

CELEBRATIONS OF HUMANISM

by Carol Wintermute

From my experience with Unitarian Universalism, I find that there is tendency to look for holidays to celebrate either within the Judeo-Christian tradition or in other world cultures and religions. Humanists could tune into all the religious and cultural holidays to some extent because they are all part of the human domain and experience. But I have some problems with borrowing these festivals and ceremonies and redoing them to suit our perspective. I believe that we should become acquainted with these holidays and understand them for their intended purpose: whether it be a reminder of some religious principles, a commemoration of some significant event or a seasonal change. It is most often that we Humanists find some useful universal elements in the holidays of the world when we look at those that occur around the change of seasons. I find that these celebrations are the ones best suited for inclusion in a Humanist calendar. But before I return to that idea, I would like to point out some reasons for my hesitancy in "doing" world festivals.

We have several choices in the ways we can deal with traditional religious and cultural holidays. We can follow their practices outright, but that is just silly for Humanists to even consider. What we most often do, and by we I mean U-Us, is to imitate them in some way. We borrow the format and some of the trappings, but eliminate those aspects that run counter to our liberal views. We have Christmas services, for instance, in which we tell the manger story, sing carols, and talk about Jesus's birth as symbolic of all births. On Easter we deliver sermons that merely refer to the death of Christ as symbolic of the time of year when the earth renews itself. All the while we are using the Christian format: opening readings, hymns, sermon etc. I think we can be more imaginative in creating Humanist holidays than to imitate the traditional Western religious ones. I doubt whether any of us would ever consider imitating the ceremony at Mecca of an Islamic pilgrim, yet we sometimes feel compelled to use the Judeo-Christian framework without question.

But what we often do in looking outside our heritage is pick a piece of some world celebration and use it in a way that I think can become mockery. This becomes especially likely when there is little attempt to understand the ceremony in its original context. I put in that category such activities as having children hurl colored water bombs at each other, because the Laotians do it in a spring festival, or have them make drums and wear feathers and do imitations of Indian dances because we're recognizing native Americans this day, or we perform a tea service on Buddha's birthday. I have found that not only children and young people but adults as well are left with the impression from these disjointed and distorted versions of world holidays that people in other cultures do some pretty weird and amusing things to celebrate their religious and philosophical beliefs.

We obviously need to create some holidays of our own. That does not mean that we should not ever look to other traditions for celebration, but we need to do it in a way that illuminates the universal expressions of the human

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urge for giving meaning to the life cycle. The change of seasons offers an opportunity to share this universal experience by highlighting the rich and diverse ways humans have come to signify these events. I think this is a way of avoiding mockery and a disjointed sense of other heritages, because such festivities are related to an experience that we know, are interested in and understand.

In the past couple of years at our First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis we have been working on creating Humanist holidays which in some cases are new but often tied to traditional times when humans of all eras and places have celebrated a life passage.

In the fall we have World Day. World Day emphasizes our connection with all humans and the desire to live in some semblance of peace with them. The focus is on understanding and marveling at the varieties of human expression and appreciating the contributions of many cultures to enriching life. In the past we have had food, games, and booths to make money for UNICEF on the Sunday nearest to Halloween. Costumes and the carnival atmosphere with pumpkins all around is certainly part of a harvest scene. Recently we have centered on the peace theme. As part of the morning's assembly, for instance this year we are using a portion of it to tell the story of the girl, Sadako, destroyed by the effects of the Hiroshima bomb, who never lived long enough to make the thousand cranes symbolizing the Japanese hope for long life and a peaceful world. A song from the play *Peace Child* will be sung by the kids, and after this morning they will begin the year-long project of making 1000 oragami cranes to decorate the auditorium for our May Rites of Passage Sunday. At the end of the morning we sell balloons with peace messages attached, to be released together at just the right moment. Profits from the sale go to UNICEF.

Thanksgiving does seem to me to be one of those occasions that Humanists can attach to with an opportunity to emphasize some of our most cherished values. No matter that the seekers of religious freedom blew it as soon as they got their own territory. That is a most poignant reminder of golden rule breaking and the need to be always alert to any abridgement of religious freedom. I have in the past worked with some classes to put on what we call a Thanksgiving Seder. This year we are offering this celebration to all our families. It is a ceremonial lunch with a written script for some of the participants. Two of our very talented members wrote this ceremony after due research into the two occasions. It is very carefully explained that the two do not occur at the same time of year, but that they are both significant stories about an exodus and the desire for religious freedom. The foods of both are served and explained. Many of the children from the classes in which we had done this in the past say this was one of their most memorable experiences. In our Sunday School both prior to World day and the Thanksgiving Seder we spend some weeks on peace activities for World Day and the study of Jewish traditions for the Thanksgiving Seder.

Just last year we established a format for our winter celebration. We have it late in the day to make the most of the transition from light to darkness and the use of light in the hall to center on the theme of solstice, the return of

the light into the season of darkness. In researching past ages and other cultures for ways that humans have reacted as a community to this change of season, we came upon enough material to not have to repeat any single portion of the celebration for several years, yet can use the same format for many to come. Last year's celebration included a wonderful rousing show tune opening called "celebration" , sung by the entire cast of adults and kids. Following were vignettes of people from all times and cultures and the ways they have celebrated solstice. We had a divali parade with Goddess Lakshmi and sitar music, a campfire scene in which the explanation of solstice was given, a Hopi dance to the returning sun, a Renaissance clown and storyteller with a special madrigal dance, a Victorial family singing caroles, a funny scene of a modern family deep into their electronic gadgets and materialism that through a power failure rediscover the art of talking and relating to one another, and finally our women's awareness group created and performed a candle lighting ritual around the images of winter that was simply beautiful. Weaving these scenes together was a poetic narration delivered by four black robed druid-like figures who explained the significance of these solstice traditions and mentioned other winter festivals that we will use for future winter holiday celebrations. Following the assembly, the audience shares plates of holiday confections with each other over coffee and punch.

