

## CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTS ON THE BEACH

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### Bulletin Quote:

The mission of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock is:

To inspire spiritual and intellectual growth, and provide a spiritual home for future generations;

To serve the needs of our community; and

To stand on the Unitarian Universalist Principles in fostering the pursuit of truth, fairness, respect, and social justice.

### Main Talk:

Back in the 1970's, I was deeply involved in my chosen line of work and operating another demanding small business on the side. In addition, I had allowed my enthusiasm and naiveté to get me into positions of responsibility both in our church and in our local government. My situation was no doubt similar to yours in your late 20's or thereabouts -- at least in respect to the energy and dedication it took to sustain the pace.

About that time, we took a week off from work and chartered a Soverel 37 sailboat in the Abaco Islands. We went with another couple with whom we were close and with whom we had shared our house at times. This was a bare-boat charter, meaning the rental was boat only, no crew, which left us free to sail, motor, anchor among the many uninhabited islands strung along the east coast of Great Abaco Island enjoying life however we pleased. I know some of you have also been there and know what an idyllic place this can be. Typically the outer islands of the Abacos are palm and small tree covered with sandy beaches interrupted here and there by low, rocky promontories, and of the size one

can walk around in half a day or a little more. Each island is separated from the other by distances that range between the width of the Rappahannock to that of the Corrotoman. And if you sailed the uninhabited outer islands of the Abacos in the sunny, 80 degree weather of late Spring of the mid-1970's, outside of your like-minded boating companions, there was no one there.

On three islands toward the center of this long chain, there are three villages. One was focused on small wooden boat building. The second island village staffed a hotel on one end of the island. This village resembled more a compacted 18<sup>th</sup> century New England town painted in tropical pastels, with walking streets not wide enough for cars, as the ancestors of the current population were American Tories looking for a new home after the events of 1776. We had rented one of the three sailboats based from there. The third island, much further south, had a somewhat larger village that offered rental vacation homes on the beach and the main sailboat-for-charter fleet, both activities capitalizing on the island's distinct and picturesque lighthouse that topped a hill at the harbor entrance. The lighthouse still operated in the old way with the lens floating on a pool of mercury, revolved by a hanging weight, like on a grandfather clock. The keeper climbed the lighthouse once a day to wind the weight back up. The charter fleet wasn't allowed to travel the 20 or 30 miles up the island chain to where we were so no one intruded upon our warm and adventurous world.

After a week of wonderful sailing among the uninhabited islands, walking the beaches, snorkeling over the reefs, flying kites from a lovely sailboat with two beautiful women

and a good buddy on board, it was time to return the boat down the chain to the tiny marina adjacent to the little New England-like town which is aptly named Plymouth. The marina was run by a guy named John who lived on a run-down wooden powerboat which his pumps kept afloat. John was a big guy and seemed more British in his English than the ex-Tories who were his fellow villagers. He wore an aged pair of dirty short shorts that hung low over a bit too much of a belly. I don't remember his shirt if he had one. And like many other elements and mechanisms of his marina, his zipper on his shorts was broken, not an issue of importance or priority in the more out-of-the-way areas of the tropics.

The marina had room for about six boats at its dilapidated docks, three of which were John's "charter fleet." In spite of its small size, John's marina did have the ability to lift boats out of the water for needed repairs. There was a largish sailboat next to John's office shack. The boat was propped up on timbers so that the live-aboard American owners could repair damage that occurred when the boat had been blown backwards against the shore during a recent windstorm. The boat's owners had found that the propeller shaft had been bent and had shipped the shaft off on the monthly supply boat that serves these outer islands. Eventually the part would find its way to the U.S. where it would be repaired and returned.

And here is where the point of my travelogue begins to appear.

While the lady of the couple lounged on the canvas shaded deck of the stranded sailboat deepening her already deep tan in the cockpit that was now ten feet or more in the air with the boat on the hard, the man sat on a timber next to the keel taking advantage of the shade of the hull. He sat with a pen knife in his hand working on a string of Christmas lights he had found on the beach. As he and I briefly talked about nothing much, he was unscrewing the bulbs, scrapping the corrosion out of the sockets and splicing frayed wires in hopes of getting every bulb to light. Christmas tree lights – and it was April.

My internal reaction was an immediate and strong mixture of how silly that was and how much I envied that man.

That image is one of my defining images I have carried with me and has played a part in my journey ever since.

The four of us then climbed into a motorboat that had stopped at John's dock. After an hour's ride back to Great Abaco Island and a short taxi ride to the landing strip, we boarded an oil streaked propeller driven DC-4, having carefully walked around the puddles of oil spreading across the broken concrete from the severely leaking engine. With three of the four engines running reasonably well, we took off in a cloud of blue smoke with no signs of flame, headed back to our home in Michigan and our continually unfolding lives. Behind and below us, no doubt that man continued to clean and scrape those Christmas tree lights until he got most, if not all, of them to work.

Why has this image of Christmas tree lights on the beach stuck with me all these years? I'm not really sure. But I have developed a theory to which you may relate and it may be helpful for us to think about some.

The man on the beach with the Christmas tree lights was without apparent responsibilities. Yet he had made a commitment, a difficult commitment of getting those lights working. However, unlike most of our commitments, this guy's was one that had a number of characteristics:

1. Whether he succeeded or not was of little consequence.
2. No one cared enough to judge his success or failure.
3. He could quit at anytime without any loss of respect.
4. If he succeeded, he could still brag about his success...if he dared.

