



**By: Sheila Flood**

*Sheila is a James Bay resident, retired, mother of two, and has lived in Victoria since 2003. She's been a member of the Bahá'í Faith since the age of 20.*

## Season's Greetings

It's Christmas time again! Good will is usually in large supply in our culture at this time of year. People socialize more, spend more time with family, begin to think of which small or large gifts would make the people in their lives happy.

What's to complain about, at this time of year? People usually cite commercialization as the main culprit, leading to mindless gift-giving that's more compulsory than joyful. Yet there's been a movement to counter that, from home-baking to providing services to buying fair trade goods – even purchasing goats for people halfway across the planet. That one blew me away. The creativity and generosity of people can be mind-boggling, the desire to do good and to contribute to the well-being of those we don't even know, utterly inspiring. Anyone who doubts the capacity of human beings for innate and genuine altruism obviously hasn't been around someone infected by the "Christmas spirit"!

I should get around to stating here that, as much as I believe in Christ, I'm not Christian. I don't put up a tree or decorations. I like Christmas food, love helping others celebrate and do give some gifts, but I generally feel that I'm looking at it from the outside. I can't say that I enjoy being bombarded by Christmas music for weeks or months on end, and have very happily noticed a decrease in that phenomenon in commercial venues. It's a little like perfume – a little is nice, too much gives you a headache. And it felt like a sort of cultural imperialism, albeit freely adopted, to see snow-painted windows and Santa Clauses in the Caribbean at Christmas in the 30 degree heat. Some details just shouldn't go global.

Here at the 49th parallel, if we didn't have a festival of lights at the winter solstice, this darkest time of the year, we'd have to invent one. A Wiccan friend of mine refers to the season as Yule. It puts things in perspective to learn the history of this festival that started as a northern European tradition. We light Hanukkah candles and Yule logs, celebrating all that light represents. It's a universal symbol, spoken of in all faiths, including my own: "...for love is light, no matter in what abode it dwelleth; and hate is darkness, no matter where it may make its nest," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in support of tolerance.

A while back there was a bit of a debate (at UVic anyway) about whether it was fair to put Christmas trees in public spaces. Personally, instead of banning it, I'd vote for more celebrations, public and private! Let's have more even more sharing of all those great faith traditions like Diwali, for instance, each at their own time and in their own way.

Here's a recipe for a messed up world: diversity in values and unity in all the superficial aspects. All of us would be wearing Santa hats and the same socks and holding wildly different beliefs about gender equality and the value of human life.

A friend from Austin TX delights in the eccentricity of Victorians – lots of facial jewelry and mismatched socks, but don't try to put plastic in the paper recycle bin. You'll get your hand slapped. We're in lockstep on some things.

I love this city, where diversity is appreciated and encouraged. It takes generosity of spirit to recognize the aspects and expressions that are of genuine worth in the faiths of our friends and neighbours, and curiosity to find out more about what those are. And why not help celebrate if you get the chance?

I've noticed "Happy Hanukkah" signs up more and more, which is wonderful! Maybe one of these days we'll have "Happy Naw-Ruz" and "Happy Navroz" signs in March. It will come! This is Victoria.