

Birds on the roof of my mother's house
I've no stones that chase them away
Birds on the roof of my mother's house
Will sit on my roof some day
They fly at the window, they fly at the door
Where does she get the strength to fight them anymore
She counts all her children as a shield against the pain
Lifts her eyes to the sky like a flower in the rain

I am my mother's son...because I do precisely this. Just like her, I lift my eyes to the sky when things get hard...and just like Rilke, I love the dark hours of my being.

I Love the Dark Hours of My Being

December 13th, 2020

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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that these dark and chilly days find you warm and well. It is so good to be together. My name is Leon Dunkley and I serve as minister in this humble house, at North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) here in Woodstock, Vermont.

Today is Sunday, December 13th and the title of this morning's reflection is I Love the Dark Hours of My Being.

Twenty months ago, in April of 2019 BC [meaning, Before Covid], as Holy Week began, the darkness of deepest days in December was broken, was shattered in the heart of Paris by a great and terrible light. Notre-Dame Cathedral was all ablaze. Paris was burning.

It's an ancient structure. It was constructed slowly over the course of two hundred years. As the historians tells us, Notre-Dame is:

A treasured icon of gothic architecture and medieval engineering. Built from glass, stone and timber..., for 850 years, [Notre-Dame Cathedral] has been an enduring symbol at the heart of French culture...

It is an absolutely tremendous structure and the ways that we have used it

over time—the ways that we have laughed and cried in it, the ways that we have lived and died in it—the Cathedral has acquired a kind of spirit, a vitality. In a matter of speaking, it has a life of its own. Notre-Dame has been described as...

...a pinnacle of medieval engineering. The Cathedral can hold 9,000 worshipers and its hundred-foot tall walls contain more than 32,000 square feet of stained glass. The ceiling is a series of dome-gothic vaults that hold up the cathedral from the inside. A complex 550-ton web of timber forms a cross-shaped roof, topped with 1,300 lead tiles and a 300-foot tall central spire. Wrapped around the church are 28 flying buttresses, limestone arches that brace the walls from the outside. And at the front, two mighty towers with ten, massive bronze bells inside soar over 226 feet into the sky over Paris.

And beyond the claims of nations, Notre-Dame is something else. It is, as a great admirer called it, "one of humanity's greatest artistic and architectural achievements."

This great project got underway in 1163—four years before Oxford University is founded in England, 473 years before Harvard and 606 before Dartmouth...just to provide 1163 with a little bit of context. Christopher Columbus would not be born in Italy for 288 years and, most impressively, North Chapel in Woodstock, Vermont—also one of humanity's greatest achievements—would not be dedicated for just shy of seven centuries. Clearly, the Notre-Dame Cathedral has an incredible history. None of this is lost on any of us...and yet, on April 15th of 2019, the great cathedral was nearly lost to us.

It was the beginning of Holy Week. It was a very special time. As Christian theologians remind us, "All time is holy because all time is God's gift to us. They name one week, Holy Week [and this, I quote],

...because it takes us to the very heart of God's gift to us. [Holy Week] is the story of a journey... For Jesus, it's a journey from the false triumph of Palm Sunday to the true triumph of Easter Sunday. On Palm Sunday, the crowd will cry out, "Hosanna!" because they see Jesus as a king who is going to lead them to a great military victory. False triumph. On Good Friday, the same crowd cries out, "Crucify him!" because that is the triumph that they want. The triumph that we see on Easter Sunday is the true triumph...of life over death and

the triumph of self-sacrificing love.

What must that have been like? ...to be at the beginning of this sacred time and walk down "Main Street" in Paris and see the city's most beloved cathedral all ablaze? In a manner of speaking, our house was on fire... shattering the night at the heart-center of the city with a dangerous and terrible light?

[Singing] Oh, how she burns...

Oh, how she burned that day. It was a terrible fire. The sirens wailed. The fire trucks stationed themselves strategically around the cathedral. Drawing water from the Seine, the river that runs through the city, the ladder trucks extended themselves as high as they could go but fell far short of the 226 feet that was required of them.

The fire had started above the dome, the dome of stone...above the nave or the central part of the sanctuary. Protecting that stone dome from wind and weathering was a great lattice-work of timbers, oak trees cut by hand and arranged in a most beautiful and spectacular way to support the lead roof above.

Now, the Cathedral, itself, was built in the form of a cross. The dome of stone impossibly high above it followed this architecture precisely...as did the great lattice-work of timbers. And, therefore, as did that terrible, terrible fire.

Thousands of people gathered that night to bear witness to the blaze. Bringing flowers in their hands and bringing children in their arms and bring songs and prayer and hope and silence, thousands gathered. Something incredibly beautiful was being lost. And so we sang...

