

**December 9, 2007**  
**Rev. Clare Petersberger**  
***On Celebrations***

Of the triumph of freedom, of the festival of lights,  
Of the birth of new hope.  
The darkness of the year will lift and the time of light grow longer.

We have gathered in this season of celebrations seeking comfort to soften the pain and the losses our lives have suffered in the fast retreating year.

We have gathered to worship joyfully within this season of celebrations with the tenderness and love of family and friends around us.

Let joy and sorrow join in the fullness of our living.  
Let us be embraced by the strength and power of this beloved community.  
Let us hope for peace in our hearts, in our homes, and on earth.

**OPENING WORDS**

Let us open worship with a responsive reading of number 663 in the back of your hymnal.

With mounds of greenery, the brightest ornaments, we bring high summer to our rooms, as if to spite the somberness of winter come.

IN TIME OF WANT,  
WHEN LIFE IS BOARDING UP AGAINST  
THE NEXT UNCERTAIN SPRING,  
WE CELEBRATE AND GIVE OF WHAT WE HAVE AWAY.

All creatures bend to rules, even the stars constrained.

THERE IS A BLESSED MADNESS IN THE HUMAN NEED  
TO GO AGAINST THE GRAIN OF COLD AND SCARCITY.

We make a holiday, the rituals varied as the hopes of humanity,

THE REASONS AS OBSCURE AS ANCIENT SOLAR FESTIVALS,  
AS CLEAR AS JOY ON ONE SMALL FACE.

## CHALICE LIGHTING

While we do not have a torch to light our way to the holy in our lives, each week we do kindle the flame of our chalice. Please join in a unison reading of words printed in your order of service with which to light this symbol of our free faith tradition.

THE CHALICE, THE MENORAH, CHRISTMAS TAPERS,  
THE KWANZAA KINARA:  
WE LIGHT THESE CANDLES OF JOY DESPITE ALL SADNESS,  
CANDLES OF HOPE WHERE DESPAIR KEEPS WATCH,  
CANDLES OF COURAGE FOR FEARS EVER PRESENT,  
CANDLES OF PEACE FOR TEMPEST-TOSSED DAYS,  
CANDLES OF GRACES TO EASE HEAVY BURDENS,  
CANDLES OF LOVE TO INSPIRE ALL OUR LIVING,  
CANDLES THAT WILL BURN ALL THE YEAR LONG.

## READING

Our first reading is how all the emotions referenced in our chalice lighting can be invoked by a single evocative object. In *Remembrance of Things Past* Marcel Proust wrote:

*I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I was stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me.*

*An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disaster innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not IN me – it WAS me.*

*And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of Madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray, when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Leonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane.*

*The sight of the little Madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it; perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the meantime, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks' windows.*

*But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised*

*a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.*

### **Introduction to HYMN**

This is a time of year dedicate to remembrances of things past: from honoring our ancestors who lit bonfires to woo back the sun; to hanging macaroni ornaments our children gilded and glittered decades ago;

from retelling the story of the struggle of religious freedom of the Macabees to retelling the stories of family members, present and absent, who gave us courage in living;

from re-enacting pageants about the birth of the divine in human form to replaying in one's mind the joy of silent and holy nights of previous winter holidays.

We are souls remembering, waiting, hoping....

So if you would like to light a candle for a significant joy, sorrow, milestone, prayer, or memory, you're invited to do so as we join in singing hymn number 225, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

### **READING**

Our next reading is about what brings comfort when we discover that we are separate, individual beings. In her book, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Sherry Turkle writes:

*D. W. Winnicott called "transitional" the objects of childhood that the child experiences as both part of the self and of external reality. Winnicott writes that the transitional object mediates between the child's sense of connection to the body of the mother and a growing recognition that he or she is a separate being.*

*The transitional objects of the nursery – the stuffed animal, the bit of silk from the baby blanket, the favorite pillow – all of these are destined to be abandoned. Yet they leave traces that will mark the rest of life.*

*Specifically, they influence how easily an individual develops a capacity for joy, aesthetic experience, and creative playfulness.*

*Transitional objects, with their joint allegiance to self and other, demonstrate to the child that objects in the external world can be loved. Winnicott believes that*

*during all stages of life we continue to search for objects we can experience as both within and outside the self.*

## PRAYER

At this time of year, one object in the external world that is loved, not only for itself, but because it references a story teaching that the external world CAN be trusted and loved is a menorah.

