

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS FOR FREE SPIRITS - THE BLOOM AND MAGIC OF THINGS THAT ARE NEAR

Posted on December 8, 2019 by Andrew Brown



READINGS: Luke 2:13-14

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

From History’by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Used as the epigraph to the first edition of Nietzsche’s The Gay Science”(1882)

To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine.

Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1886 preface to Human, All-Too-Human” (1879), trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

A step further in convalescence: and the free spirit again draws near to life slowly, to be sure, almost reluctantly, almost mistrustfully. It again

grows warmer around him, yellower, as it were; feeling and feeling for others acquire depth, warm breezes of all kinds blow across him. It seems to him as if his eyes are only now open to what is close at hand. He is astonished and sits silent: where had he been? These close and closest things: how changed they seemed! what bloom and magic they have acquired! He looks back gratefully to his wandering, to his hardness and self-alienation, to his viewing of far distances and bird-like flights in cold heights. What a good thing he had not always stayed at home, "stayed under his own roof" like a delicate apathetic loafer! He had been beside himself: no doubt of that. Only now does he see himself and what surprises he experiences as he does so! What unprecedented shudders! What happiness even in the weariness, the old sickness, the relapses of the convalescent! How he loves to sit sadly still, to spin out patience, to lie in the sun! Who understands as he does the happiness that comes in winter, the spots of sunlight on the wall! They are the most grateful animals in the world, also the most modest, these convalescents and lizards again half turned towards life: there are some among them who allow no day to pass without hanging a little song of praise on the hem of its departing robe. And, speaking seriously, it is a radical cure for all pessimism (the well-known disease of old idealists and falsehood-mongers) to become ill after the manner of these free spirits, to remain ill a good while, and then grow well (I mean better) for a still longer period. It is wisdom, practical wisdom, to prescribe even health for oneself for a long time only in small doses.

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ADDRESS

Advent and Christmas for Free Spirits - The bloom and magic of things that are nearest

Our four-and-a-half century old Unitarian, Free Christian and Universalist tradition has, at times, consciously been able to understand itself as attempting to be a church of the free spirit and we, individually, have seen ourselves as attempting to become brothers and sisters of the free spirit. For example, [Norbert Fabián Špek \(1870-1942\)](#), the founder of the modern Czech Unitarian church ([Religious Society of Czech Unitarians](#)), said of its building in Prague, 8 Karlova Street:

The house is of great historical value. In 1404 it was occupied by a sort of liberal Christian body. They called themselves Brethren & Sisters of the

Free Spirit. They were accused of laying more stress on a Christian life than articles of faith. They believed more in the inner light than the letter of the Bible. Further they did not believe in the Trinity and were accused of pantheistic tendencies. I regard these people as the first Czech Unitarians' ([Norbert Fabián Čapek: A Spiritual Journey by Richard Henry, Beacon Press, 1999, pp. 195-6](#)).

In these disorientating and unhealthy times this self-identification as a church of the free spirit is something to which I wish we could consciously return because I think it may help us to find a way back to a great health; the possibility of which this address will conclude.

But as a religious tradition we have rarely articulated, either to ourselves or to others, any basic process through which a person must go in order to become a genuinely free spirit.

Well, on this second Sunday of Advent I want to remind you that Nietzsche offered us one which I have outlined most fully in my 2016 *Sea of Faith* lecture called [The freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today: Becoming Free Spirits and Archeologists of Morning](#), copies of which are always to be found in the vestibule or here, by the door. But this morning I will simply, and briefly, illustrate the basic process at work in the context of Advent and Christmas.

