people or events. Some ornaments are lovely, some funny. Some are old – from my parents, my childhood. Very few are new, though, because our family no longer puts up a Christmas tree.

I tell you this not to advocate new holiday traditions, but to offer a story about adapting to change. This year some Christmas traditions UUCB has long held dear will change, and adapt we must, at least for now. We no longer have our own sanctuary to decorate. Every Sunday we have to put away everything, leaving no traces of our religion around. That means we cannot leave Christmas decorations out at the Minnie Brown Center. We cannot bring a tree in mid-way through December and leave it there for several weeks. Nor can poinsettias decorate the pulpit area, except on Christmas Eve. For one thing, who would water them? For another, both ethically and contractually, we are obliged to respect our Jewish friends whose space we use.

When our son was born shortly before Christmas, Steve and I instituted a new family tradition: A decree went up from Stocker-Wellcome that no tree should ever enter our home until after David's birthday. That way, his birthday and Christmas remained distinct from one another.

For a dozen years or so, the first Saturday after David's birthday, we would procure a spruce to adorn our home. I loved the excitement of our quest, the cold air nipping at our noses as we trudged through the field imagining how various trees would look in our space. I loved pulling the ornaments out of their boxes, revisiting memories. I loved the colored lights that added sparkle to our tree. I was blessed with a spouse who took charge of watering; all I had to do was stand back and thrill to the beauty.

One memorable year our tree continued to grow, even though it had been cut. By the time we took the tree down, the branches had sprouted an inch or more of new growth at their tips. That poor tree, already dead, had wanted so to live! How sad I felt discarding that tree at the end of the season. Such a strong life force should be awarded more dignity than to land in a brush pile, it seemed to me.

That year I started to regard Christmas trees differently. I started to feel uncomfortable about chopping down an entire tree so that I could have it in my home for a few short weeks.

We continued getting trees, despite my rumbling disquietude. Then in 2011 Steve lost his job three months before Christmas. It took 16 long months for Steve to find work again. I was an intern minister at the time, receiving a stipend of \$3,000 per year. To augment that princely sum, I worked as a Teaching Assistant for three Hebrew Bible classes at Andover Newton Theological School – at \$750 per class. Those numbers were burned into my brain. With money in such tight supply, I remembered every nickel that came our way.

Trimming all unnecessary expenses meant jettisoning the tree. We also largely abandoned giving gifts. We discovered something interesting: Christmas was just fine without the trappings. We still had each other. We still had a quiet day to play, read, cook, and simply be together. When Steve returned to work and I began my first ministry, we could easily have put it all back – tree, gifts, all of it – but we chose otherwise. We have had only one tree since then – the year we had a guest from Belgium, and we wanted to show her an American Christmas.

In all those years, I have certainly enjoyed other trees – many of them at the churches with which I have been associated, among them the trees that graced our sanctuary. Those trees transformed the room in a magical way. I will miss that magic this year.

But I know from experience that I can face changes with grace and good spirits. Things will feel different this year, but I know we have each other – to sing, to laugh, to weep, and to celebrate together. This year, when we have lost so much, we have each other – the best blessing of all. Merry Christmas.