This is different than the way most of us have led our lives. We have accepted responsibilities and made commitments that have consequence, consequences external to ourselves. (Now I'm talking about things outside our family commitments and responsibilities. Family commitments that are common to most all of us so please don't mix up the two.) We have accepted responsibilities and made commitments that have consequences external to ourselves. We have stepped up to goals and achievements that are apparent to others as to whether we have accomplished them or not – we've said yes, we'll do that with or for others where it will be obvious whether we did it, did it well, or not. We may even have gotten ourselves into a situation where we wished we could have quit...but didn't out of fear of losing the respect of others...and ourselves. And, when we

succeeded, we may have even have committed the sin of bragging about it while others roll their eyes to the ceiling but respond appreciatively, even admiringly, just to be polite. There are some folks, rare to non-existent among UU's, that shy away from any kind of responsibility or commitment of consequence, and even make that claim that they don't make commitments of consequence as though it is a characteristic to be admired. Why? I'm not sure. Maybe it's because, as some people do, making commitments of consequence is a personal test, a personal growth opportunity, a personal challenge. However, learning, and possibly revealing, what you can and can't do can be uncomfortable. I'm not sure why some people boast about not making commitments of consequence.

There is strong appeal to both of these two types of commitments, of consequence and of no consequence. A commitment of consequence gives us the opportunity to move toward personal goals, or do our part toward goals of groups of which we are a part. A recent President's corner in our UUFR newsletter commented upon how deeply our membership is involve in unselfishly contributing to meet the needs of our community, especially the disadvantaged. Typically, these commitments increase our own feeling of self-worth, self-respect, which are usually reinforced by the respect and appreciation of others. A commitment of consequence may also have the advantage of challenging our abilities, technically or socially, thus adding to our capabilities and self-confidence. A commitment of consequence may even give us the opportunity to leave tracks, marks on the unfolding timeline of our neighborhoods, communities, interest groups, businesses, technology, or even culture. Possibly tracks on the landscape as well. Commitments of

consequence give us the opportunity to apply the talents and abilities built up over a lifetime to the opportunities at hand, a form of conservation of resources. The philosophy is “You worked hard to get it—so use it, don’t waste it.” Also commitments of consequence enhance the meaningfulness of our lives...things that look good on our resumes, or obituaries I suppose, without the need to enhance them with puff words.

Commitments of no consequence also have their appeal. Commitments of no consequence provide an opportunity to be our own sole judge of success, to rationalize that success or lack thereof without critique. Commitments of no consequence come with no pressure...unless we choose to pressurize ourselves. Commitments of no consequence keep us in total control of the commitment. And, I believe, commitments of no consequence have a cleansing effect that, in part, provide a balance against our other activities that do indeed have stresses that go with consequence.

So how do we deal with the attraction, the positives, of both types of commitments? Most of us don’t want to be 24/7 productive burn-outs nor do we want to be just parasites, reaping the benefits of commitments of consequence made by others, the little red hen fairy tale where pig and others of the barnyard wanted to reap the benefits without helping to grow the wheat or to make the bread. Finding the right balance over time between commitments of consequence and commitments of no consequence isn’t easy and, unfortunately, it is usually a trial and error process.

“Work Spurts” work. By committing to measurable goals in defined segments that are of consequence with Christmas tree lights on the beach between segments is one way of allowing both types of commitments to enhance one another. This was the concept of “vacations” before vacations became a commitment of consequence in and of itself. Vacations morphed from just puttering around the house with commitments of no consequence, maybe fixing Christmas tree lights, to an expedition to Disneyland or the Grand Canyon, a commitment of major consequence as illustrated in spades by Chevy Chase in *American Vacation*. Was it Grandma who ended up dead on the roof of the car in a rocking chair? Or was it Auntie something or other?

Whether or not your vacations lengthen into semi-retirement to full retirement, Christmas tree lights on the beach can become a trap. Some workers and retirees suffer from this trap. They stop making commitments of consequence. Their sense of worth slips, their self-confidence recedes such that they get nervous doing relatively inconsequential things, whether in front of groups or individually. At times even their health, both mental and physical, suffers from the lack of consequential challenge and meaningful activity.

“Work Spurts” work. A short term commitment of consequence, be it six months, a year, or two, broken into segments is a good defense against this trap. A segment completed, its goal measured and achieved, signals that it’s time to head back to the beach for another session with the Christmas tree lights. In this way, a balance is maintained. During the “Work Spurt” and its accompanying demands, you can take comfort in knowing that the Christmas tree lights are in your near future at the end of the



current commitment segment. And, while scrapping away at the Christmas tree lights, you can also take comfort in knowing that you are not far from switching from parasite to contributor once again, in the very near future. It becomes a cycle of your life, each portion sufficiently separated from the other to mutually enhance both portions of your life, and inspire you to do more...with comfort.

It comes down to how you control your commitments of consequence, and your commitments of no consequence, thus, the control you wish to exert over your own life.

And that's my take-home for today.

Now, I'll share a personal secret with you. In my miles and miles of walking beaches, I have never found Christmas tree lights in the sand. However, one of my substitutes is this pair of \$20 shoes. They have been worn out for years -- many years. And, each winter, I devote hours if not days, sewing them back together with my sail repair kit, waterman's twine, found string, or whatever else is available. Continuing to salvage these shoes is a commitment of no consequence – a meaningless accomplishment of which I just bragged about to all my friends here for the very first and last time. Please, if you don't mind, roll your eyes to the ceiling and politely say, Wow!