We start with (i) the comfort found at the family hearth. Drawing on Nietzsche's book, *Human, All Too-Human* (subtitled *A Book For Free Spirits*) the philosopher Gordon Bearn notes that:

Those who will become free spirits do not begin by being sick, but by being healthy, they are in fact bound by what fetters fastest: by their dutiful reverence for their elders, their country, their teachers, and for the holy place where they learned to worship. They are fettered by all those ideals that warm one to the family hearth. These ideals are normally taken to be of the highest value, and so Nietzsche can write of those who will be free spirits that their highest moments themselves will fetter them the fastest, lay upon them the most enduring obligations" ([Gordon Bearn: Awakening to Wonder](#), SUNY Press, 1997, p.4).

Advent and Christmas is a season full of many things we have felt to have been of the highest value and which have been celebrated before the family hearth. This hearth is the holy place where many of us first learnt to worship. It's a holy hearth where God is perceived to be with us ([Immanuel](#)) before which families and friends gather to exchange

gifts drink and to eat in convivial ways at the darkest time of the year. For so many of us Advent and Christmas has been one of our life's highest moments' (especially when we were children) and this is why it fetters us the fastest' and lays upon us an enduring obligation not to let these things go.

But so much has happened in our own lives and culture during the last two centuries that **(ii)** has ensured we, our heaths and our holy festival, have succumbed to the sickness of nihilism in which there has been a hateful assault on everything that had seemed so comforting. 'It comes upon most of us at one time or another that this festival is now empty – merely pasteboard and filigree. The natural sciences and philosophy have quietly been at work persuading many (if not most) of us that the God/gods of old is/are a mere chimera/s; historical-critical research has persuaded us that the Christmas stories contain, not neutral, objective, historical facts but are, instead, creative, uneven and inconsistent human myths and legends; the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism have created pressures that have contributed greatly to the fracturing of extended family networks and have simultaneously turned the equal and free-exchange of modest gifts into a multi-billion pound industry concerned, not with exchange, but only with unequal competition; so much of the food and drink we consume in this season has been effected in the same way and today we share together not so much the fruits of the local fields tended by local farmers but the products of globalised and highly mechanised factory farms whose workers are utterly unknown to us and about whom we often care little or nothing. All in all, if you are anything like me, these things (and many more besides) have often meant that I have expended most of my energy, not in preparing happily for Christmas, but in warding it off until the very last minute when, utterly exhausted by the defensive effort, I have finally given in to the pressure and spent the twenty-four hours of Christmas Day pretending that all is well and that the old hearth burns as brightly, warmly and meaningfully as it once did.

Sometimes it has felt as if this sickness were going to be one unto death but, like Bearn/Nietzsche, a real hope, an educated hope (*docta spes*), has always remained alive deep in my being that there might be a way to move beyond this awful state of affairs to a much better state of being. As did Bearn/Nietzsche, I, too, have discovered that, if you are able survive the long, deep and painful nihilistic assault then, miracle of miracles, it becomes possible **(iii)** to begin to convalesce in two phases.

The first phase is a cool one, one in which Bearn/Nietzsche suggests that the convalescent lives without any love but also without any hatred. The cooler convalescent – neither dead nor alive – floats above the earth. 'This seems to me to describe well the moments I'm sure we have all felt when we have been able to detach ourselves from the whole sorry show and begin to look at the season as if from a great height. As Bearn/Nietzsche says:

Everything is small. Everything is flat. Nothing matters. This is the mood equally of a scientist sure ours is a world of valueless facts and of those literary characters who float through a world from which they have been estranged and which they look on with a species of tender contempt'

(Bearn, p. 8).

I can certainly remember many years of my life spent in this cool phase in which I have walked through shops and Christmas markets, through family and church gatherings, feeling utterly detached, looking on everything with no love nor any hatred, but with a species of tender, knowing contempt. One way of putting this is to say we begin to experience Advent and Christmas as if we were detached, knowing, cynical historians, sociologists and/or anthropologists.

