



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

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## **The Christmas True**

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This past July, I preached a [sermon reflecting on the 100th anniversary](#) of the beginning World War I. And as a point of connection, it seems appropriate to reflect that tonight is the 100th anniversary of the famous Christmas Truce.

December 24, 1914 was a clear, cold night. The shooting had stopped, and in the silence, Walter Kirchhoff, a German soldier, who in peacetime had been a tenor with the Berlin Opera, began singing “Silent Night” in German. His strong voice carried the tune across the “No Man’s Land” between the two opposing armies:

*Still Nacht, Heilige Nacht.*

*Alles Schläft, einsam wacht....*

Then, he sang it again in English:

*Silent Night, Holy night,*

*all is calm, all is bright....*

*Sleep in heavenly peace.*

The British soldiers, no doubt also missing their loved ones began to join in. And slowly, soldiers began to take the risk of emerging from their “trenches to fraternize, drink, and even play friendly games of soccer” (46). [“Soldiers ... wrote home the day after](#) to their families, to their wives, and to their parents, saying, ‘You won’t believe this. It was like a waking dream. They recognized that on both ends of the rifle, they were the same.’”

Taking a wider view, historians tell us, it is no coincidence that the Christmas

Truce happened within the first few months of the four-year war. The longer the battle continued, the more entrenched and jaded soldiers became, making events like the Christmas Truce increasingly impossible (46).

That being said, I don't want to underemphasize the significance that the historic Christmas Truce, one hundred years ago today, happened after months of warfare with heavy casualties on both sides. The singing of "Silent Night" was completely spontaneous and unplanned. It might not have worked if the person singing didn't know both English and German. It might not have worked if the person singing didn't have such a resonant voice. It might not have worked if someone had betrayed that moment of potential trust and opened fire.

These soldiers were caught in a broken system. Many historians look back on World War I as about "narrow national rivalries and selfish imperial interests" (3). Indeed, "Harry Patch, the last soldier actually to have fought in the war's trenches and who died in 2009 at the age of 111...said, 'Two civilized nations, British and German, fighting for our lives.... What...we fought for, I now don't know... [The] politicians who took us to war should have been given the guns and told to settle their differences themselves...'" (3, 33).

But even in the midst of a broken system, when an opening of potential transformation presented itself — the timing of Christmas Eve on a cold, silent night with gunfire had temporarily stopped — one soldier was courageous enough to risk raising his voice. And other soldiers took the risk of joining in.

Even in the most entrenched and embattled relationships and conflicts — whether global or interpersonal — openings for potential transformation still come. This Christmas, what new hope might you birth into the world that might disrupt the status quo? What first step might you take toward peace and reconciliation? What unanticipated act of love might you extend? What joy might you allow to emerge unexpectedly from your heart?

For now, I will close with these words from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1967 "A Christmas Sermon for Peace":

if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our

class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective.... we must either learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or we are all going to perish together as fools.... [A]ll life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly....

In that spirit, you can remain seated as we sing together, **Hymn 246**, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

**For Further Study**

“WWI Christmas Truce still remembered,” available at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/wwi-christmas-truce-still-remembered-1.2880262>.