

**Blue Christmas:
The Longest Night of the Year**

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In my family mourning was not done publicly. Therefore, I, as a child, assumed it was not done at all. Both sets of grandparents died and I recall hidden tears, the quick turn away to look out a window, the closing of a door. This mysterious behavior seemed to commence with the announcement of death and end immediately after the funeral.

Of course, if mourning is private, almost secretive as though shameful, there can be no comforting.

Now I discover that, if honest emotion is shared, the response tends to be compassionate, but if those who grieve don't bring up the subject of fatal illness and death, no one else will. Those who would comfort us are watching our eyes, awaiting our lead. No one can know how to help unless we teach them.

—Barbara Lazear Ascher, [*Landscape Without Gravity: A Memoir of Grief*](#), 121

When I was a sophomore in college, I lived in a dorm with a particularly close-knit group of students. One of our favorite activities that year was driving to a downtown cafe called Coffee Underground for a late night snack or an infusion of caffeine. But on October 30, 1997, on one of many short drives downtown to that cafe, a car filled with five of my friends was hit by another car, who ran a red light. Four of the five freshman escaped with minor abrasions, as did the other driver. But my friend Greg was thrown through the front windshield and suffered massive trauma. The accident left him legally blind and partially deaf. Through personal determination and herculean support from his parents, Greg graduated from Furman University in May 2003. And to accept his diploma, he rose from his wheelchair and took a few steps for the first time in public since his accident five years earlier.¹

Greg's story is inspiring in many ways, and his progress is remarkable. But I harbor no illusions that his life since the accident has ever been easy. The wreck happened the day before Halloween, on the edge of the holiday season. By Thanksgiving, Greg had still not yet emerged

¹ The quotes about Greg's progress in recent years are from two sources. The first is "A Study in Courage and Tenacity," available at <http://www2.furman.edu/About/About/PresidentEmeritus/Pages/CourageandTenacity.aspx>. The second is David E. Shi, [*The Bell Tower and Beyond: Reflections on Learning and Living*](#), 37-38.

from his coma. We were grateful that Greg was alive, but in the coming years he would have “20 surgical procedures and [have] to re-learn the most basic physical actions, from swallowing to speaking.”

When his accident first happened, the entire college and larger community were shaken, and there was a heartfelt outpouring of emotion and support. But as time passed, other responsibilities began to demand people’s attention. Life, for most people, returned to normal. But returning to “life-as-normal” before the accident was, of course, impossible for Greg and his immediate family. And those of us who had lived with him on the same hall continued to feel a relentless sadness. Every time we passed his dorm room, we were reminded of him and that he remained in the hospital instead of where both we and he wanted to be: back to class, back to his room, back to a “regular” college life routine.

As the Christmas holidays approached that year, I remember sitting with a group of friends from that hall in a dark alcove of the college’s dining hall. Greg had awoken from his coma by that point, but we had just received another email update about how difficult his path forward was going to be. I remember us collectively looking out at the rest of the brightly lit Dining Hall, which was festively decorated for the holidays. Everyone seemed so animated, happy, and carefree. Their loud, jovial conversations were such a stark contrast to our somber mood. Holiday music was playing in the background, but none of us felt particularly, “Merry and bright.” The whole scene was so different from the immediate aftermath of Greg’s accident, when a pallor had spread over the whole school.

Of course, we didn’t know what was really going on inside the heads and hearts of all those other students. Many of them were likely dealing with serious problems of their own that were hidden from outsiders. But that evening in particular, **it seemed like everyone had moved on with their lives except us.** And I have no doubt that in the months and years that followed, Greg and his parents likely experienced similar emotions. Certainly all of us on that hall did move on with our lives (which have included our own respective struggles), even as Greg and his parents continue to persevere each day, living with the “new normal” that is their permanently changed lives.

That holiday season of 1997, I had much to be grateful for: friends, family, meaningful work. But there was also an accompanying sense of sadness as my friends and I lived with the loss of Greg's presence from our daily lives and as we were regularly reminded of how much Greg's life had changed in an instant. I had also known loss prior to this event. My own family's celebration of the holidays had been irrevocably changed, when my father died of esophageal cancer in 1994.