One holiday of Humanism that I really urge you to put on the calendar is International Women's Day, March 8. To me this is an example of how Humanists can pick up on some needed area of focus to emphasize the importance of reform. In this case we can highlight needed reforms while celebrating some of our progress toward liberation. We have done something special for four years now near International Women's Day, and will do so until such time as it won't be necessary. We have had dramatic productions such as: celebrating our heritage, a play in which six women take the voices of women from the past to tell the story of women who had the courage to defy tradition, another play for four women who take the voices of some of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party guests to tell the story of women's oppression, another year we had a performance of vignettes about women disenfranchised by race and poverty with portions from Alice Walker's *Color Purple* and the play *When Colored Girls Get the Blues*. . . , and a poignant depiction of a bag lady, and last year we had an emphasis on women around the world. We told their stories, we included some women in the program from India and the Hmong area of Laos. We decorated the stage with quilts from different countries and each of them did various kinds of craft work while on stage to demonstrate the unheralded contributions of everyday women. With all of these programs we have been conscious of the need for drama, humor, and music to make the point. We have also introduced ritual as something that can be created afresh. This year we ended our world of women celebration with a flower ritual and a simple thank you by each of us to the women who have helped our cause. There are no main speakers at these programs as we wish to demonstrate that there is another way to do a program other than in having the black-clothed authority figure hover over you, dispelling the truth.

In the spring we now have two events to usher in this season. Since we

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can't avoid the fact that Unitarian halls seem to swell on Easter Sunday and something is called for on that day, we try to at least avoid making the morning one big cliché. We have a breakfast and some sort of informal program before the main address at 11:00, and if you know Khoren Arisian, you can be sure his talk is never the ordinary garden variety resurrection-renewal piece. This year the school is giving a play for the informal part of the morning that tells the somewhat grizzly story of how the flaming chalice became a symbol for Unitarians. The point is that for Humanists there are stories we need to dig up about our heroes and heroines that might make up into dramatic presentations for Humanist holidays.

The new holiday of spring that we instituted last year was humor Sunday. Around April Fool's Day is a great time to hit this subject and celebrate what I think is the one of the most redeeming features of human beings, a sense of humor. There is a history around the world of enjoying this change of season with a light heart. Last year I wrote a skit for part of humor Sunday that was entitled *The Humanist Unitarian Finishing School* otherwise known as HUFs. Dean Arisian introduced the class valedictorian, Agusta Blough Hard, and she in turn brings in the stumbling student characters: Justin Space, Ima Braesive, Carrie La Cauz, Ben Anurd and Noah Candu. They then give a rousing rendition of the school fight song, "Buckle down you Huffies." After 15 minutes of making fun of Humanist courses and some of our more pompous tendencies we ended with the Alma Mater, to the tune of "High Above Cayuga's Waters" called "Far Above the Old Religion. "

This year we are thinking about doing something with clowns and magic. I for one would definitely like to continue this one as a special Humanist holiday.

Throughout the year we have music Sundays with chorus and orchestra that are celebrations of composers lives and works, which is another way to honor a most valuable spiritual expression of humanity.

We end the year with our Rites of Passage celebration that focuses on some of the transitions in our lives that receive little attention within our culture, as well as some of the more traditional passages. I won't talk about that one now because it has more to do with the later topic of life cycle celebrations.

Besides the traditional times to celebrate holidays, we need to be imaginative about creating brand new occasions. I don't think we should invent them just because we need something of our very own, but because they are poignant and significant honorings of our principles and purposes for being.

We can look at birthdays of heroes and heroines as times to take note of their contributions to our movement, life in general and as a means to rededicate ourselves to the courage of our convictions. For instance I don't suppose Roger Greeley would mind a Robert Ingersoll Day. Such occasions might include talks, dramatic events, social action projects to initiate,

music, and theme dinners, such as one we had this October for our fall fellowship dinner with David Clarke, Minister and student of the Humanist Institute, who did a presentation on P.T. Barnum, a Yankee Universalist who took on the Presbyterians.

We can also look at historical events that are significant to us. We could make a holiday around the ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights that focuses on a non-military view of freedom and democracy. We could also use the signing of the Manifestos as a holiday occasion for emphasizing Humanist principles. In some ways our coming together as a committee for Humanism is a celebration time that should be recognized as such.

I think that there has been one factor responsible for people, who are or were attracted to the Humanist philosophy, refusing to join our ranks and that's our inadequacy in providing spiritual sustenance. It's time we put forth something other than a dry, dull 19th-century version of scientific rationalism. I'm not talking about succumbing to such new fads as psychic areas and discovering past lives, but in providing good food for our emotional selves. We need to celebrate the spirit of industry and the accomplishments of the collective human spirit. Our affirmation of positive contributions to the species and planet are important in providing us with reminders of the good a little courage can produce. It may seem like a hell of a day and age to proclaim human potential, but without doing so we leave a vacancy that is easily filled with churchy proclamations about the evils of humans and the good of some sky spirit.

The appeal to the senses, emotions, and soul is the heart of holidays and celebrations. You don't get community with philosophy alone. All the trappings of holidays, music, drama, poetry, food, ritual, settings must be put into play to give our philosophy some breath of life and a reason for pursuing it together as a community.