

*It Gets Better, Rudolph*  
*Letter to a Red-Nosed Reindeer*

**Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**  
**UU Church of Minnetonka**  
**January 23, 2011**

*(originally meant to be presented in December, but cancelled because of a snow storm)*

**FIRST READING**

***Youth Advocates and Educators Gather for Premiere of SPLC's New Film***

<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/news/youth-advocates-educators-gather-for-premiere-of-splc-s-new-film-to-combat-anti-ga>

On October 5, 2010, a crowd gathered in Washington, D.C., to watch the premiere showing of the Southern Poverty Law Center's latest Teaching Tolerance film, a classroom documentary designed to combat anti-gay bullying.

The film, called *Bullied: A Student, a School and a Case that Made History* premiered at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center at an event that highlighted the destructive power and the tragic consequences of anti-gay bullying.

SPLC President Richard Cohen and co-founder Morris Dees introduced the film, noting the need for schools to adopt strong anti-bullying policies that specifically protect gay and lesbian students.

"In recent weeks we've seen a number of teens take their own lives after enduring anti-gay harassment," Cohen said. "Each tragedy is a sobering reminder of our responsibility to take a stand against anti-gay bullying in our schools."

*Bullied* chronicles the powerful story of a student who stood up to his anti-gay tormentors and won a landmark federal court decision that school officials could be held accountable for not stopping the harassment and abuse of gay students.

Despite that ruling, anti-gay bullying continues to be a severe, nationwide problem... In September, at least four teens killed themselves after being subjected to anti-gay bullying and harassment. In the Anoka-Hennepin school district in Minnesota, at least four students have committed suicide in the past year alone.

Nearly nine out of 10 LGBT students [nationwide] experienced harassment in the past year – a rate three times higher than students in general.

**SECOND "READING"**

"It Gets Better" video by Dan Savage and Terry Miller

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IcVyvg2Qlo>

**SERMON**

***It Gets Better, Rudolph***  
***Letter to a Red-Nosed Reindeer***  
**Kent Hemmen Saleska**

Dear Rudolph,

Greetings! My name is Kent Hemmen Saleska. I am the father of two small children who don't really know your story yet, and I serve as the minister of a Unitarian Universalist Church on the western edge of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Our children here love to sing about you! I hope you're doing well with the weather up there – I'm sure you'd appreciate the 20-below *we* had this past week!

I bet you're wondering how I know about you. Well, good news travels fast, and stories about you! I heard a few months ago that one of Santa's reindeer, Donner, had a calf, so I was just waiting to write to you until you were big enough to get some mail. I know all baby reindeer hope to do some useful work around the North Pole someday, and that the biggest dream is get on Santa's team for Christmas Eve. Given all the training flying games you have to do, I know next Christmas will come quickly, so I hope you have the time to read this.

You see, I have a practice every year of writing a letter to a holiday character. This year, for many reasons, it felt like the time was right to write a letter to you. My letter is a bit delayed because of all the snow storms we've had down here, but I think before long it will get through.

And what a delight it is to finally write you! I grew up hearing and seeing stories about you. Like all good stories, each time I heard your story it always seemed new and I always loved the telling of it. Each year the story *is* new: as we sing about it, see it on TV, hear about your unique difference, and your struggle to grow and learn. One of the more powerful parts of your story is that each time we hear it, it reminds us about the strength each one of us has inside, too.

Did you know that you had strength? Or maybe you didn't even know we knew about your difference? Yes, I imagine from what I've heard that you wanted to keep it secret because you were ashamed.

Well, the stories do travel. But stories are curious things. There's a difference between factual stories and true stories. And I've heard both. Some of the stories include one that Robert Lewis May wrote about you in 1939, a song that was written about you in 1948, and even a special stop-motion animated TV show about you made in 1964. Each of these stories has parts that are a little different from each other. In one version, they say you are the son of one of Santa's reindeer. But in another version, they say you were born into an ordinary village in another place that was not at the north pole. One version says you were an embarrassment to your parents, especially your father, Donner.

That is one part of your story that I imagine is especially painful for you. Your father was very proud to have a son when you were born, but then was shocked and ashamed of you when he saw that, unlike all the other little boy reindeer, you had a nose that glowed red. He even tried to disguise it by covering it with a glob of mud. Inevitably, while you were playing with the other reindeer, the glob of mud fell off, and many of the other little reindeer saw that and started laughing at you, and making fun of you and calling you names.