For the past five nights, Jewish people have lighted the first five of the eight candles of the menorah. And they've done so telling the story of how the Maccabees reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem from the Greco-Syrians in 164 BCE.

But when they went to rededicate the temple only one vat of purified oil remained – enough for only one day. It would take the Jews a week to process more purified oil. The Maccabees lit the menorah and it burned for not one, but eight days, by which time the new, purified oil was ready.

I invite us to join in a responsive meditation, *The Miracle Of Hanukkah* printed in your order of service by my colleague The Reverend Mark Belletini lifting up what this story might mean for Unitarian Universalists.

*The miracle is not that oil lasts,  
but that our hope lasts, despite disappointment.  
Barukh atah, tiqvah! Blest are you, hope!*

*The miracle is not that fire illumines,  
but that we grow brighter.  
Barukh atah, zohar! Blest are you, brightness!*

*The miracle is not that people tell ancient stories,  
but that people dare to live their own stories.  
Barukh atah, midrashim! Blest are you, stories!*

*The miracle is not that tyranny is resisted,  
but that resistance recreates us into new beings.  
Barukh atah, khadash. Blest are you, new being.*

*The miracle is not that courage exists,  
but that courage does not, every time, have to ball itself into a fist...  
Barukh atah, khayil Blest are you, courage.*

## READING

Friday night, at a family Hanukkah celebration of TUUC members, one of the children asked, "Now where did the menorah come from?" and the story of the origins of the family menorah was told. I was reminded of the following reading by Igor Kopytoff:

*In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people...*

*Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things?*

*What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the things "life," and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?"*

*The biography of a car, for instance, would reveal a wealth of cultural data:*

*where it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller and the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers, and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car finally collapses, the final disposition of its remains.*

*All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of any other car...*

## OFFERTORY

A church is not a thing or an object. It is a community of people. But similar questions could be asked of this congregation.

Where did TUUC come from and who made it? What has been its history so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal history for a UU congregation?

What are the uses to which this congregation is regularly put? How does the mission of this congregation change with its age and the changing times?

All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of any other congregation...

One of the ways this manifests itself is in our offertory. Not every Unitarian Universalist congregation gives 25% of undedicated gifts to the offertory to support the congregation's social action projects. But we do. We want the evocative object of money to make a tangible difference in the world.

With this in mind, our morning offering will now be given and received in grateful appreciation for our shared hopes, values, and mission to the world.

## **SERMON** ***Evocative Objects***

Proust had his Madeleine to hold "the vast structure of recollection." Me? I have, according to my brother, one of the largest collections of Christmas kitch in the world. Personally, I don't think "kitch" is the right label. OK, maybe the pink flamingo in the Santa costume falls into that category. And, possibly, the holiday Ferris wheel with little plastic reindeer dressed in winter outfits who go round and round as the Ferris wheel plays Christmas carols counts.

But many of the ornaments, quilted Santas, and angels made out of various mediums were gifts from parishioners and children in the congregations I've served over the years. Some of the ornaments were gifts from my late husband Tom. And these objects can carry me back to the mummer's play at First Parish in Cambridge in 1985, or to the Madrigal at Eliot Unitarian Chapel in St. Louis in 1987, or to the children's Christmas pageants in Midland, or to Christmas Day 1995 when Tom asked me to marry him, or to last year's Christmas Eve service with the music from A Charlie Brown Christmas Special faster than any time travel vehicle ever could.

And so, in mid-November, I began to look up at the neatly stacked boxes of Christmas ornaments in the master bedroom closet and wonder whether this would be the year to bring them down again.

Last year, the first after Tom had died, I could not imagine decorating for the holidays without him. As those of you who have lost a loved one know – a major challenge of the holidays is acknowledging the absence of the loved one, and the sacred power of memory, while also honoring the continuation and freshness of life.

In the hospice support groups, members spoke of changing holiday decorations the first year – getting a small tree and putting it on a table, or putting up a large tree with only lights, or putting up some sort of display on which people can hang memories of their loved one.

But what about the second year? And third year? And fourth year? When might objects, such as holiday decorations, begin to have a healing function – giving access to “the vast structure of recollection”? And by giving such access, enable, as Proust discovered, old griefs to be transformed into ideas – thereby “losing some part of their power to injure our hearts.”?

In part to answer this question, I was drawn to an article in mid-November in The New York Times about Sherry Turkle. Two decades ago, Sherry Turkle founded the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self to study how computers and robots will change our lives.

