

Care
November 27, 2022
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley
North Universalist Chapel Society

The taste of the Thanksgiving was still in my mouth when I first to heard. Too soon, they came...the jingling and ring-ting-tingling holiday songs. I could have thrown my plate at the radio. Have any of you heard them? No one should hear them yet. There ought to be a law...like you're not allowed to play the carols unless it's December or something. I could have thrown my plate!

Not everyone feels this way. I understand that but I do wish they started a little later. And even through my reactions, I do love them nonetheless—the holiday carols and the jingling bells for the merry, little Christmas that's fast approaching. 'Let your hearts be light!'

What a crazy thing to say at this time of year! 'Let your heart be light?' Where is the light these days, can you tell me? It gets so dark outside. 'Let your heart be light?' It sounds like nature's cruel joke. "When it's late December, dark and cold... [gesture for them to sing] Where is the light?

When it's late December, dark and cold
Where is the light?
When old man year is bending low
Where is the light?
When the sun runs off to bed too soon
Where is the light?
And there's nothing but a skinny moon
Where is the light?

Can you tell me, where is the light? (3x)
Oh, the light's inside of me

When it's dark each morning when I rise
And it's dark when my eggs are fryin'
And it's dark when off to work I go
And it's dark again when I get home

Can you tell me, where is the light...? (3x)
Oh, the light's inside of me

It's in my skin and in my bones
In my heart and in my soul
That light of life, so bright and golden
Like a summer day
When the sun goes missing in the sky
It is rising in my eyes
Chasing all that winter gloom away

I'm burning bright like kerosene
I'm twinkling like the Pleiades
I'm dancing like a candle flame
I'm flaming like a fruit flambé

Can you tell me, where is the light...? (3x)
Oh_____, the light's inside of me!

It is so important that we nurture this light that comes from within. We need this light. The whole world needs this light.

More than two years ago now, in a meaningful gesture of compassion, empathy and respect, I poured the fragrant waters on the cornerstones of the church. The waters were fragrant because they'd been sustains the lives of flowers. The flowers had come from you and from the people of the Woodstock community, given in love to honor the lives of the brave ones that had fallen. We had placed four signs on the front lawn of North Chapel. Each sign carried a name. If we were doing this today, there would be five names—Kelly Loving, Derrick Rump, Ashley Paugh, Daniel Davis Aston and Raymond Greene Vance. Beloved souls, one and all. Kelly was a 40-year-old trans woman. Described as “caring and sweet,” she had moved to Colorado only recently. Derrick was 38 years old. He was a Club Q bartender. Club Q was where the shooting had taken place. He was described by his mother as “a kind, loving person who had a heart of gold.” Ashley was 35 and she left behind an 11-year-old daughter who is just devastated. Daniel was 28. He was a trans man who moved from Tulsa, Oklahoma two years earlier. And Raymond Greene Vance was the youngest at 22.

Retired military veteran, Richard Fierro is the person who confronted and disarmed the shooter in Colorado Springs. He had gone to Club Q to watch a drag show with his wife and daughter. Raymond Green Vance was his daughter's boyfriend. Fierro is a hero and he showed his concern. He said,

I want those that are in the hospital right now [to] get better. Please get better. We went out to see a show and have a good time. And, thank God, Raymond was smiling. He was dancing with my kid and my daughter got to spend the last day with him happy.¹

Richard Fierro “was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan four times and said in an interview with The New York Times the experience still haunts him. He left the Army in 2013 due to the brutal psychological and physical toll of war, and said he never thought he'd experience the same violence at home.”²

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https://www.democracynow.org/2022/11/22/headlines/suspect_in_colorado_lgbt_q_nightclub_massacre_charged_with_murder_hate_crimes

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https://www.democracynow.org/2022/11/22/headlines/suspect_in_colorado_lgbt_q_nightclub_massacre_charged_with_murder_hate_crimes

But Richard Fierro did experience that violence and surely, it was triggering and re-traumatizing for him...but he took action anyway. He found the courage within him to confront the gunman and to disarm him. What power he has! What courage! And what strength! What strength, even though he broke down as he told his story! What strengthens people like that? What steels their spine? What ennobles them?

What ennobles people like Adrian Vasquez, the Chief of Police in Colorado Springs? In a gesture of respect and affirmation, Chief Vasquez spoke the names of the deceased with their respective pronouns. He did it intentionally. It was moving.

Something rises up within us—something that is dignified, peaceful, quietly brave and true. Something rises like the morning sun when we witness things that are this beautiful, that are this tragic and that are touching...joy against the backdrop of challenge and sorrow. How do we process all of this without losing our balance? How do we stay afloat? How do we witness the weight of it all without sinking in the river like hardened stones?