Other versions of your story either don't mention what your parents thought, or say you were born into a loving home. One of the difficult things, I suppose, about being a legend, is that people usually never really know the facts about the life of a legend. And if we do, at some point, learn the factual details, we are often disappointed – and even angry – because we feel betrayed that the facts are not the same as the story we always heard.

As a minister, though, separating truth from fact – or maybe more accurately, *extracting* truth from fact – is a primary part of my calling. For example, we humans love to let ourselves get

hoodwinked into factual debates over whether or not the universe and our planet was created in seven literal 24-hour days, when the truth is that our planet and we creatures on it did arrive here after going through a creative process. We emerged from the stars, just like every other part of the universe. It is not likely we will ever know the facts of our origin, but the truth is that we exist here and now, and that we humans are no more separate from nature than you animals are.

It is difficult for people to see the truth of your story, Rudolph, through the facts because there are many different versions. Some people discount or discredit your story by saying it was merely a stunt by the Montgomery Ward department store in 1939 to save money on coloring books. By this they mean it was merely a capitalist maneuver to exploit your story in order to make a corporate profit. Some people even go so far as to say that, factually, you do not exist.

But all the stories do agree on one point. This point is the heart and soul of your story, and is what makes your story so powerful and meaningful, and one that we come back to and look forward to every year – even if it is covered up in all kinds of layers of cheap sales gimmicks and schlock. The heart of your story is that you, Rudolph, are different from all the other reindeer. You have a glowing red nose. Because of that one difference, you are teased and bullied, you are called names, and the other reindeer will not let you play with them. And that’s just the part of your story we hear about. I hate to even think about what else you endured that you never told anyone.

Rudolph, I know you are struggling right now, being so different, and yet trying to fit in, trying to prove yourself to all the others and to Santa about how well you can fly. I’m guessing it feels like no one pays attention to your feelings, your profound gifts, your true qualities because all they can see is one single physical attribute, your glowing red nose. So far, others have only seen the outer light from your red nose. But in time, others will see your beautiful inner light, too. Even if you don’t know it yet, with so many months ahead before Christmas, I know your story. Millions of other people know your story. We want you to have faith in yourself, because we know it gets better for you.

I know, though, that you are in a difficult place right now. Simply saying, “it gets better” at some unknown point in your future is probably not much comfort to you right now. And since you are not old enough yet to leave home and live on your own, I know you have to live with your parents and in your community for a while longer. Ultimately, you will need to find your own way. But, in the hopes of providing you with some rest stops along your journey, I also wanted to share some observations from my life experience.

Where I live in my country of the United States of America, we have all kinds of people who are different from all kinds of other people. The funny thing is, though, that we call some people “different” when each of us has some unique trait that often makes us feel different from everyone else, and each group different from some other group. This country is full of white people descended from Europeans who traveled here of their own free will; red people descended from aboriginal tribes who lived here for centuries; black people descended from Africans brought here against their will to be slaves to white people – and black people from African nations who came here more recently as refugees from wars or to freely practice their religion; brown people who often journey here from Central and South America looking for jobs to feed their families; and people from Asia who were brought here long ago to build our railroads, or those who arrived more recently as refugees or to study in our universities.

And then we have people from all kinds of different religions – including my own – who say they are more different or persecuted than people from every other religion. We have people who feel different from other people because they are rich, or because they are in poverty. We have people who feel different and alone because they suffer from addictions, or depression, or because they were unfaithful to their partner, or because they are suffering the ravaging effects of a physical

or mental illness. So many different people endure so many different kinds of pain, and most of us feel different or alone at some point in our life.

I know, though, that some differences are treated more harshly than others. A hundred years ago – and even now – one of the most painful ways to be different is based simply on the color of skin. Along with skin color, one difference that is most painful these days – and perhaps most closely parallels your situation – is based on who people love. Rudolph, can you believe that? Can you even imagine that some people in our country are hated simply because of the people they love? In our country, we call those people “gay.” Or if we break it down even more, we use more specific words like “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual” or “transgender.” As shorthand, sometimes we just use the initials: GLBT. But no matter what word we use, they are just different labels to describe the different gifts, the distinctive love, and the unique sense of self each of those people have.

Unfortunately, like you, Rudolph, many people who are bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender endure tremendous amounts of harassment and bullying, and even physical danger simply for being born the way they are. Sometimes the hate and anger, the bullying and intimidation, the pain of loneliness and shame become so great that some people no longer want to live or care to live in a world where they experience so much pain. As a result, some throw away their own lives. Last fall a rash of people who were BGLT committed suicide. And just last weekend in Alexandria, Minnesota, an 18-year-old high school student took his own life as the result of bullying he experienced in school. Unfortunately this is not a new problem, and unfortunately, without some profound changes in school systems and school policies, these deaths will not go away.

