



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“The Greening of the Season”

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Rev. Jen Raffensperger

When I was little, my family had a Yule Log tradition. We had needed to cut down a very large weeping willow tree in our backyard, and the logs we made from it would burn and burn for many hours - though not for 12 days. On Christmas Eve, we would decorate the log - merrily stapling on ribbons and bows and wrapping paper to make it festive - and on Christmas morning my father would put it on the fire and keep the fire going all day and much of the night. One main reason I remember this is all the photos in the family album, which my mother would write captions for when she had the time. One year in particular I remember there was a picture of the decorated log immediately after it was placed on the fire, and under it she wrote “I got dressed up for this?!”

I thought about this story when I first read this morning’s [chalice lighting](#):

“I do not know if the earth remembers the flowers from last spring or if the evergreen remembers that it shall stay so.

“Perhaps that is the reason for our births -- to be the memory for creation.

“Perhaps salvation is something very different than anyone ever expected. Perhaps this will be the only question we will have to answer: ‘What can you tell me about December?’”

What can you tell me about December? What can you tell me about the tall and proud evergreens, or the smaller more humble ones that many in our culture and time choose to cut down and display in our homes at this time of year?

Where are our traditions? What about them comforts us, and what about them challenges us?

Being the memory for creation sounds like a very big task to me. Fortunately, there are a lot of us to do it! This is why we tell the same stories year after year, no matter what our family or cultural traditions are in this season.

How many of you had a beloved holiday tradition around this time, whether it was religious or secular or particular to your family or community of origin? Anyone? You can raise a hand here in person or type it into the chat, I'll repeat to make sure that they get shared over the microphone. (take a few answers, ideally from each space)

These are great! I love hearing the stories that others tell over and over, their own traditions and the things that they look forward to, year after year. Does the evergreen remember that it shall stay so? Perhaps, if it hears us telling stories around it every year, if we go out into the woods and whisper our stories to the trees, the winter birds, the gray skies and dark rivers, we will remind them - and ourselves - that we are the memory of creation.

We are the moment of creation knowing itself.

There's a sweet song I also love at this time of year, by John Denver - ["Alfie, the Christmas Tree."](#) Every year I read articles on the environmental impacts of real trees versus artificial trees, but the truth of the matter is I have a cat who will chew a plastic tree until he makes himself sick, so for me, for now, it's a real tree every year. And I think about that sweet song about Alfie, and its last lines:

"You see, life is a very special kind of thing, not just for a chosen few  
But for each and every living, breathing thing, not just for me and you.  
So in your Christmas prayers this year, Alfie asked me if I'd ask you  
To say a prayer for the wind, and the water, and the wood  
And those who live there, too."

We are the moment of creation knowing itself.

And we tell the stories again and again, to remember.

The Yule stories got folded into the Christmas stories as Christianity went through enough changes to move it from a movement against empire to a tool of another empire, but they still shine through. We still tell the stories of lights - Christmas lights, Yule fires, Hanukkah lights, Diwali lights, lights for Kwanzaa and lights on the Advent wreath. The fires we kindle in our own hearts when we hear these stories, loved and repeated, are what allow us to move through times of uncertainty.

Change is always with us - it is the essence of life itself. So we create memory, and tradition, and while it comforts us, when enough time has passed, we know tradition too must change to survive. The comfort may turn to challenge - have I considered stories other than my own? Have I grown curious about others, and their lights, and their own stories?

[Today's reading](#), you may have noticed, was about stars and not evergreens. But really it wasn't about either of those things - it is a poem about stories, about signs, about how we embody memory for generations after us, about how we remind ourselves that we are creation, knowing itself.

Frankly I love this poem so much I'm tempted to just read the whole thing again, but let's consider this specifically:

"It's almost romantic as we adjust the waxy blue  
recycling bin until you say, Man, we should really learn  
some new constellations.

And it's true. We keep forgetting about Antlia, Centaurus,  
Draco, Lacerta, Hydra, Lyra, Lynx.

But mostly we're forgetting we're dead stars too, my mouth is full  
of dust and I wish to reclaim the rising—

to lean in the spotlight of streetlight with you, toward  
what's larger within us, toward how we were born.

Look, we are not unspectacular things.

We've come this far, survived this much. What

would happen if we decided to survive more? To love harder?"

Here names of constellations are a reminder of the sweep of human history -  
our history of naming, of story-ing, of leaving the signposts of memory shored  
up so that the generations to come may learn where to go. (~7:44)

But who remembers and re-tells the stories of the constellations? And anyway,  
there are so many that we forget, when we point to Orion and both Dippers,  
perhaps remembering for a moment doomed prophetess Cassiopeia when  
we spot the clusters of her throne in the sky? And what memory do the  
constellations serve now, when every day we receive new magnificent images  
from the James Webb Space Telescope, opening new views of the world that  
make us catch our breath, that leave us nearly paralyzed with wonder?

How on earth can we possibly name these magnificent celestial creations!?

The names, you see, aren't for the stars. The names are for us. The stories are  
for us. The constellations are for us, to guide us through the unfamiliar. By the  
light of the constellations, wayfinders traced a path across the boundless span  
of the Pacific Ocean, explorers navigated never before seen forests, where the  
grand evergreens heard and held their fears and their nerves. And those  
wayfinders and explorers told stories again and again, and named the stars in  
the ways that fit best for their own place and time.

So why not new ones? Why not new names, new constellations, new signposts encouraging those that come after us: "Try this way!" Or perhaps: "Not that way, we tried it, and we learned, and we did better!"

What if we decided to survive more, to love harder, and to leave signposts?  
After all, the poem concludes:

"What if we stood up with our synapses and flesh and said, No.  
No, to the rising tides.

Stood for the many mute mouths of the sea, of the land?

What would happen if we used our bodies to bargain

for the safety of others, for earth,  
if we declared a clean night, if we stopped being terrified,

if we launched our demands into the sky, made ourselves so big  
people could point to us with the arrows they make in their minds,

rolling their trash bins out, after all of this is over?" (10:13)

What if we were to say a prayer for the wind, and the water, and the wood, and those who live there too - and then added action to that prayer? An embodied prayer for earth, for the entirety of creation of which we are only a part?

In the moment of creation knowing itself, all parts of that creation must be a part of the memory-making. The stories we tell, the stars we name, and every tree we whisper to whether in dark woods or brightly-lit parking lots, are a part of that knowing, too. The stories we tell, the signposts we make, the way we communicate all that has gone before to make way the path for what is to come - perhaps there will come a time when we are called to answer, "What can you tell me about December?"

Maybe just maybe we can say, "In the cold light of December, we learned we can survive more, and we can love harder."

May it be so.