In a gesture of compassion, empathy and respect, I poured the fragrant waters on the cornerstones of the church. I poured the flower waters ceremonially in order to honor the lives of the brave ones who had fallen. We placed four signs on the front lawn of North Chapel. Each sign carried a name—Nina Pop, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

As for the flowers, themselves? I brought them home with me—all of them. I made a mess of my car. I brought the tribute flowers home with me and I lined my garden with them. I lined my garden with the love and with the compassion that this community has shown for that which is most beautiful and most precious within us all—the light of life. I lined my garden with flowers and slowly, the flowers reentered the earth and later, the earth was soaked by the rain and the rainwater carried the nutrients that became the lovely vegetables...vegetables that local deer and neighborhood groundhogs stole right out of the garden.

I had a plan but I was foiled by elegant mammals and industrious rodents. The plan was to create some kind of gesture, some ritual, that would nourish us in times of great sorrow. Because the violence is relentless and sometimes we don't know what to do. I sing and that gets me breathing again after the wind gets knocked out of me. I sing a song called Love Will Show the Way.

You say you see no hope
You say you see no reason we should dream
That the world would ever change
You say that love is foolish to believe
'Cause they'll always be some crazy
With an army or a knife
To wake you from your daydream
Put the fear back in your life

Look, if someone wrote a play
To just to glorify what's stronger than hate
Would they not arrange the stage
To look as if the hero came too late?

He's almost in defeat
It's looking like the evil side will when
So on the edge of every seat
From the moment that the whole thing begins
It is love who mixed the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones
And it's love who made the stage here
Although it looks like we're alone
In this scene, set in shadows,
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play
For in this darkness love can show the way

I sing it like my life depends on it and I believe that sometimes, it does. I don't have to sing it well, of course. It's not a performance under heaven...but it is a prayer for me. It is a means that I practice, a way of grounding myself and finding my courage. A way that I remember who I am.

Mary Michael Wagner is a wonderful and gifted poet. She writes about the torso, the chest, the rib cage. She describes it as "an arbor of bones," a forest of hardwood bones—oak and ash and maple—rocking to and fro, backward and forward...as if gently moved by tide. And we hold this arbor, this forest within us, and we are moved ourselves, in the processing of all we carry. We are moved by the weight we bear and by the beauty that we protect.

"At the end of his essay, *The Fire Next Time*," my mentor explained to me, ...after exposing the dynamics of racism, the ways humanity is beaten down and torn apart by the devastating exploitations of racial injustice, James Baldwin says, quote,

"The question remains, *What shall we do with all this beauty?*"

Unquote. Baldwin evokes the persistence and the resilience of beauty, the face of the holy shining through human beings even in the midst of all that we do that defaces one another. And finally, Baldwin's prophetic call, like the prophetic call of so many artists, is not a call to outrage and pity which merely demands that the privileged become that paternalistic. It is a call, instead, to all of us to come together before the sacred altar of beauty and be transformed by the gentle and fierce insistence that that which is lovely not be defiled.

I want to make a big shift here.

In your Orders of Service, there is a By-Laws hand-out. Can you take a look at that? On one side, the printed side, there should be the first, few articles of our By-Laws and on the other side, there should be a largely purple graphic of a pie-chart or an abstract array of flowers. Please, take a look at that for a moment. Please notice precisely what I've described to you—on one side, please notice the opening text of the North Chapel By-Laws and on the other side, please notice one of two different graphic representations of said text.

Have you got it? [] Okay. Then, I have a question for you? How many of you—and there is neither honor nor shame in this, no judgment—how many of you have carefully read through the North Chapel By-Laws? How many of you have ever read through the North Chapel By-Laws? How many, before this moment (broadly speaking), were aware that North Chapel had By-Laws?

Good to know. Last question. How many of you recognize the picture? [] Excellent. So, you can read through the By-Laws at your leisure. Let me tell you about the graphics.

Like I said, you are currently looking either at a pie-chart or at an abstract array of flowers. The By-Laws have been analyzed along seven, different vectors—seven vectors that loosely correspond to the chakra system (the levels of Vedic energy within the human body) and seven vectors that closely correspond to a Western, spiritual system developed by this super-brilliant (and super-Buddhist), American philosopher named Ken Wilber. There's a lot that goes into this but suffice it to say that the seven colors that you see—light blue, sage, magenta, egg-shell, deep blue, fire and rose—represent those levels of energy as I have prepared this for you. In other words, these are graphic representations of how I want you to see the By-Laws AT FIRST.