According to one well-known and well-respected human rights organization, the Southern Poverty Law Center, in the past 14 years, BGLT people were twice as likely to be attacked in violent hate crimes as people who are Jewish or Black, more than four times as likely as Muslims, and 14 times as likely as people who are Latino or Latina. I don’t know exactly where you are in the spectrum of bullying, but I do know it is not OK.

I’m assuming that young animals, like you, Rudolph, are similar to young humans. You don’t have as many emotional or communal resources to make it through your feelings of loneliness and shame. Those feelings are so powerful because they isolate you from others. So it is important for you to know that there are others like you. Maybe they don’t have such an obvious difference as a red nose, but it will be something else, I guarantee it. Your task, if you want to make it through, is to believe that life gets better when you can surround yourself by others who love you for who you are – and then find them!

No matter what, though, I am very glad your story gets told. You may not realize this, but in many ways, your life story resonates with others, and is meaningful to others. It seems that even Robert Lewis May, the guy who recorded and wrote down your story in order to share it with the world, resonated with your story. He got picked on, too, as a child because he was extremely shy, small and slight. So right from the start, from the very first time your story was written, your life gave meaning and support to the life and struggles of someone else.

I do have one warning, though. Rudolph, I urge you to value your own soul no matter what others think or how they behave. There is a difference between being valued for who you are, and being valued because you have a service you can provide for others. In general, Santa seems like a nice guy, and I do think he means well, but frankly, he doesn’t seem to know much about either individual gifts or group dynamics. You are being bullied, and he doesn’t step in to stop it. For someone who knows about what’s “right” and “wrong” behavior in human children, he sure doesn’t seem to know much about the behavior of reindeer.

Maybe someday, even if he only values you at first only when he has a use for you, that experience will help Santa think and act more compassionately for all creatures. No matter what,

though, you have no control over how Santa, or anyone else, behaves. So it is important for you to explore deeply inside yourself and find what is most valuable to you, and love that part of you fiercely, even if no one else does. And remember, others are doing some of this same work, too.

I have one more observation I want to share with you about this notion of “flaws.”

Somehow, early in life we get to feeling that our imperfections are abominations. If we’re too big, we think everything would be better if we were smaller. If we’re small, then we know life would be better if we were bigger. If we’re organized or anxious, we’re told we need to relax and chill out. And if we’re laid back, we’re told we are lazy and need to get our life in shape. But I know one thing about what we call “flaws”: they each contain a gift on the other side. Anxious or organized people tend to get things done, and laid back people tend to enjoy the moment more. And I’ll give you one clue about the future: the one who has a deformed proboscis is also the one who illuminates the darkness!

So many times, so many people and so many religions define themselves by how different they are from others. When we are at our worst, we Unitarian Universalists get caught in that trap, too. One of *our* flaws is that we often take pride in how much we are “not like” conservative religious people. Unfortunately that just tells others what we are not. That does not describe what we *are*. In the TV story about you, you and Herbie – the elf who wants to be a dentist – visit an island of misfit toys. Sometimes our church is like that island. We feel like a bunch of misfits because we feel like a bunch of people whose only reason for being together is that we feel like we don’t belong anywhere else!

But the flipside of this unfortunate flaw, and what is perhaps one of our greatest gifts to the world, is that we Unitarian Universalists welcome and celebrate diversity and pluralism.

When we are at our best, we offer a safe haven from other groups who can sometimes be mean or cruel or act like bullies. When we are at our best, we find value in our differences, we are generous with our time and our resources, and we look beyond our own small circle of misfits to see how we can make our circle grow larger. When we are at our best, we look for ways we can do good things for people who aren’t like us, just because they need it, and because we know what it’s like to be different. When we are at our best, we measure ourselves, and define ourselves, by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.

One of the most arduous tasks of our lives – arduous because it usually takes a lifetime and because it usually requires that we return to it again and again – is the task of learning, and believing, and trusting, that each of our flaws also brings with it a gift. You have one flaw, and that flaw is also your gift. The best advice I can give to you is not to run away from this gift, but to move toward it. Carry your light with joy, learn more about it, and discover how it can illuminate the darkness around you. Life does get better. And for you in particular, it’s going to get a whole lot better before this year ends!

Signed, with deep affection and faith,

- Kent