

For Meredith News “Speaking of Faith” for December 24, 2020
Rev. Betsy Tabor - UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes

'Tis the Season for Making Room

As the story goes, there was no room for them at the inn. But in the end, the innkeeper made room for the weary travelers, she heavy with child. They settled down in a lean-to, outside with the farm animals.

I grew up with this story, Christmas central to my childhood and to our quaint town near Boston. In December, our little bubble of a world revolved around the tree, the gifts, the crèche, Santa and Christmas carols. An outsized holiday in every way, Christmas *was* December. Back in the 1950s, schools and churches made little room for other cultural understandings. Many cultures' celebrations of the light belonged in the realm of school projects – dioramas made out of shoeboxes.

College in upstate New York gave me a healthy dose of reality as the dorms emptied out during the High Holy Days. Soon, my own young family would sit at a neighbors' seder, a world apart. I'm grateful that they made room for us, and still remember the bitter, the questions, the whole family reciting prayers in Hebrew.

Still, for me as a young mother, now in a quaint New Hampshire town, Christmas was the main event. Every year it seemed to take over, a whirlwind of traditions and commercialism, over the top in many ways – a crazy mix of merry-making and overwhelm. Often it was not 'til the day itself that the pace quieted into the peace and joy of the season.

In those days, I started to become aware of how little room Christmas left for others. I remember a Jewish friend's sadness and surprise when her children were expected to sing Christian carols in the grade school holiday concert. How bravely she spoke up. And how well! Today, those school concerts make room for many understandings.

The other night, at long last, I experienced a connection with another celebration of light. Kwanzaa. It's taken seventy years for that to happen – too long! – and even so, indirectly. My college pal in Atlanta has a Black friend whose family has long observed this celebration of African-American culture, started in 1966 during the Civil Rights movement. What a delight to hear nearly firsthand stories of Kwanzaa's symbols, candle-lighting ritual and emphasis on thoughtful conversation. In these days of reckoning with racial justice, it feels especially meaningful to make room within for this tradition with its deep roots in African harvest celebrations.

Throughout December, people the world around – and right here in New Hampshire – celebrate the coming of the light. The enlightenment of the Buddha (5th century BCE) was remembered on December 8. Hanukkah, December 10-18, commemorated the miracle of the little vial of oil that burned for eight days (165 BCE). Starting November 29, Christians have observed the four weeks of Advent, Christmas here tomorrow. The week of Kwanzaa begins Saturday.

Making room for a convergence of cultural celebrations feels good – stimulating, heartening and expanding. In the year to come, for what and for whom do you hope to make room?

Rev. Betsy Tabor serves the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes (UUFES) in Tamworth, a congregation known for embracing diverse beliefs. Curious about Unitarians? All are welcome, all Sundays, at 10 and Christmas Eve at 4. Zoom details at www.uufes.com.