When our emotions are drastically out of joint with the rest of society, it's not always clear how we should be or act. As it was for me in 1997, this disjointedness can be particularly difficult for many people during the holidays, when we are surrounded by societal expectations and pressure. Carols proclaim, "Joy to the World" and that, "It's the most wonderful time of the year / With the kids jingle belling / And everyone telling you 'Be of good cheer.'" But **what if inside we just don't feel like "It's the hap-happiest season of all."**

Over the years, I've heard stories from many people that, despite all the parts of the holidays that they enjoy, this season remains a painful reminder of loved ones who are no longer present to celebrate the holidays — whether from death, divorce, estrangement, illness, distance, or some other change in our relationships to ourselves or to others. **The weeks and months that for some people legitimately are "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year" are for others a bittersweet time**, tinged with grief, anger, resentment, regret, depression, isolation, or some related mix of emotions.

In recent years, increasing numbers of people have felt comfortable sharing their difficulties with holiday cheer, and there has been a rise in congregations offering "Blue Christmas" or "Longest Night" services that provide a safe space for people to name their pain and tell their stories — or to be compassionately present for others who have this need. One hope of these services is to give people permission to be transparent and authentic about how they experience the holidays. To echo the refrain of a Blue Christmas litany written a few years ago for use in a UU congregation, the hope is that, **"We find comfort in naming these feelings; we find some peace in being together."**² As we often say at the beginning of our weekly Sharing of

² Debra Faulk, "Litany of Comfort for Blue Christmas," written for the Blue Christmas Vespers Service (December 2007) at Don Heights Unitarian Congregation, Toronto, Canada, available at <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/readings/submissions/151325.shtml>.

Joys and Sorrows, “A joy shared is a joy increased. A sorrow shared is a sorrow diminished, if only in part.”

I am not sure about the origins of “Blue Christmas” or “Longest Night” services, but I first began hearing about them a little more than a year ago. A quick Google search turned up references to annual Blue Christmas services as far back as 2006, but they may well have been happened many years prior as well. And for whatever confluence of reasons, this year the increase in the services seems particularly significant. There have been a number of media stories about Blue Christmas services, and I’ve noticed quite a few congregations here in Frederick offering a Blue Christmas service. My assumption is that **these services are proliferating because they are responding to a previously unmet need of the many people, who experience the winter holidays in a way that is messier and more complex than can be captured in simple catchphrases like “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year.”**

Indeed, the marketing of the holiday season as “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” may be precisely why we desperately need Blue Christmas and Longest Night services. **By proclaiming the holidays as “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” we may be setting ourselves up to fail. How could the messiness of reality ever live up to the hype of all those perfectly choreographed holiday specials?** And our choices shouldn’t be limited to either celebrating a Hallmark Holiday or not celebrating the holidays at all. We have the freedom to find meaningful and authentic ways of marking our holidays with rituals that honor the reality of our actual life.

To that end, I first planned to preach this Sunday on the theme of “Blue Christmas” back in the summer, but the need of many people to articulate their experience of a Blue Christmas has become even more sharply clear in recent days. No one could have predicted this timing back in July, when I first outlined my preaching plan for the coming months. I spoke earlier about my experience of a Blue Christmas creeping into the holiday season in the wake of an accident that happened to one of my friends on the day before Halloween, almost two months before Christmas. But, as you all know, the tragic shooting in Newtown, Connecticut happened on December 14, only eleven days before Christmas. Particularly **for the immediate families of**

those lost loved ones, the holiday season now and in years to come will almost inevitably be a reminder of their ongoing grief and loss.³

And in the past few days as I have been thinking about the theme of Blue Christmas, hearing more details about the tragedy in Newtown, and preparing for our Christmas Eve Candlelight service tomorrow night, I was freshly reminded that sorrow, violence, and tragedy have been woven into the Christmas story from the beginning. Many of us who are familiar with the Christian tradition are accustomed the hearing the Christmas story told from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. We'll be hearing that reading at our own candlelight services tomorrow. But there's another story about Jesus' birth in the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. And it includes a horrific passage about what happened when King Herod realized that the magi had escaped Judea without revealing the location of Jesus' birth to him:

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi.

