

Coming Back To Life (faith after tragedy in Nashville)

April 2nd, 2023

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

I have a sorrow and an overwhelming joy this morning that is wildly irreverent, triumphant and fantastically offensive. Please forgive me but I hope it's ok if I share it. I promise, there is a method to the madness.

Eighteen years ago, at a wonderful gathering that took place right here in Vermont, I saw flying proudly the beautiful state bird of New Jersey. It was not the American Goldfinch, as wonderful as it is. The "state bird" that I am referring to has to do with an often vulgar gesture of the hand, a kind of commonly used sign language. It was not this—which means "I love you"—but, strangely, it functioned in this way. Do you have a sense of what I'm trying to say? Used correctly, this state bird of New Jersey can be a blessing and a prayer.

So, long story short... Years ago, my old friend Keith was in a tragic accident. It was serious. He severed his spine and lost the use of the lower half of his body. Years after this accident, a big group of our friends gathered in Vermont for a reunion. Our youth group was getting back together.

Few of us had seen Keith in the wheelchair. So, it was hard. He's different now than he was back in the day and seeing him in this new state made many of us sad and nervous, though we feigned otherwise. We didn't get away with it at all. Keith is very smart and as a group, we're pretty bad at dishonesty.

Still, one by one, we greeted him as we arrived that summer morning—so awkwardly—and not too long after breakfast, it was time for Opening Circle, a ritual gathering marking the official beginning of our time together. My good friend, Hank, who is dear to Keith, stepped up to offer the words of welcome. He said (and these were his words precisely), "Can we all please STAND and gather 'round?" He was standing right next to Keith and he said, "Can we all please stand!" There were audible gasps. Hank can be foolish and brash and funny but this time, we were horrified. Keith couldn't stand like the rest of us. He's wheelchair bound.

We were horrified—all of us were—and an anxious hush fell over the room. There was a hollowness in our hearts, a cavernous emptiness. What a terrible way for our great reunion to begin. Into that very silence, however, Hank said, looking down into the eyes of our beloved Keith, he said, "Good God, I remember you being so much taller than you are today."

That was when I saw it, the beautiful state bird of New Jersey, the state where Keith and I so many others of us are from. It was the prettiest bird I've ever seen— wildly irreverent, triumphant and fantastically offensive. Keith let that good bird fly so boldly, right in Hank's loving face until we all got over ourselves, shattered from our pretenses by a blessing, by gesture of deepest friendship and holy love, by a sacred thing that brings us back to life.

Thank you, Hank, for your fearless and hope...and for your healthy ministry of us.

Quote...

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

— Howard Thurman
Author of The Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman:
A Visionary for Our Time

So, I ask you, friends, what is it that makes you come to live? Is it music? ...or meditation? Is it the state bird of New Jersey? I wonder how the Rev. Howard Thurman would have connect with Hank? I think that they would have deeply love each other. Do you know about Howard Thurman? Not everyone knows his name.

Howard Washington Thurman was an American author and theologian. [He was a leader in the movement for civil rights and] played a leading role in many social justice movements and organizations of the twentieth century.¹

So reads the thumbnail of his Wikipedia page.

According to Taylor Branch, Howard Thurman was among the “triumvirate.” He was one of the three, leading, Negro preachers of his time—with Vernon Johns and Mordecai Johnson from down in Paris, TN. Martin Luther King, who was thirty years his junior, claimed Thurman as an influence.

“Keep afresh before me the moments of my high resolve,” Howard Thurman used to say. He was a mystical, progressive theologian. When Martin King was only a child, Howard Thurman led a delegation of African Americans on a six-month journey through India. They met with religious leaders from around the world. Mahatma Gandhi was among them and Gandhi asked Thurman “‘persistent, pragmatic questions’ about the Black community and its struggles.” Together, they spoke of a principle called satyāgraha. Through this principle, they laid the groundwork for the non-violent strategies of the civil rights movement.

Satyāgraha is a Sanskrit word. It is a compound word in two parts—satya, meaning ‘truth’ and āgraha, meaning ‘insisting’ or ‘holding firm.’ Satyāgraha translates as ‘truth force.’ It’s powerful.

Through Thurman, the living bond between Gandhi and Martin King is obvious.

When Thurman asked Gandhi what message he should take back to the United States, Gandhi said he regretted not having made non-violence more visible as a practice worldwide and remarked, “It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world. 2

A vital charge. And so, again, I ask you, what is it that makes you come to live?

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. “Today is Friday, June 23rd of 2006 and this is the first day of our reunion gathering up here in Vermont. We gather now to recognize and to celebrate the twenty years that have

past since last we were together as LRYers back in the 1980s. My, my... How things have changed!

So, began our reunion that was my sorrow and great joy. It took place 17 years ago. Fifty or sixty of us gathered from all across the country to celebrate having participated in the youth group of the UU church. LRY, we called it...which stood for Liberal Religious Youth...or stood for Left-over, Raspberry Yogurt...or for Little, Red Yoyos...or Love Reaches You, depending on how seriously you wanted to take the world at that time.

