

A Happy Atheist Christmas!

Chris Highland (writer, teacher, social worker)

I was born on December 25th and I became a minister because of that day and the long-ago One who shared that birthday. As a church leader I assisted in many a Christmas Eve candlelight service. As a chaplain, I led many a seasonal celebration with women and men who didn't feel much like celebrating as they sat in jails and stood on the streets (those outsiders who find "no room in the inn" holyday after holyday, in homes or churches. . .I always found that strange, don't you?). I used to love the candles, the greenery, the presents and truthfully I still do. But mostly, as a chaplain, I very much enjoyed what I came to call "the present of being present." Being with people who were outsiders, who felt lonely, depressed and outcast especially in a faith-saturated culture, was a present to me as well, and became, frankly, the most meaningful part of the holidays.

I've written about all this before: *My Address is a River*, *Life After Faith*; *Jesus and John Muir*, and a pile of essays. Nothing new here. Yet, there's always going to be more to say when it comes to the meaning of this season. Some say I'm angry; others say I'm hurt; still others say I'm bitter and just want to attack faith and religion and god. There is a chestnut of truth to that. I usually respond that I am mostly disappointed, with all those things. It was disappointing to find that I could dedicate my life to serving the people Jesus was most concerned about and discover that "His People" (The Church) didn't, for the most part, share my dedication. It was very disappointing to find out that the more I associated and identified with the most outcast and marginalized among us the more I was personally and professionally marginalized by those who were supposedly my "community," sisters and brothers in my "family of faith." It was disheartening to have to struggle to pay rent on a lowly chaplain's salary while pastors were making \$100,000 plus a Christmas bonus to shepherd their warm and comfortable flocks. Finally, it was very disappointing to me to discover, to learn, to grow to realize, that the divine Friend and Companion and Ruler of the Universe wasn't really there after all. Wow, can that be a shocker! In fact, it was quite painful. Like a parent you thought loved you and promised to be there forever suddenly disappears without a trace, with no word, no warning. Stunning and kind of sickening really. When I lost my parents a rabbi friend said to me, "You're an orphan now," and when I lost my god it felt the same.

So, yes, I'm still a bit pained and angry, a bit bitter and bewildered by that. You can, as some do, judge me for the way I express my bereavement (which of course serves to drive in the knife a little more, thank you). But the point is the same: I am a survivor of

faith and really good with that. I don't seem to need a 12-step religious addiction recovery program (yet). I don't wear that on my sleeve. In fact, many I work with on a regular basis have no idea, no clue, that I have these thoughts and feelings. I just keep doing what I have always done, faith or no faith: try to help people be happy, healthy and feel a sense of belonging. Faith never guarantees any of these things, so I simply continue to act in the only way I know is best, and that's to show some compassion, to listen and try to help. My life story. Period.

The other truth to say is that it's not all about me! As a child I thought it was--Christmas Day that is. But as I grew up I found out that I wasn't the only one born on that day, in that season, and there were billions of people who didn't care one way or the other, one day or another. They could enjoy the season without chopping down a tree or chopping the head off a fat bird. And I realized that I could too. In a way one could say I found a big oddly-shaped present under the (living) tree: I unwrapped the enduring perennial gift of Nature's intrinsic goodness. Not always pretty, but beautiful nonetheless.

So, in this season of light and hope and laughing children (at least in some places, on some faces), I am not interested in taking the sparkle or the jolliness or joy away from anyone. Though I have no faith and feel no need to participate in the pageantry and credit-card frenzy of something fondly, even nostalgically, called "Christmas," I choose to step outside of it as much as possible, avoid the herds of shoppers and their frantic free-for-all to find a parking space and merely refuse to eat slaughtered animals under a slaughtered evergreen to prove I'm a good patriotic Christian. . . I mean American (easy to confuse these words these days). I choose to sidestep the Christ Child tug-o-war that the frenzied, fear-driven faithful call the "War on Christmas." Who has time for that fake battle?

Though I am a Christmas Baby, I don't feel the need to honor that Other Christmas Kid in any way like we see year after year season after season. How good and pleasant that is!

But speaking of the child. . .you know, The Child. I'm with Thomas Paine (you know, the Paine-in-the-backside guy who gave us *Common Sense*, *The Age of Reason* and the phrase "The United States of America"?!). Yes, I'm with that Paine, who said he had no beef with Jesus, in fact admired the heck out of the guy. There is no need to disparage the character of one of history's most exemplary characters. Without worshipping the man who was, legend tells us, born in a barn in a bundle of dirty hay, I can appreciate the man and his message, his "way" of peace and justice and basic human kindness.

In my mind, most of the Christian Church, those who call themselves by his name and claim to "follow" him, still can't wait to get away from the the dirty manger, to get out of the dark and dank barn, the dung-heaped stable, that is, to escape and deny the poor and humble origins, as quick as the donkey can waddle. That is, they never really got the Christmas Story and, ironically, tragically, can't seem to get the baby crucified fast enough--in barely three months!. As I have said for years in many forms in many writings and sermons and classes: Jesus would never be welcomed in any of the places called "Church." Now, isn't *that* disturbing? A sad fact; a disappointing irony. And now, as a former person of faith, I remain discouraged by this, and I'm reminded throughout the year, but especially at "Christmastime," of the disconnect, the strange and odd and weird disconnect between "Christmas" and the birth of a poor Palestinian Jew 2000 years ago. I don't get it. And yet, I do.

Here's the toast for you to take into the season of lights. Think of it as a kind of **Atheist Christmas Card**, a non-believer's cheerful wish for comfort and joy and goodness:

Celebrate the Child, the real child of the story; reflect on the circumstances of poverty and injustice and religious/political oppression in which that child was born, and in which many children are born today. Turn the celebration into compassionate collaboration.

Celebrate that the child grew to be the wise teacher Yeshua, Jesus, and that Jesus was a great and respectable figure in human history. Find joy and courage in the fact that he can't be owned or packaged by any philosophy or religion.

Celebrate with good tidings and good cheer that the homeless kid with a dark and shady past grew to be an amazing teacher with a message to light up the world. Standing alongside Buddha and Socrates, Solomon, Lao Tzu and Confucius, Marcus Aurelius and Muhammad, Francis Wright, Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and countless others, Jesus of Nazareth was a wonderful, inspiring human being who had *no need to be God*. His humanity was divinity enough.

And remember to remember: you don't have to "do" Christmas, the holidays, the season. Choose your own way of enjoying this time of year. Start a new tradition, something no one has done (I climb a tree!). See if there's someone who needs a hand and offer yours. Visit someone who is alone. Keep it light! Find a new trail to hike, a letter to write, a new movie to watch or meal to prepare and share. Make the season a

new kind of "holyday" for yourself, your family, your community. Theist or no, it's up to you, and always has been.

Merry Christmas (Happy Hanukkah and Solstice and Every Blessed Day too)!