What she has concluded is that “The question is not what computers can do or what computers will be like in the future, but rather, what we will be like.” Because her studies have revealed that what we humans truly crave is not “realism” but “relationships.” So computers and robots not only help us to think, they reveal something about our emotional intelligence.

From children drawn to teaching Furbys English because they loved the little creature to elderly dementia patients who found comfort in Hasbro’s My Real Baby, a toy which exhibits emotion, across the lifespan, in Turkle’s words, “It takes your breath away how you react to a robot looking at you.”

Turkle’s own interest in evocative objects preceded the invention of computers and robots. As a child, she spent weekends at her grandparents’ apartment in Brooklyn. She had been given permission to climb on the kitchen table and take down books and boxes from the kitchen closet. This she did, every weekend, from the age of six to thirteen or fourteen. What was she looking for among all the trinkets, souvenirs, and photographs?

She writes, “I was looking, without awareness, for the one who was missing. I was looking for a trace of my father.” Her mother had left her father when she was two. She continues, “But they had been there before me and gotten rid of any bits and pieces he might have left – an address book, a business card, a random note.” The most Sherry Turkle ever discovered was “A photograph of a man standing on a boardwalk with his face cut out of the picture.” She knew who it was. She didn’t have to ask. She didn’t dare ask for fear the photo would disappear. And at least it gave her an image of her father’s hands and the fact that he wore tweed pants and lace-up shoes.

When asked why she did not ask about her father, Ms. Turkle replied, “When something is literally unspeakable in a family, you don’t even feel permitted to think about it. Or I didn’t”. Only years later did she discover that her father had been a scientist, somewhat mentally unstable, who had wanted to use her as an object of study and experimentation. That is why her mother left him.

It was through the objects in her grandparents' closet, that Sherry Turkle began "to find (herself) in the world – because the people around (her) weren't talking." So it's no surprise that objects continued to be important to her.

She writes, "We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences." This view that objects are useful, aesthetic, or vain indulgences was reflected in some of the advanced responses I received to today's sermon title, "Evocative Objects."

One person wondered if I had seen the movie, "What Would Jesus Buy" and was going to preach an anti-consumerism sermon against vain indulgences. Another person shared the recent discovery of some intriguing artifacts, whose original purpose will remain a mystery, in the estate of a deceased relative.

But I borrowed the title "evocative objects" from Sherry Turkle's most recent book. And she defined an evocative object as objects (which are) "companions to our emotional lives or...provocations to thought;" objects in which our feelings and thoughts, our ideas and passions are inseparable.

Sherry Turkle writes, "We think with the objects we love; we love with the objects we think with." To illustrate this, Sherry Turkle established a series of lectures at MIT. She invited scientists, artists, musicians, authors, psychologists, professors from the liberal arts, to speak on an evocative object from their own life that had "brought together things that are important to them."

Carol Stohecker, a researcher, wrote about teaching her younger brother to tie his shoes. She was nine. He was three. And she was tired of tying his shoes. So she created a mantra for him – something to do with left, right, loops, and around. From this, she went on to work with knots as a teenager, making macramé belts, bracelets, potted plant hangers, shawls and so on. And from that, she went on to become known as "The Knot Lady" at the MIT Media Lab. For many years, she used knots to teach math to ten-year-old inner city children.

Carol asked her now grown brother if he had any memories of learning to tie his shoes. He reported that he recalled a moment "when he had just completed tying his shoes and left the house to join his friends." Carol concluded, "I like to imagine that this moment occurred after he mastered the strings and mantra on the stairs, only steps from the front door of our house."

For Carol, a simple knot, which she taught her three-year-old brother to form, and which she experimented with as a teenager making gifts for family and friends became an evocative object that shaped her life-long vocation as a researcher and teacher.

What object, from your childhood, do you remember that gave some clue of the vocation you would pursue? For me, the book, "*I Went For A Walk And What Did*

*I See?*” was a good starting point to minister with a religious community that promises to walk together in all the ways of truth known or to be made known!

Some of the evocative objects people chose to speak about in the MIT forums were actual gifts. James Loeb, a Professor of Classical Art and Archaeology at Harvard University remembered visiting his grandfather’s farmhouse and spending many hours playing with stone objects his grandfather had found plowing. One was an axe head which James Loeb recalled holding, “feeling its smooth weight, its polished, pecked surfaces, and musing on the long-ago, long dead people who had walked these same hills and creeks, and had left silent witness to their vanished presence.”