I do not want to get distracted this morning with the important questions that could and should be asked at other times about this passage's questionable historicity. Instead, I want to point out that a horrific story about the slaughter of the innocents is embedded in the biblical narrative about Jesus' birth. Perhaps one redeeming angle to this terrible tale is a reminder to be honest that **we inevitably bring our full selves with us into each new holiday season, and the expression of our full selves includes all the messiness of our past and present: all the joy, hope, and peace, but also all the pain, sorrow, and tragedy.**

At the same time, it is important to remember that many of these Blue Christmas services are also known as "Longest Night" services because they often happen on or around Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year. Here at UUCF, our pagan group gathered this past Friday evening on Winter Solstice, also known as Yule, to commemorate the night this year with the most darkness and to celebrate the coming of the light — that incremental shift toward longer

³ Huffington Post published a devastating account of the **more than 100 shooting deaths that have happened in the U.S. in only the week after Sandy Hook**: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/21/us-shooting-deaths-sandy-hook_n_2348466.html.

days that will culminate six months from now in the Summer Solstice, on the other side of the Wheel of the Year.⁴

And perhaps the pagan practice of choosing to celebrate the “coming of the light” precisely on the darkest day of the year can point us toward the hope that on the other side of even the darkest night, dawn will come. That being said, let me be clear that I would in no way presume to tell the victim’s families in Newtown — or anyone in the midst of deep suffering — that I or anyone else knows the way forward for them. As a news story published Friday, on this year’s Winter Solstice said, **“Christmas is only four days away, but Newtown residents are living minute to minute, day to day, too numb to think that far ahead.”**⁵ When we are surrounded by the darkest night, there are important coping strategies that counselors, therapists, and similar professionals can provide to help us in through our longest nights, but in my personal experience of losing my father to cancer and of losing friends in tragic accidents, there is a sense in which the return of the light comes slowly, sometimes imperceptibly — growing incrementally, almost unnoticeably like the returning of longer days after Yule. **I do not think that time heals all wounds, but sometimes we can find ways of integrating our losses into a new sense of ourselves and the world. We cannot always know the way in advance. And the best, most empathetic guides are often support groups or the supporting presence of those individuals who have survived similar experiences.**

In this spirit, I invite you to hear a “Blessing for the Longest Night” written by the artist Jan Richardson. This blessing is written in the hope that being authentic and honest about our experience of having a Blue Christmas or a Longest Night can be part of what leads us — sometimes without us knowing how or why in advance — to a different time, a different place, and a different space in on our journey through this life. I offer you this blessing:

⁴ For more on the pagan Wheel of the Year, see my post on “Can You Feel the Wheel of the Year Turning? A Spirituality of Winter” (December 10, 2012), available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/12/can-you-feel-the-wheel-of-the-year-turning-a-spirituality-of-winter/>.

⁵ Gary Stoller, “In Newtown, tears shower a season of joy,” *USA Today* (December 21, 2012), available at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/12/20/how-will-newtown-celebrate-christmas/1783101/>.

You will know
the moment of its
arriving
by your release
of the breath
you have held
so long;

a loosening
of the clenching
in your hands,

of the clutch
around your heart;

a thinning
of the darkness
that had drawn itself
around you.

This blessing
does not mean
to take the night away
but it knows
its hidden roads,
knows the resting spots
along the path,
knows what it means
to travel

in the company
of a friend.
So when
this blessing comes,
take its hand.
Get up.
Set out on the road
you cannot see.
This is the night
when you can trust
that any direction
you go,
you will be walking
toward the dawn.⁶

If the night is dark enough, you can trust that any direction you go, you will be walking toward the dawn.

⁶ Jan L. Richardson, “Winter Solstice: Blessing for the Longest Night,” © Jan L. Richardson, available at <http://adventdoor.com/2011/12/19/winter-solstice-blessing-for-the-longest-night/>. Used with permission.