

A Letter to Santa
Rev. Mark Stringer
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
12/13/09

Dear Santa,

It's been such a long time since I have written you. In fact, I can't say that I remember ever doing so. You see, my parents weren't big fans of yours. I mean, we'd talk about you coming to our house and bringing gifts, but under the tree, on Christmas morning, all the labels on my presents said, "From Mom and Dad". I remember asking them, "If the presents all came from you, why does Santa have to bring them?" I don't remember their response. I think they changed the subject. Or knowing my dad, maybe he just said, "That's a good question...", leaving me to come to my own conclusions. He's been really good about letting me connect the dots for myself my whole life. It's probably one of the reasons I'm a Unitarian Universalist. I should remember to thank him again for that.

My first childhood home didn't have a fireplace, so my parents put up a store-bought cardboard version, complete with a light-bulb powered "fire". The chimney didn't reach the ceiling. I think my mom probably just wanted a place to hang the Christmas stockings. Still, I wanted to know how you, Santa, would get into the house to fill them. You obviously wouldn't be coming down our cardboard chimney! My mom said something about you coming in through the front door. I tried to get my mind around that. It seemed a much easier way to get into all the houses on your route, but, boy you sure would need a lot of keys! Probably a whole sleigh-full! Where would all the toys go? I decided you must use magic to gain access. Sometimes, magic is the only thing that makes sense, isn't it?

Santa, you may remember, since I assume you pay some attention to these things, that my first time performing on a stage was in a first grade Christmas pageant, playing you. Donned in a red-suit, cotton-ball beard and big black belt borrowed from the kindergarten teacher, I had the responsibility of singing "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." I sure was nervous! But being encouraged to stand in front of my classmates and their parents and sing as though I had a right to be there was a wonderful confidence building experience, and, we could even say, a significant contribution toward my future. Maybe that's why each time one of the children of our congregation stands before

us to share a story in a service, I get a little choked up. Who cares if we sometimes can't make out every word they say? We are giving them the gift of being seen and heard, and what an incredible, potentially transformational gift it is.

My childhood was the heyday of animated television Christmas specials. Every year, it seemed, a new one would appear. In most of these, Santa, you were portrayed as a loving, kind-hearted guy who only wanted to bring joy to people's lives. However, I must say, I have always found your behavior in the "Rudolph the Red Noised Reindeer" special to be a little suspect. Perhaps you, too, remember the part that has concerned me. When you discover that young Rudolph, who has already impressed you with his flying ability, has been hiding a feature that some would consider a deformity (his shiny red-nose), leaving the other reindeer to "laugh and call him names", you are standing right there, but you don't tell the young bucks to stop it. You don't reach out to Rudolph, in sympathy for his plight of being different by design. No, you chastise his father, saying to Donner, "You should be ashamed of yourself." If you would have stopped there, Santa, we might have believed that you were suggesting that Donner should have embraced Rudolph's difference and not tried to hide it. But that was clearly not your intent. For the very next words you speak highlight your real interest: yourself. You say, "What a pity! He had a nice take-off, too."

Obviously, Rudolph's shiny nose had nothing to do with his flying ability. He was different, not deficient. And yet you left Rudolph to wander away in disgrace. Did you think later about how your obvious self-interest kept you from showing compassion for the outcast? Did it weigh on you, as you sat down to dinner that night with Mrs. Claus? Here you were, obviously the most powerful, privileged person at the North Pole, with all your needs being met, and even you couldn't find it in your heart to stand up for poor Rudolph? Obviously you came around, once you could see that the reindeer and his shiny nose would be an asset on a "foggy Christmas Eve". And one supposes your heart eventually opened to him for reasons beyond his usefulness to you. Still, every time I see this scene of you disparaging Donner's family, my heart breaks.

Perhaps you are not responsible for this dramatization, and it doesn't represent what really happened. But let me tell you, Santa, you might want to apologize anyway. After all, if pastor Rick Warren can come out this past week and make a public statement condemning anti-homosexual legislation in Uganda, even though by all implications he

and his associates clearly contributed to its development, then can't you also make a public statement of apology, or at least clarification of your unkind behavior? A simple Youtube video would do the trick. A man of your stature speaking on behalf of fairness and equality could make a big difference. And you know, Santa, if you decide to make a public statement, would you consider mentioning how, when you make your yearly trek all over the world, you bring gifts to children with same-sex parents, too? There are so many people who still believe that "real" families only come in one basic form, and there is no one who could let them in on the truth more easily than you. After all, you've got first hand experience. Give it some thought, OK?

As disappointing as I have found your initial disregard for Rudolph to be, Santa, I will say it has, strangely enough, given me reason to hope. After all, if the most singularly generous being on the planet can be so obviously self-involved, too, then it gives us reason to reflect our own behavior, particularly those places in our lives where we might be denying justice to our neighbors. Furthermore, your transition from denouncing Rudolph's difference, to embracing it, reminds me of something I heard recently at a marriage equality conference. Harry Knox, the religion and faith director of the GLBT advocacy group the Human Rights Campaign, spoke of how for years he carried in his wallet a clipping of a letter-to-the-editor of a Christian publication, a letter written by a 14-year old young man, declaring that there was no room in Christian belief for accepting homosexuals. You may wonder why Harry carried this clipping around so long that it disintegrated. Why would, Harry, an openly gay man who has found his life calling in working for justice for his GLBT sisters and brothers and those who love them, keep this relic of injustice? Why would Harry, who was denied ordination to the ministry by his denomination, because he is an openly gay man, want to keep so close to him for so long such a painful reminder of how his God-given identity is disparaged on a daily basis? He confessed to us that he kept the clipping of the published letter, treasured it even, because he was, those many years ago, the young man who wrote it. That's right. He penned those words of exclusion and judgment. He kept them in his wallet as a reminder that, just like he did, people can change, and they often do. And Hallelujah for that, right Santa? Harry reminded the conference attendees that people adjusting to cultural shifts like same sex marriage typically need two things. One: they need to be educated with accurate information, which includes, in this case, learning from real-life same-sex couples and their families and friends. Two: they need time. Time to process, time to reflect, time to connect the dots, so that one day, they might transform from naughty (or at

least narrowly focused), to nice. I bet you see this kind of transformation all the time. And I bet, in the end, you know that most people are genuinely nice, or at least want to be. They just need the means and the time...to get there.