Obviously, though, today is not that day. Would that I could convince you otherwise. It is, however, the Sunday that is nearest the 1st of April. So, Happy April Fools Day. Foolishness can be a holy thing. Today is Sunday, April 2nd and it is Palm Sunday in the Christian tradition and the title of this morning's reflection is Coming Back To Life, well-suited for early spring and for us. It is a reflection about finding faith after the tragedy, like the one in Nashville. []

There is a story of a man who prayed a lot—seemingly always. Another man, a young journeyman, a minster who was new along the path, he came upon this praying man with a question. He said, "Excuse me, my good brother, may I ask something of you? Why is it that you are praying all of the time?"

The praying man responded. He said, "I do not pray always, even though I truly wish that I could." He said, "I do pray often. Have you seen me while I was in prayer?"

And the journeyman said, "Yes. I see you praying as the sun rises on my morning walk to work and again, I see you praying at it sets on the far horizon. Some days, I come home for lunch. Each time I pass, I see you praying. It seems to me that you pray all of the time. Is that not true?"

The praying man said, "No, that is not true. I do not pray all of the time...but I do pray often. So, I'm not surprised that you believe I always pray. In truth, I'm just consistent. I pray at those three time and at two others."

"Why do you pray so often? Why do you pray five times a day?"

"Because we so easily forget, my friend," the praying man responded. "Because so quickly we forget the holy gift."

"Are you Muslim?" the journeyman asked. "In my studies, I've learned that this is the tradition." Their conversation continued for a while but I don't know recall the rest. The story ends before we find learn the specific details. It is the Muslim tradition to pray five times—at fixed times—every day. Fajr takes place at daybreak. Zohar takes place after the Sun passes over its highest point. Asr happens at a calculated time between the sun's zenith and its setting. Maghrib happens soon after sunset and Isha begins after dusk.³ Five prayers.

This is one way of praying but it is not the only way. There are many ways of praying, many ways of remembering the holy. And it is not only the Muslim tradition that holds that we should pray this intensely. In fact, it was St. Augustine who said that when we sing, we are praying twice. And it was in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians that he suggested that we pray without ever ceasing.

A prayer is an appeal for blessing, a holy gift, a gesture of grace. It is an act of calling a little piece of heaven down to earth. Patti Cathcart sings it beautifully. She sings,

What are you waiting for, believe in me
Isn't it love in this life that you need?
You can offer your soul on an alter of sacrifice
But give your heart to me
Let's bring heaven down here
Let's bring heaven on down
I don't want to wait for the angles
Let's bring heaven down here

This is a loving prayer but prayer comes in many shapes and sizes. Others traditions have different ways of calling blessings down to earth.

As a seminarian in Unitarian Universalism, I learned to sing a song of blessing back in 2004 and I've been singing it without ever ceasing for 19 years. I learned this song from a vibrant and barrel-chested man named John Berquist. He was a beautiful man. He died a few years ago but his music lives on within me. I carry him and others as precious and powerful in the melody every time. And I sing,

Call down a blessing...
Call down

Beauty above us
Beauty below us
Beauty around us and between us

So, call down a blessing...
Call down

This is one of our ways but it is hardly the only one. And when I say that it is one of our ways, what I mean is that I learned this song from a beloved elder...in a UU church in Chicago. I don't know who technically holds the spiritual copyright, if there is such a thing. What I know is that my spirit moves when I sing it. I'm moved in a way that is larger than me, in a way that feels like it belongs to a sacred river that moves us all. I don't mean to impose this experience on others but I do want to share that singing Call Down a Blessing feels like prayer to me. It is this special feeling, more than the song, that keeps me connected with others.

There are many ways of singing, of praying, of blessing one another with holy gifts...~~with real-life treasures that we can testify about.~~

You may recall the story that I've shared before...about the woman who cried out for blessings. And it's not my story. It's Bill Clark's story to share, my colleague, the former minister in Provincetown. He was walking in the woods, reflecting on his practice of faith when he came upon a meadow—wide-open and filled with flowers...and in the middle of that meadow, there stood woman brave and free, standing strong in the center of it all. She cried out, "Blessings, come!!!" And Bill was surprised...and jealous, jealous that she proclaimed her faith so powerfully.

She cried out, "Blessings, come!" and then, stood in the meadow in silence...and nothing happened. Nothing moved. She cried out again, "Blessings,

come!” Her passion caused my colleague to wonder, “What would it mean for UUs to proclaim our faith as passionately?”

He mulled this question over for a while, then something holy happened. The woman in the wide-open meadow cried out for a third and final time and with this, her prayers were answered and Bill witnessed it al first-hand. Now, the seas did not part. The skies did not open so flooding rains could fall torrentially. The hand of God did not come down and touch the faithful woman on her cheek. But out from the thick wilderness, out from the dense forest surrounding the meadow sprang a 90-pound, playful and spirited golden retriever, the dog for which the woman in the meadow had been searching. ‘Blessings’ was the name of her dog, her golden, her faithful companion, as it were. Finding her beloved blessings was an answer to her prayers. If one were to ask, “Was this answer a secular answer or a sacred one?”, I could only respond by saying the reasonable people could disagree. One thing that we can all agree upon, though: when blessings come out from the wilderness, when grace reveals itself from out of the greatest mysteries of life, it makes us feel that we have come alive.

