

**Reflection by Ron Friedman**  
**A UU Christmas: So Many Gifts...**  
**December 25, 2022**

Gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

These gifts - frankincense is a kind of incense and myrrh is an ingredient used in perfumes and medicines - these gifts were fit for a king or someone of high estate. But Jesus did not become a king of the Jewish people. Actually, he became an itinerant preacher, teacher and healer, who traveled around a very small part of the Roman empire, an area now referred to as the Holy Land.

Among his many teachings he preached a message of God's love for all mankind. His message was **not exclusionary. God's love applied**

- the high and the low,
- the rich and the poor,
- the master and the servant,
- the outcast and the sinner,
- the Jew and the gentile.

Everyone was beloved of God.

Jesus also preached and promoted the *virtue* of charity. Charity given anonymously. Charity given for the purpose of helping the needy. Charity not given for recognition and acclaim for the giver.

Within a few hundred years of the common era, legends appear of pious men who known for their charitable giving. The most famous of these men is Bishop Nicholas of Myra, a port town in what is today modern Turkey. Legend says he was often seen riding his donkey, dressed in his red and white Bishop's clothing, giving gifts to children.

There are many legends attributed to Nicholas.

There is the legend about a poor man with three daughters. The man was so poor that he could not provide dowries for them, and therefore the girls would not be married and were faced with a life of destitution. The legend says that one night Nicholas climbed on the roof of the house and dropped gold coins down the chimney and these coins provided for the dowry.

Bishop Nicholas of Myra is Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children, but also of sailors, merchants, archers, repentant thieves, brewers, pawnbrokers, unmarried people, and students. While his legend thrives, there is almost no documentation to prove he lived and did what he is supposed to have done.

Over the centuries, however, more legends arise of characters who bring gifts to *good* children on or about Christmas. They have such names as Father Christmas in England, Pere Noel in France, Der Weihnachtsmann in Germany, and **Sinterklaas** which is Dutch for St Nicholas. But often these characters travel with companions who serve as foils to their benevolence. The companions supposedly would come to punish children who have been bad. Black Pete, Belsnickel and others were dreaded visitors. Images I found of the “good” gift givers make them look like acetic monks, or long bearded Bishops in fine robes.

Sinterklaas was transported to America by the Dutch, who settled New York and Connecticut., and then adopted by the English, when it became New York. However, the name changed to Santa Claus, as we know him.

In 1823 Clement Moore wrote a poem you are probably familiar with – titled “A Visit from St Nicholas”. You know it – “T’was the night before Christmas and all through the house....” Moore describes him as a chubby and plump jolly old elf dressed all in fur, with a pipe in his teeth, who arrives in a tiny sleigh driven by eight tiny reindeer. He lands on the roof and goes down the chimney to deliver his bag of toys for the children. Then he flies up the chimney and away “on Dancer, Prancer, on Donner and Blitzen, etc, etc.”

Moore gave a whole new image of the Christmas visitor. Clement Moore was a theologian and a Unitarian. One writer claims that Moore transformed St Nicholas from a Catholic bishop to a Unitarian. That’s because Moore’s Santa Claus believes in the worth and dignity of every child and that all children deserved some kindness and pleasure.

From my Xmas experience as a father of four daughters and a grandfather to five grandchildren, I believe that about now, living rooms and family rooms are strewn with used wrapping paper and ribbons torn off toys and other gifts. The children love the gifts they got this morning and will enjoy them. However, they will **outgrow them very quickly**, their **interests will change**, and I will venture to say that:

in about **18 – 24 months** many of the toys and games and sports equipment given to children this day will be included in **tag sales** and **church fund raisers**. It’s a natural part of life, growing up and moving on.

**So what can we give children that they won’t so quickly outgrow?** Spending time with them – our children and grandchildren – was a common response to this question when posted in the e-news.

However, news stories I read this past month pushed me in another direction. Bullying in schools and social media is causing lots of emotional and mental turmoil for our

young people. There has always been some bullying in schools, but not on the scale we have today. The internet and social media have only raised the volume, not decreased it.

So what can we give a child or young person that might help. I believe we need to look no further than our **seven Unitarian principles**.

I believe that if we start to instill in our young people the belief in our very first principle, we may be off to a good start.

The stated aim of our denomination is to covenant together to affirm and **promote our belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every human being**.

Inherent means essential and inseparable. We must raise our children to know that they have an **inherent dignity and worth that cannot be denied them**.

That their dignity and value as people is so strong that **no bully or social media shamer can change that**.

And if they can relate that to their schoolmates – all of them – the ones they like and the ones they don't like, the smart ones, the challenged ones, the athletes and the nerds, the tall ones and the short ones, the skinny kids and the overweight ones, the kids with braces and/or eyeglasses and those who don't need them – all of their schoolmates then maybe we can raise a group of children and young people who are able to bring a more harmonious environment to their schools.

And if this seed can take root, perhaps that generation will make great strides at creating the peace and goodwill among all people that we hope and pray for.

\*\*\*