As you can see, there is a lot of purple. There is a lot of the magenta level. And there ought to be. This is the level of law and order. These are the rules. Magenta represents the degree to which the By-Laws are providing instructions. This is how we have chosen to govern ourselves. This is how we have chosen to deal with time and treasure. This is what it means to call a minister in this tradition. This is how we have chosen to build and to strengthen our community. The By-Laws guide us, they implore us, they coach us to be faithful stewards of this establishment. They warn us of common sand traps and dangerous pitfalls. They order our assembly when we come together as one.

By-Laws do something that is much more powerful than this. They open the good way forward for that which is newly possible and they do so in the most mundane of ways. In his book, The Good of This Place, former president of Duke University Richard Brodhead wrote a chapter called "On Administration." [I'm sure that you are all almost unable to control yourselves. The overflow of excitement is surely colossal. (I'm kidding.)] But there really is such a book [show book] and there really is such a chapter and I really am quite thankful for what he writes. He writes,

One thing that has become clear to me is how many years one can spend in a university without paying attention to its administration. From this position [as Duke University president] I now suppose that the deep aim of university administration is in some serious sense to make itself disappear: that its real goal is to make possible for most people most of the time to think about other things.³

Good administration isn't always sexy but it makes things possible that would not be possible otherwise and making things possible that would not be possible

³ Richard Brodhead, The Good of This Place, p. 83-4.

otherwise is holy work. It should come as no surprise that the words 'minister' and 'administration' have a common root which means 'to serve' but not in a narrow sense. The good work of the work is not a commercial exercise. It is not designed to satisfy our individual desires and cravings. We serve in a broad sense. We serve the joyful dreams of Kelly Loving and Derrick Rump, Ashley Paugh and Daniel Davis Aston, Raymond Greene Vance and Richard Fierro, Nina Pop and Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd...and we serve the possibility that those who took their lives become worthy of their own somehow...not because the killers deserve our grace but because we deserve to be among those whose hearts are not closed by violence.

To be among those whose hearts are open takes a lot of effort. It's hard work. It is difficult, strenuous service. And it's beautiful. This work, this service is deeply beautiful in a way that artists James Baldwin would recognize. He bravely asked, "What shall we do with all of this beauty?" I think that we should use it to bless the world in the spirit of love. I think we should use beauty for its highest service. But how is 'highest service' best defined? What does it mean, precisely?

It means that we care. It does mean that we play by the rules. It means that we know why the rules are valuable. Now, we all can be good stewards of the church we love so well...by studying our By-Laws and by obeying them...but there is a deeper stewardship available to us. I think that we should go for it. Our By-Laws say that "the name of this organization shall be the North Universalist Chapel Society." Few can argue with that! Our By-Laws say that "the purpose of this Society is to provide a free pulpit and voice for liberal religion and to nurture a religious community bound by no dogma and restricted by no creed." They say that "this Society is a fellowship of seekers after truth, beauty, and goodness" and that we "strive to be tolerant of the ideas and behavior of others." STRIVE. They say that we "rely on reason, individual freedom, and democracy as our methods" and that we join together to understand our world, to cooperate with our fellow human beings and to enrich the community." What does this mean, precisely?

I would like to be honest and very real with you. I want to answer this question with integrity. Years ago, I was charged by the Board of North Universalist Chapel Society to pursue 'the work of Black Lives Matter.' That was not the language exactly but that was the meaning. I was thrilled at the invitation and terrified of the ministerial necessity. I have been called to do this work in a way that is unique. I would like to share that with you but it requires courage...because it's not a call to outrage and pity... It is a call to come together before the sacred altar of beauty and be transformed by the gentle and fierce insistence that that which is lovely not be defiled. It brings joy to the world and hearts are light.

We are looking for light right now. We are looking for hope, looking for goodness, looking for peace, looking for solace...for grace and sanctity...and these reside not far away but near at hand, ear at heart. It is so easy to get outraged. It's so much harder to find grace, to find patience, to find beauty, to find time enough to make new things possible. Yet, this is precisely the time and precisely the season to do just that. This is the time of waiting for something precious to be born, for something precious to rise and to shine...and to flower up within us.

This birth, this rising, this shining, this blossom is natural for us. It is written into our code. It's in our very DNA. And if you don't believe me, just check the By-Laws. This is what they protect.

In a gesture of peace, I poured the fragrant waters on the cornerstones of the church. Waters the honored the names of the fallen—Kelly, Derrick, Ashley, Daniel, Raymond, Nina, Tony, Breonna and George Floyd. The North Chapel choir sang, not long ago,

I'm gonna lift my brother up (my sister, my sibling)

They are not heavy

And this is true. We are no burden to one another for we have let our hearts be light.

The taste of the Thanksgiving was still in my mouth when I first heard the music...all of that jingling and all of that ring-ting-tingling. I could have thrown my plate at the radio. What can I say? Life is messy. People are complicate. The world is complex. Love is imperfect and absolutely glorious, just like you and me.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.