It is that time of year again. The crocuses and daffodils, the tulips and the red clover are pushing through the snow right now to great the brand new day. It’s the time of year to come alive again, even amidst...especially amidst the challenges we face.

Tragedy unfolds again in Nashville. I won’t quote the numbers of mass shootings in this country from the chancel of this church today. No single house of faith... No single faith, alone, can handle that much tragedy in a single service. Painters can’t paint it. Poets can’t get there with beauty, only with bitterness. Simple prayer is not enough to console a broken family. The poet cries in anger, soul-crushed, punch-drunk, swinging recklessly, as if at blind faith itself...

mohammed is pacing when he isn't kneeling
jesus can't talk 'cause he's too busy weeping
yahweh's a mother who sighs at the ceiling,
“If only they knew how good it could've been!”

it's the day of atonement 2004
would jesus be happy we evened the score
you hypocrites, bullies who profit from war
may your gods all spit on your graves

i say all of you gods, tell your squabbling children
whatever the color or call
they can all go to hell (if there is such a thing)
go to hell, have it out, have a ball

Dayna Kurtz is the courageous poet, the artist, sweet-bitter broken, who wrote and sings these lines.

What do you think she’s doing? Why do the artists rage? ...because they preserve in us a certain tenacity that we need...to resist, to insist upon truth, to cleave to it. I see these artists as bravest champions of a bitter grace that is stronger

than the violence, that outweighs sorrow and grief and even death. I see such artist as brave stewards of the peaceful soul of love...even as horrify our pretenses, even as their art is resisted and is criticized and is defiled by those of us who meet its edges before we're ready.

Five years ago, Manuel and Patricia Oliver lost their son, Joaquin, in Parkland. You may remember that on the 14th of February, on Valentine's Day, tragedy unfolded at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School near Miami, in the suburban town of Parkland, Florida. I was reminded of the three of them, not because of what just happened in Nashville, but because of Manuel's recent arrest for speaking out at a committee hearing. Manuel and Patricia have been fighting ever since they lost their son. Two, armed Capitol Police officers held him to the ground—face down on a marble floor for resisting, for insisting that we find a way to stop killing school children. It isn't complicated. Manuel said,

I am sick of going to the Capitol Hill buildings, knocking doors, and explaining, with my pain, with our suffering, that this is not good. [] ...we need to get together, seriously. Otherwise, this will vanish, like Parkland vanished, like Santa Clarita vanished, like Uvalde vanished. And we cannot allow that to happen. I'm sick of this, and I will do everything that it takes. Everything that it takes. I'm flying to Tennessee tomorrow, by the way. And we have an event on Monday at 10:30.

That would be tomorrow...at 11:30 our time. Hold them in your hearts with me, will you?

So many of us keep asking ourselves, 'How is it that this keeps happening?' and 'What do we need to do to make it stop?' and 'How is it that we seem to have forgotten where we've been?' and 'How can we re-member who we are?'

Sometimes, a little bit of distance is all you need to bring you home. Planning this service earlier this week with David in the library, he spoke of a place in Turkiye—Urfa Göbekli Tepe. It is an excavation site that reveals the remains of an ancient civilization that is 11,000 years of age. If it's true what they say, that we grow old by inches, we may be far wiser than we know. How do we call upon that wisdom? A great artist named James Baldwin raised this question. I don't know if he answered this question directly but I know that he raised it. He said that he did in an interview. He was reflecting on the conclusion of a book that he wrote that was called Another Country.

Baldwin finished the book in Istanbul, a city with which he felt a deep connection. He felt deep roots there, old roots. He felt that these roots were not his roots but they were as old as his roots and he found in them something true and powerful.

The city of Istanbul is 950 km from Göbekli Tepe, the 11,000-year-old civilization. That's roughly the distance between here and Charlottesville, VA...which is relatively close, considering that Istanbul is 7,767 km from here. Baldwin had traveled to Istanbul in order to find his way back home. Sometimes, a little bit of distance is all you need.

In life, we face great choices—choices of family and career, choices of spiritual and emotional integrity. How we live into these choices, how we survive

them is up to us. This spring, as the crocuses and daffodils are breaking through the snow, when tulips and red clover are rising in earth and in us to greet this brand new day, it's time again for us alive, against the odds and against the grain, even amidst the many challenges we face.

At the reunion that I mentioned, the reunion that was my candle of sorrow and joy, we can all find ways—perfectly imperfect ways—to overcome the challenges we face. Life is loving enough, spirit is loving enough, God and time are loving enough to see us through. A little birdie told me.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

ld

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org › wiki › Howard_Thurman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Thurman)

² [https://en.wikipedia.org › wiki › Howard_Thurman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Thurman)

³ <https://www.noorulislam.org.uk/prayer-times-explained/>