Since I'm asking you to consider making an apology, let me offer one as well. When I was in third grade, I came to the conclusion that you were not real, and I took it upon myself to make sure everyone around me knew it. Someone had to debunk the ancient mythology of your existence, and, now that I had determined the truth, I was proud to take on the responsibility. I was merely a soldier in a righteous cause offering a public service on behalf of honesty and justice. One December afternoon, as I sat on the school bus with my neighborhood pals, waiting to be driven home, I must have been preaching my smug nine-year-old perspective a little too loudly because the bus driver marched back to my seat and demanded that I exit the bus with him. I still remember the rage in his eyes, as my 18 year-old inquisitor grabbed my arm and protected the institution of belief in the supernatural. He shouted at me: "What the [beep] is wrong with you, you little [beep]?" Somehow I had developed enough strength in my nine years to withstand his barrage and even tried to offer a counter argument. But he would have none of it. In fact, my attempts at reason only angered him more. Who knows for sure what really got his goat that day? He claimed he was looking out for the children who didn't need some smart aleck taking away their Christmas joy. But maybe he was settling a score for a wise guy who had once stolen his dream. Or maybe he just didn't like me. Certainly his passionate attack on me betrayed his own desire to "protect the kids"!

Nevertheless, I think I learned something important that day, Santa. For a long time, I thought the message was, "Don't declare the truth unless you know people will be receptive to it."

But, after nearly a decade of being a Unitarian Universalist minister, I now interpret the lesson to be: "Don't argue with people about speculative matters. It only angers those who don't agree with you and bores those who do."

So, these many years later, let me make it clear. I'm sorry for attacking my fellow school children with my truth and for trying to reason you away from people who weren't ready or willing to let you go. There was and always will be room on the bus for people who believe and people who don't. Besides, just as my dad taught me, it's better when people come to their own conclusions anyway, and

change for their own reasons. Arrogant peddlers of truth lack one of the most convincing arguments for their cause—compassion for the humanity (and freedom!) of those who see things differently.

I know that I have wandered far off the course of a typical letter to you, Santa. I suppose most letters you receive are much more concise and to the point, explaining what the author wants for Christmas and not a lot more. So, since I know you are a very busy guy these days, let me get to it. These are some things I've been thinking I might like from you for Christmas. This is not an exhaustive list, Santa, but any combination of these would be nice.

I know you probably don't risk going to prisons and jails, what with all the guards on 24-hour duty. However, could you find a way to pay a visit to the women and men behind bars this Christmas? I've come to understand that our legal system can be a little more arbitrary than we might like to believe, and that our prison industrial complex in this nation is far more focused on incarceration than rehabilitation. I'm just asking that you give a nod and a wink to these folks, give them some peace of mind, if only for a day. Visit their families, too, as I know you will. I'm thinking these folks need a little extra love this holiday, as well.

Santa, I don't know if you do this kind of thing, it seems something more reserved for angels and ghosts, but would you gather up all our US congressmen and women and make them pay visits to those without adequate health care or the means to get it. Make sure each of them visits people most like themselves. I know there are millions from which to choose, so it shouldn't be too difficult. I'm talking at least a full day of hearing from their constituents, their neighbors, their sisters and brothers, long enough for them to see that access to health care is an issue that affects everyone, one way or another. You might even take them to some graveyards, so that they better understand the stakes. And then, when the visits are done, send them right to the Capitol and lock the doors until they work out their differences. It's long overdue in this nation for adequate health care to be a right, not a privilege.

Santa, could you linger in all the places where war prevails? Paying visits to the soldiers and those caught in the middle of violent conflict, especially the women and children. And while you are at it, how about sprinkling a little magic dust on those who, removed from the battles, make the decisions that prolong them. I know there will always be

sacrifices that need to be made for war. I just want our leaders to remember that peace-making involves sacrifice, too.

Santa, my daughter asked me this week to wake her up when you arrive at our house on Christmas Eve. So, when you slide down our chimney or enter through a door (your choice, of course), would you please make sure I'm awake, too? In my 42 years I've never seen you in person on Christmas either.

Santa, would you let all the people of First Unitarian Church of Des Moines know how grateful I am to be traveling with them. We are not a perfect community, but we're doing OK and getting more connected, more open to life, more expecting to love, more prepared to serve all the time.

Santa, would you accept the gift of my gratitude for your example of Christmas cheer and the lesson your story imparts to all of us who still believe in the magic of the season, which is, after all, no matter our religious tradition or lack thereof, really

- about finding light even in the darkest of times
- about the possibilities always waiting when it seems life is most against us,
- about grace in the midst of hardship, love in the midst of hate, and belief in the midst of despair.

And Santa, thank you for teaching us through your example, that the jolliest person is always the one who gives the most.

Your friend,

Mark

p.s. Could you send Heat Miser over here for a day or two to clear the roads of all the ice and snow? Thanks!