Ave Maria

Gratia plena

Maria, gratia plena

Ave Dominus

Tecum

Benedicta tu in mulieribus

Et benedictus

Benedictus fructus ventris tuae

Ventris tuae, Jesus

Ave Maria

Virgin of the sky
Sovereign of thanksgiving and loving mother
Accept the fervent prayer of everybody
Do not refuse
To this lost person of mine, love
Truce in his pain!
My lost soul turns to you
And full of repentment, humbles at your feet
It invokes you and waits for the true peace
That only you can give

What a great and terrible night it was on the 15th day of April...some 20 months ago, back in the spring of 2019. Thousands were gathered there witnessing. Thousands watched in sorrow as the spire burned passed the breaking point and fell, as it crashed through the burning tiles of the roof and its great lattice of hand-hewn oak underneath, as it fell down shattering through the vaulted stone dome that sheltered the sanctuary for the lion's share of a millennium.

The world looked on...in great sadness...and in prayer and joined in the singing. And prophets and priests and presidents made great proclamations... about our healing and our rebuilding of that which had fallen. But it was not an architectural achievement that we passionately pledged to rebuild. Surely, there has been and there will be great effort and great expense dedicated to the physicality—to "the church of wood and stone," as my old minister used to say. At the same time, there has been and there will be great effort and great expense dedicated to the spirit that the physicality both protects and represents—to "the church of blood and bone," as my old minister used to say. For, when that great steeple fell at Notre-Dame, something fell within us as well.

The physicality of sacred places is reflexive. It interacts with us over time and distance—at times, impressively. The physicality of a place is also metaphysical. I not trying to be deep. I just know that we are impressed by things. When we look out at the ocean, something resonates within us. Starlight shines in outer space and in inner space. This is why we dream of heaven and build rocket ships to get there. It why we think we go there when we die in dreams of heaven. The physical is metaphysical. The physical church represents much deeper things. I think that our Buildings and

Grounds Committee may have some insight into this. I can't tell you the number of times that I have arrived here at North Chapel to find some member of that committee or a volunteer hard at work...planting care in flower boxes, raking leaves and composting them, shoveling snow from steps and walk ways, sanding the floor of the Sanctuary, cleaning the rugs and windows, placing the hymnals neatly in pew back pockets, arranging flowers on Sunday morning, pouring over the details of construction projects, planning the practical architectures of sacred life...which is normal life. All life is holy life. Churches represent more than they are. So, when there is fire, when steeples fall, something falls in us as well. Of course, it does. This is nothing new. Churches are like houses of theology. This thought prompted the writing of this book. It's called *A House of Hope*. In its first pages, Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker explains,

Each dimension of the house [this "house" that is North Chapel]—including its setting in the natural world—corresponds to one of the classic issues of systematic theological reflection. Theology...is architectural—it provides a framework for human life. It is also ecological—it creates an interactive system in response to a specific environment. And it is archeological—it unearths artifacts from the past that can inspire our imagination and understanding.

With her colleague (our colleague), Rev. John Buehrens, Parker takes us on a trip from the garden to the sheltering walls, from the roof to the foundations, from the threshold to the welcoming rooms. They develop this analogy as a means of exploring the different realms of religious and spiritual reflection, the realms of eschatology and ecclesiology, soteriology and theology, missiology and pneumatology. And, of course, they define and explain each of these realms in detail.

My understanding and experience of the fire at Notre-Dame suggests the primacy of two of these realms. This is what I reflect upon. Because of that fire (and because of how we have chosen to respond to it), I feel called to reflect on the realms of soteriology and missiology. Soteriology is the roof that was burning sending a cross-shaped firelight up to the heavens. Classically speaking, soteriology is the study of salvation. Parker and Buerhens write,

Given the realities of tragedy, oppression, injustice, evil failure, and sin in the world, what can protect life from harm and repair or restore

lives and communities?

This question is at home in the realm of soteriology. Its Latin root, *soteria*, means "salvation, deliverance, preservation, or release." Missiology is the threshold, the doorways and windows through which we and light can enter and and come in, shine out and go forth. Classically speaking, missiology is the study of the message of the church. They write [quote],

...without pretending to any messianic powers, what is the mission of a liberal or progressive religious community? If it is not to bring others into one's house to convert them to one's own way of thinking, how can dialogue and partnership with others advance efforts to promote justice and compassion in this world?

This question is at home in the realm of missiology and, classically speaking once again, "the word 'missiology' is from the same root as missive [meaning, written letter] and message—the calling to bring something to others, to the world—and to receive as well, what others bring to us.

The fire at Notre-Dame started in the timbers, in the whole oak structure that supported the roof spilled over into the sanctuary when the steeple fell and pierced the domes, the gothic-stone vaults that protected the sanctuary. Theologically speaking, there was suddenly a hole in that which saves us. I rather like the way that my friend and colleague, Rev. Jake Morrill, put it at the time. He saw the fire at Notre Dame as an invitation to grieve all that is being destroyed in our world. He saw it as an invitation for us to dedicate ourselves to the protection of that which is the sacred, not only in Paris but wherever it lives. Jake wrote, Yesterday, with the fire, maybe some awe was reawakened. The reminder of what's precious. And maybe it can inspire in us not only the resolve to protect what is Holy, but also the capacity to defend our neighbors and our children from acts of desecration that diminish us all.

