

**December 27, 2015: Santaland Diaries. Dave Lloyd, Worship Leader, and Kim Johnson-Ryan, Worship Associate**

Today's service included readings from Santaland Diaries, by David Sedaris. Santaland Diaries first appeared on NPR's Morning Edition in 1992. Mr. Sedaris presented an expanded version for This American Life in 1996, and it is now available in printed form in two different collections of essays, including Holidays on Ice, published in paperback in 2008 by Back Bay Books.

*The first reading was from the beginning of David Sedaris's essay, in which he decides to take a job as an elf in Macy's Santaland, partly because he was unable to get a job with UPS.*

**Message:** How many times have we faced this level of disappointment? The best job David Sedaris can get is being an elf. A better job would have been to lift packages all day for UPS. It seems that sometimes all our options are bad ones. Either you get a brown uniform, or you get a green uniform. When we look back at the end of a year, we see that often we didn't have much of a choice; all we could do was make the best of a bad situation.

And when we did have a real choice, when we look back at the end of a year, or at the end of a relationship, or over a number of years, sometimes we realize that we had a choice but made the wrong one. Regret can follow us our whole lives. But regret is an illusion. Regret is based on magical thinking. Regret is based on the idea that, if we had chosen differently--if we had taken that job, if we had not married that person, if we had just said the right thing--everything in the universe would have been exactly the same, except for that one thing. But this is not so. If we had taken that job, who knows if we could have been rushing to catch the train, on the first day of our new job, and hit by a bus? If we had not been in that relationship, we would have never learned that thing about ourselves that has made us stronger and wiser. If we had said that clever thing, it would have reminded that person of what their fifth-grade teacher once said, and they would have disliked us forever.

One of our seven UU principles is respect for the interconnected web of life; it reminds us that everything is connected; that if you pull a string at this point of the web, it tugs on a string somewhere else in the web. If we could take back one action, we would have to reverse a whole cascade of results. It's a common theme in movies and TV; that a character makes a very small and meaningless decision, but it has enormous consequences. Or someone travels back in time and makes one little change, and everything is different in the world of the present. When we look back at the end of a year, or over the years in our lives, we need to remember that all the choices we've made, all the experiences we've had, have woven themselves into the web of our lives, and have made us what we are. We should definitely learn from our mistakes, but we should banish regret.

And when we think of the choices that the universe has made for us, whatever color uniform we end up with, we should study what it really meant for us and see what we can learn from each of our experiences. It's a common experience that when we are going through something, whether it's unemployment, or grief, or conflict, it takes forever and seems that no possible good can come from it. But when we look back, It wasn't that long, it wasn't really that

bad, and we gained this skill or learned this lesson. We can remember that famous Christmas song by the Rolling Stones: You can't always get what you want; but if you try sometime, you just might find, you get what you need.

*The second reading from Santaland Diaries was about how parents fuss over the photo opportunity with Santa, often ruining the experience of their children's visit.*

**Message:** Parents can so easily spoil Christmas, or any experience, by insisting on making it ever more special, more lavish, more perfect. A number of us have very difficult memories of holidays past; and it's often because the reality didn't match our ideal of what the holiday should have been like. And when we were going through it, either we, or our families, concentrated so much on making it the perfect Christmas that we raised the stress level on all of us to the breaking point.

Not only at holidays, but throughout our lives, it's easy to insist that everything be perfect, and thus, to ruin...everything. We want our friends, our lovers, our children to just be a little different; just do a little different. Just be more attentive; just give us a little more space. Just do what we say; just think for yourself. Just fill the dishwasher the right way. We want people to change to be more the way we need them to be. And when we get people just the way we want them, we don't want them to change to be something else.

Another of our UU principles is acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. Sometimes this means letting go. The video won't be perfect, the meal won't go as planned, our friends will continue to have those irritating habits.

*The third reading was a series of descriptions of the many people who come to Santaland. The reading ends with a segment about how adults come to see Santa and always say predictable things. They think they are being new and unique, but they are similar and predictable.*

**Message:** It's true that each one of us is much less unique than we think we are. In his Christmas song, "All Around the World," Paul Simon sums it up like this: "There's no doubt about it, it was the myth of fingerprints. I've seen them all and man, they're all the same." But in the story, David Sedaris interacts with everyone he meets in a unique way. He shows respect to the forty-year old woman with the personality of a child. He approaches the soap opera actress with a level of hero worship. He turns around a mother's need to use Santa to threaten her children into good behavior, by telling them that Santa will steal their TV and appliances. And the people themselves are all different. A parent uses her child to parrot a political message. A child wants his dead father back--and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. One of the elves hits on women like Santaland is a singles bar.