However, though it is absolutely necessary to pass through this cold phase, it is obvious that it can hardly bring full health because, although there is sunlight to be seen in this phase – a kind of clear, enlightening light – it is the kind found only in the highest and coldest altitudes of detachment. After a while it becomes apparent that if we wish to continue convalescing (and not merely catch one's death of cold) we must come back to earth 'where the sun warms.' As you heard earlier, here's how Nietzsche puts this return to earth in *Human, All-Too Human*:

It again grows warmer around him, yellower, as it were; feeling and feeling for others acquire depth, warm breezes of all kinds blow across him. It seems to him as if his eyes are only now open to what is near He is astonished and sits silent: where had he been? These near and nearest things: how changed they seem! what bloom and magic they have acquired! (HH I, Preface, par. 5, quoted in Bearn, p. 8).

Coming back down to earth in this warmer phase of convalescence it becomes possible for us to see and feel amidst the shops and Christmas markets and in family and church gatherings, 'spots of [warming] sunlight' in which begin to appear the bloom and magic of things that are nearest' (Bearn, p. 14) things that, before, had been obscured from our sight. Warmed in these occasional spots of sunlight our eyes begin to open, and we begin to see so many people near at hand trying their hardest to be good, kind and decent human beings despite being cast adrift amidst the horrible pasteboard and filigree of the modern, neoliberal capitalistic world.

Lastly, these moments of warmth gives us the genuine hope of being able to enter into **(iv)** the final phase of great health in which we might be able to live completely and fully in these moments of natural warmth. As Bearn says, This spirit freed from the

tradition that seeks metaphysical comforts is surprised by a new happiness and a new love for all that is delicate. The great health is a life attuned to what is near'

This attitude is seen most clearly expressed in the epigraph by one of our own religious tradition's great figures, [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) that Nietzsche chose to grace the first edition of his *Gay Science*:

To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine' (Emerson: History).

In this context I do not think it is entirely coincidental that Āpek, the founder of the modern Czech Unitarian Church entitled one of his most famous books ["To the sunny beach: the guide to a happy life"](#).

So, to draw to a provisional close, we can now turn to the traditional Christian focus of the Advent and Christmas season, namely, the Christ-child.

From the foregoing I hope you can see that for Bearn/Nietzsche the great health 'can only come after the sickness of nihilism with the acceptance of the value of this world, the earth, of the little things that are nearest to us' in which state we are able to live as neighbour to precisely the things that the metaphysical tradition only found valuable as indicators of another metaphysical world' (Bearn, p. 32).

But, alas, we also know that the Christ-child spoken of in all orthodox, believing, Christian circles remains in play as an indicator of another metaphysical world' and this means that a genuine free spirit cannot properly celebrate Advent and Christmas in these Christian circles.

But all is not lost because for the free spirit there is the great health to be found in understanding the Christ-child can only be found in the actually living, mortal human children of our world and it is this singular insight that is explicitly celebrated in the hymn we sang last week, earlier in this service, and will sing once more on Christmas Day: *The Universal Incarnation'*, by [John Andrew Storey \(1935-1997\)](#)

Around the crib all peoples throng

In honour of the Christ-child 's birth,

And raise again the ancient song:

Goodwill to all, and peace on earth.'

But not alone on Christmas morn

Was God made one with humankind:

Each time a girl or boy is born,

Incarnate deity we find.

This Christmastide let us rejoice

And celebrate our human worth,

Proclaiming with united voice

The miracle of every birth.

Round every crib all people throng

To honour God in each new birth,

And raise again the ancient song:

Goodwill to all, and peace on earth.'

([You can download a pdf copy of a selection of John Andrew Storey's writing at this link](#))

Personally, I can see no other way of achieving the end imagined in the ancient song quoted by Luke, 'Goodwill to all, and peace on earth' (Luke 2:14), than by bravely letting go of the old health offered by Christianity which saw our salvation only in **another world** and, instead, becoming consciously prepared to suffer the sickness of nihilism, the slow recovery from which can not only help inoculate us against further sickness, but also, in time, bring about the great health that, thanks to the bloom and magic of things that are nearest, can always be found in **this world** .