On this Holy Week, there's solidarity in tears and in grieving hearts for a world that can seem ruled by the feckless forces of devastation, in an age that seems to bring loss after loss. It's not all there is. It's not the end of the story. It's just what's true today, at this part of the story, with so much of what's yet to come depending on if we'll let our scarred-over hearts stay a little tender and full, like they were yesterday.

That was his Facebook post on April 16th of 2019. That post was, then, quoted in an article that I read that appeared in our monthly magazine, UU World.

When fire fell into the sanctuary, it carried with it the molten lead of the rooftop and burned throughout the night...release a toxic dust. It came through the rooftop and poured through the doorways and covered the windows...and shut out the light. Rooftops and doorways and windows... A poet writes,

Birds on the roof of my mother's house
I've no stones that chase them away
Birds on the roof of my mother's house
Will sit on my roof some day
They fly at the window, they fly at the door
Where does she get the strength to fight them anymore
She counts all her children as a shield against the pain
Lifts her eyes to the sky like a flower in the rain

—Sting

I do this...when I find myself running out of strength. I lift my eyes to the sky...when I need to be reminds of the light that lives within...when I need to see its echo, its reflection, its refraction in the light that is beyond me. I do this. I look for that light...I lift my eyes just like a flower to rain.

And I appreciate others of us who can and who do, others who do whatever we can to generate a little light. It doesn't take much sometimes. Other times, it takes a whole lot of work. I think of a scientist who understands this very well—maybe, better than the rest of us. I think of a French scientist. I think of a woman named Claudine Loisel. She is a Glass Conservation Scientist—I didn't know that there was such as thing—and she works for the Research Center for French Historic Monuments. She fully engaged in the wake of the crisis. She said,

It was really painful to see the catastrophe on the TV. I was looking to see what happened around the windows and it was, of course, totally difficult to have a good idea of what's happened. There is a before and after 15 April for Historic Monuments. That's for sure.

Remember, the Notre-Dame Cathedral has 32,000 square feet of stained glass. Fortunately, very little of the glass was destroyed in the fire but all

of it was damaged by the toxic dust that the fire produced.

Claudine Loisel used scientific methods and calibrated instruments and precise techniques to determine the best path forward in Notre-Dame's recovery. To this end, she used...

...a hand-held, digital microscope to investigate the levels of lead powder on the stained glass. Fortunately, these window had not been cleaned in 100 years. So, the lead [produced by the fire] has settled on top of a dust layer, not on the glass itself.

A team of scientists have become part of this process. They have removed whole sections of stained glass and have taken them to a special laboratory. It's a very elaborate process requiring fine brushes, precision vacuum cleaners and x-ray spectroscopy. This time-consuming and painstaking process is designed to produce a single result—the restoration of glass that conditions the light of the sanctuary—both the sunshine light that comes in from outside and the soulshine light that goes out from within. What is happening within the Notre-Dame Cathedral can also happen within us. If a great fire comes, and the roof falls in and we forget how to save ourselves, we can find a way—and we have found a way and we will continue to do so—a way of dusting off the glass for the shining and receiving of light, for the exchange of our gifts of spirit, possibility and new birth.

December is a time of darkness. It is the time of Advent, the season of waiting. This is a moment of anticipation, of the looking forward to. It is a moment of looking through the darkness for to find the light. In *All Beautiful the March of Days*, the second reads as follows:

O'er white expanses sparkling clear, the radiant morns unfurl
The solemn splendors of the night burn brighter through the cold

Yet, this was not the case in gay Paris—not in April 20 months ago... not in spirit, at any rate. It was not "solemn splendor" that was "burning through the cold." I was a part of us, if my colleague Jake Morrill is right...if by fire, awe was reawakened on that fateful day...if loss is not the end of the story and recovery is possible...if we "let our scarred-over hearts stay a little tender and full" for a little while.

And other things are possible. And here is the point of all of this: We can learn to enjoy the dark hours of our being. This is so much brokenness and so many crises and so much catastrophe all around us. Yet

and still, through and against these challenges, we shine. We shine in both the darkness and the light. Boldly, we stand, with care and also with confidence, we embrace all that there is. Somewhere within us, we are strong enough now. We know that there are ways to find the miracle in everything. Embracing the daytime and the night. Embracing the darkness and the light. We can enjoy the dark hours of our being. That's the implicit challenge of each day within winter's reach. We can love the dark hours of our being.

This idea comes from a poem by Rilke and has inspired this morning's reflection. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

I love the dark hours of my being.
My mind deepens into them.
There I can find, as in old letters,
the days of my life, already lived,
and held like a legend, and understood.
Then the knowing comes: I can open
to another life that's wide and timeless.
So I am sometimes like a tree
rustling over a grave
and making real the dream
of the one its living roots embrace:
a dream once lost
among sorrows and songs.

I enjoy this poem...and I wonder if its "dream once lost" is found in each of us. For are we not, in part, the old ones shining forth? In this time of patience and anticipation, is it not, in part, ourselves that is eager to be born? Imagine. Just like John Lennon said, imagine.

May it be so blessed be and amen.