There is constant tension in how we perceive the world. We're all different, but we're all the same. We know that people should be treated alike, their rights should be respected, regardless of where they come from, what they look like, how they talk. But we know, just as well, that people act differently, react differently, depending on who they are and where they come from. You can tell a joke to this one that will offend that one. You can ask this one

anything, but that one won't ever help. You can't rely on this one, but you can count on that one for anything.

It really is just like fingerprints. From far away, or even from close enough to see, to hear, other people, they're really all the same. You can't tell, from looking at, or listening to, another person, what they're really like. It's only when you get close enough to them to really know them; to see them up close, close enough to feel the ridges in their fingerprints, that you can see just how different everyone is. One of our UU principles is justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. It doesn't say treating everyone the same; it doesn't mean blindly ignoring our differences. "Justice" walks a fine line between punishment and forgiveness. "Equity" means treating people fairly, and knowing when to treat people differently because of their different needs, and when to extend to them equal treatment because of their human identity. "Compassion" combines care with tough love. The more you read the words in our principles, the more you realize with what care each word was chosen.

We also need to keep in mind how we are the same as everyone, and how we are different from everyone. When we consider how troubled we are, we need to remember that other people are troubled as well. There is virtually nothing that we can go through that someone else hasn't also gone through. There may be some comfort when we consider that others--many many other people, since the beginning of time--have suffered just as much as, or more than, we are suffering. Besides, that knowledge means that there are likely many people who have gone through what we have, and have survived; and therefore can help. When we drop the notion that we are unique, that no one can understand what we know, we can reach out for help.

We also need to remember that others are NOT just like us. That what they are going through, no matter that it seems to be just what we went through, is in some way different from what we know. The temptation is always there to offer our own advice and our own views on other people's experiences. It's a truism that the advice that people give is usually advice that they know they should have taken. The advice we wish to give is not always what that person needs, or wants.

We're alike but different. We're all unique, but we have so much in common. As we move forward into the new year, we should always strive for the wisdom to know the difference.

*By the last reading, David Sedaris has reached the end of the Christmas season, when fatigue has set in, and he resorts to going off-message for his own amusement. At least one fellow employee reaches the breaking point with a difficult customer. But he can still appreciate the efforts of one Santa to really reach the parents that he sees.*

Message: So ends David Sedaris's adventure as a Macy's elf. It's a story that's told in a humorous, and often cynical, way, but it displays the deep humanity of the writer. He reassures people: "Trust me; Santa's not going to judge you. He used to be judgmental, but he stopped." He shares the story of the one Santa who asks parents if they have been good girls and boys; if they tell their children that they love them each and every day. He makes a point of the parents who don't want a chocolate Santa; they want a "traditional" Santa. He comes close to saying that they

don't belong at Macy's; they can go to the other store down the street that has separate lines for white and colored.

And at the very end, his co-worker finally has the opportunity to tell the rude, obnoxious customer off. Presumably, on her last day at Macy's.

Our first principle is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But respecting the inherent worth of every person doesn't mean we respect the worth of every action, of every idea, of every motive. As UUs we try not to make blanket statements of faith, or of morality. We try to see everyone's point of view. As modern people we don't like to say that one culture is superior to another; that one group of people are "primitive" compared with another group. But a culture that oppresses women, that makes slaves of children, that fosters hate and violence, is not a fit and healthy culture. And we're right to oppose it. We respect all people; but a person who despises others who look different, sound different, or worship in a different way, is wrong and should be stopped--especially if such a person presumes to seek political power.

There is right and wrong. Philosophically, we struggle with the concept of an objective right and wrong; we doubt the idea of a supreme being that has ordained this to be right and this to be wrong; but as thinking and compassionate human beings, with thousands of years of history and millions of years of evolution behind us, we know that the broad consensus of our world establishes that some things are just wrong.

This is a time to look back to see where we have been in the past year, and where we can go in the coming year. It's a time for reflection and self-study. Whether we say good-bye to old habits at the solstice, or make resolutions for the new year, we think about our own patterns and practices. But it's not all about us. The store is full of customers. We interact with all of them. How we treat them makes a difference in our own lives and in the world.