Loeb credits this gift of the axe head with guiding him on his path as a teacher and archaeologist. He concludes, “The axe head still rests atop the mantel of my fireplace and will until I too recede, no longer telling but told into its long story by my daughters, who will, I hope, remember its deeper provenance in their own way, in their own time.”

Sherry Turkle writes how “a gift retains something of its giver and so becomes animate.” This was certainly true for Irene Castle McLaughlin, an anthropologist at Harvard, who traded cuff bracelets with Irma Bailey, a professional Southwest trader. Irene gave Irma a gold cuff, made for her grandmother, the dancer Irene Castle. Irma gave Irene McLaughlin a 19<sup>th</sup> century silver Navajo cuff with turquoise.

Irene wrote, “This bracelet exchange was not motivated by desire for fine jewelry; it was an expression of allegiance, a way of giving shape and substance to the intersection of three kindred women.”

Irene continued, “My bracelet grounds me in an invisible social firmament, where Irene and Irma are stars in the constellation of descent and affinity.” She concludes, “I feel their reassuring presence when the weight of the bracelet is on my wrist.”

What gifts remind you that, in the words of Marcel Mauss, “everything passes to and fro as if there were a constant exchange of a spiritual matter, including things and people”? For me, such evocative objects are the ones whose biographies I love to share – because ultimately, the biography of the object and how it came into my life turns to the biography of the gift-giver and that person’s influence in my life.

Sherry Turkle reports that when she started this speaker’s series, people were hesitant to explore objects as a focus of their emotional life. It took a while to explain that what was being done was not a study of materialism, and what was being asked was not a revelation of hobbies.

Instead, on the premise that each of us has a concrete object that grounds and guides our lives, speakers were invited to choose an object, follow its associations, write about their feelings, and share what new insights they gained.

Sherry Turkle recently collected these essays in her book, *Evocative Objects*. And what emerged through these essays is that we all have transformative experiences in childhood of finding and losing, of success and failure, of right and wrong. And, often, we come to understand these experiences, and ourselves, through concrete objects. Or, as Walt Whitman said, "A child went forth everyday and the first object he look'd upon, that object he became."

By looking at the objects that hold our attention, we discover what matters to us. For Olivia Daste, an MIT researcher, this led her to the discovery of what could heal her grief. After her grandmother died, unexpectedly, while her family was visiting in France, Daste's mother began to sort and discard things. Daste writes, "With each book, shoe, and coat my mother grabbed and threw in a trash bag for donations or garbage, my stomach turned and my heart sank." Daste ran to the kitchen and picked up a glass her grandmother had used – her lipstick still on the rim. That's when she got the idea to go into her grandmother's bedroom. She got down her grandmother's new red suitcase, opened it, and began packing her favorite outfit. To this, Daste added two pink-and-green flower-painted teacups in which her grandmother had served morning coffee. Daste wrote, "I was taking our breakfasts with us; our long, animated conversations; our ritual of sharing our dreams; our nightmares and laughter."

Daste then found the Christmas gift she and her brother had carefully selected for her grandmother. And most important of all, she packed "the cut-out quotes about love, family, humor, and life that she kept everywhere around her apartment" and silently promised to live by them.

Two-and-a-half years later, Daste has not unpacked the suitcase but opens it to smell her grandmother's perfume. After reading these essays, and especially Daste's, I decided that rather than bring down all the holiday decorations, I would choose from the collection, a few that had collected the most meaning for me.

Meanwhile, in the absence of a tree in my house, another evocative object has begun blooming. For four years, Tom tended a Christmas cactus. He repotted it and watered it and it never bloomed. Last year it did. Evidently, it didn't like being moved away from the window each December when we put up the tree.

By looking more closely at familiar objects in your life may you, too, discover the evocative ones which order your days, guide your choices, remind you that you are loved, and open out your world in unexpected ways. And may this discovery lead you to give such evocative objects evoking passion and thought and transforming lives in this season of gift giving.

## CLOSING WORDS

For you I wish:

Soft snow,

A gift both given and received, wrapped in love,  
an exchange illustrating a spiritual tie between souls,

A candle and a fire,

A bowl of crisp red apples, tangerines, and oily oranges,

A blizzard of cards that bring those others closer than they were before,

A tree that somehow kept its green when autumn came and went,

The joy of old stories that seem forever new

And songs sung softly under the breath of "peace on earth."

**Go now in peace.**