

Most Americans of my generation had a religious upbringing, especially if you came from a small town like my parents did. You were raised Methodist, or Presbyterian, or Lutheran, or Baptist or some other denomination – and one of the first questions you might get asked when you met new people was, “What church do you go to?”

I, on the other hand, was raised up as what I only half-jokingly call Generic Protestant. My father was an Army officer, and I was – still am – an Army brat.

Military bases usually had a church for the Catholics, a synagogue, and a single church for all the various Protestants.

Army chaplains came from a variety of religious backgrounds, and were expected to minister to everyone who sought their care. The Protestant services might be run by a Methodist, or a Lutheran, or some other flavor, depending on who had been assigned to that duty. Because of that, those Sunday services tended to be rather generic, as they needed to speak to the needs of the many.

Anyone was free to go off-base and gather with those of their specific denomination if they chose, and I’m sure some did, but military folks tended to stick together. Army society in the 50’s and early 60’s was pretty rigid, and the social expectations were exacting and sometimes brutal, especially for Army wives.

My folks were nominally Methodists, but not particularly religious. They went to church because it was expected as part of the social role of an Army officer and his wife. At home, we weren’t instructed in the Bible, or expected to memorize verses, or get saved. We weren’t loaded down with a bunch of guilt and shame. I wasn’t raised to be a good Christian, thank God.

So perhaps I can be forgiven for not knowing – or having forgotten – until just a few years ago, that there was such a thing as Advent. Shocking, I know.

Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent.

The word "advent" comes from the Latin term "adventus" which means "arrival" or "coming," particularly the arrival of something or someone of great significance. This speaks not just to the birth of Christ, but also to the long awaited second coming. For many Christians, this is indeed the "reason for the season."

Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year in Western Christianity. The four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day, each one with its own meaning. Hope, Faith, Joy, and Peace. Or some variation on those themes. Many Christian traditions use an Advent wreath of evergreens, with the candles spaced around the rim, and each Sunday, another candle is lit.

Another Advent tradition is the Christmas tree, an evergreen tree decorated in the old days with candles and fruits and paper flowers. These days, it's electric lights and shiny objects.

These traditions aren't very old in the scheme of things. The practice of Advent appears around 500 CE, give or take a decade or two. Modern Christmas trees appear during the German Renaissance, but arise from much older traditions, going back centuries before the birth of Christ. Viking and Saxon worship of trees - especially the oak, are often seen as the origin of our Christmas trees.

No date for Jesus's birth given in the Bible, but references to the lambing season have led some theologians to conclude that he was born in spring.

There is some pretty convincing evidence that the Christmas season comes from the old Roman festival of Saturnalia, and is also heavily influenced by those northern European indigenous ways. Kissing under the Mistletoe is associated with worship of the Viking goddess Frigg.

For seven days from the 17<sup>th</sup> of December it was party season in ancient Rome. It was the start of a lengthy mid-winter period of merry-making and the season of goodwill - Saturnalia.

Saturnalia originated as a farmers' festival and commemorated the dedication of the temple of Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture and the harvest. During this festival, there was a reversal of traditional roles, with slaves wearing nice garments and sitting at the head of the table.

Families gave each other gifts, and homes were decorated with evergreen wreaths, and wax tapers and torches were lit. The festival is described as one long party. Over-eating, gambling, drinking, singing and sharing witty tales were all part of Saturnalia celebrations. Those who did not join in were considered scrooges and humbugs. The Sigillaria - held on the 23 December - was a day of present-giving in ancient Rome.

And December 25<sup>th</sup> – the date of the solstice in the Julian calendar - was the festival of Sol Invictus, the Unconquerable Sun, which always returned, bringing light and warmth to the world.

And although some Christians deny this, it is easy to see how all these pre-Christian traditions and practices influenced present day Christianity in the West. The use of evergreen trees and wreaths to symbolize eternal life was also common among the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews – as was the lighting of fires and candles during the shortest days.

Tomorrow is the winter solstice, and marking that event goes back even further. 4000 years BCE, the people who built Stonehenge waited for the sun to shine through a certain spot between the pillars, heralding the news that the sun would return. And then, they celebrated.

There are hundreds of such archaeoastronomical sites across the planet, the oldest of which is Nabta Playa in Africa, and is 7000 years old. I'll bet they partied too, when the solstice came around.

That means thousands of years of celebrations and festivals and religious observances taking place at or around the winter solstice, some of which are still around today. Christmas. Hannukah, the festival of lights, celebrated by the Jewish people. Dong Zhi in China. Shab-e Yalda in Iran. Inti Raymi in Peru. Here in the Southwest US, the Zuni observe Shalako, and the Hopi, Soyal. Toji in Japan. Yule in northern Europe.

From time immemorial, in the long nights of the northern hemisphere, people gathered. They put up evergreens, lit fires, told stories, sang songs. We are part of that lineage.

Now, there are those who claim that the Christians appropriated the Roman – who they called Pagan – festivals and practices. Or is there another way to look at it?

Maybe the Pagans made the Christians adopt them. These were ancient and deeply popular festivals, after all. And cancelling them would have created a great deal of unrest. Rome was a ferment of religious cults, some of them secretive and violent. The Emperor Constantine had converted and made Christianity the state religion, but that did not magically transform the beliefs of the citizens. Constantine bowed to the popular will, and in the end, perhaps they both gained.

Cultures and religions are constantly borrowing from each other and evolving in ways that are not amenable to control by the powers that be. These acts of cultural creativity are widespread and ongoing. They are largely syncretic, containing a multitude of voices, ideas, and practices that are sometimes at odds with each other.

Unitarian Universalism is such a syncretic religion. There is Santería, a fusion of Catholic practices and African folk beliefs. It emerged in Cuba during the 17th century, and has been embedded in Cuban society ever since. In Maya folk religion, the members of the Catholic Trinity, the Virgin Mary, a number of saints, the angels and the devil have melded with traditional and patron deities, and ancestral heroes to form something completely new. Mixed Jewish and Christian households celebrate Chrismukkah, which although not strictly a religious observance, is an interesting practical development.

There is no culture or religion or technology that isn't the product of borrowing and mixing. The tensions and contradictions inherent in that process are part of the richness and vitality of the human condition.

Perhaps we should think about culture and religion as ongoing creative endeavors. We are artists. Sometimes we make bad art, or weird art, or clunky art. Sometimes we make great art. Art that feeds our souls and helps us understand in better ways.

Creativity is not something subject to ownership, appropriation, or the purity police. To claim otherwise is to deny the creativity and power that lies within all of us, to see ourselves as victims and not powerful co-creators. To deny our common humanity and our imaginations.

We imagine the experiences of others by virtue of our common humanity. Their pain resonates with ours. Their grief resonates with ours. Their joy resonates with ours. Their creative responses to life and survival spark our creative responses. This is where dignity and respect arise, and without those, there can be no peace. There is no Other in our common humanity.

Does it really matter if Jesus's birth is mapped onto some ancient Roman holiday? Or if the lamp oil really lasted 8 days? This misses the point, really. The truth lies not in the details, but in the wholeness of the story and the experience. In gathering together during the long cold nights to share and celebrate, to await the return of the light and the warmth.

We do that in unique and wonderful ways, with who we are, and what we have at hand, and with the memories and stories of those who came before us.

And next year, and the year after, and in a century and another century after that, it will be the same, yet different. Ancient, yet new. Reborn and shaped by fresh hands, and told by new voices, and we will be the ones who came before.

This is our dream, our hope and our faith. There is joy there, and peace, if we choose.

May it be so.