

Inner Light in a Time of Darkness

October 4th, 2020

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. It is good to be together. In these difficult days, it is good. May we dare greatly and love and live so well into tomorrow. And let us agree in love, shall we? It is a most precious place from which to begin.

Perhaps, Hosea Ballou he said it best, that powerful Universalist of old. He said,

If we agree in love, no disagreement will do us any harm. Yet if we do not [agree in love], no other agreement will do us any good.

So, let's dare greatly and love so well. Heaven only knows what dreams may come.

The title of this morning's reflection is Inner Light in a Time of Darkness, appropriate in light of the season that we are entering with its changing leaves, its soaking rains and chilly mornings that leave their markings on the mountains, hills and valleys. There is a line of poetry that I'm enjoying these days.

You've gotta do right by your woman
As she'll do right by you

These words recur throughout the song. They return in the chorus...and we return as well. We return to these words and it feels good when we do. It feels good because these words hold us every time we hear them, like a shelter that grows more and more familiar. These words hold us in harbors of safety, harbors of comfort and recognition. We clearly see their deep and easy wisdom. They provide us with a basic logic...

You've gotta do right by your woman
As she'll do right by you

No matter who we are and no matter how we identify, we can find the deep breath that lives inside this song. There is a deep breath that lives within all wisdom that is as clear and is as positive as this wisdom is...and we rest well in this clarity. We benefit from it. We grow. We cultivate our lives, enriching them with the warmth and with the insight that easy wisdom always provides.

The deep breath and its wisdom are one. Together, they fill our chest with oxygen, fill our heart with hope, fill the soul... And so inspired, when we breathe in, we breathe in peace and when we breathe out, we breathe out love. And we make good habit of this.

The breath is so important. The breath that sustains all of life. And there is ever a breath that resides in us or longs to reside in us. This is the oscillation of living things. We breathe. We breathe in and we breathe out. This is living.

This song by Krasno and Gutter is, indeed, a beautiful one. It is entitled Calling Out to You. It is a good instruction. When we follow it, we kindle the

inner light. We call out to one another and we call out to ourselves. We do right by others and we asked for the same in return. Love thy neighbor as thy self. It's not original.

Calling Out to You tells a lovely story as it unfolds over time. You see,
There was a lady on the mountain
[Her eyes were] pools of water in the sun
[Her hair was flowing down the] shoulders like the river
I could see her chest move up and down

Breathing... And this lady on the mountain with eyes like pools of sunlit water could reflect the all of the light of the whole, wide world right back at us...but, strangely, she had trouble taking that light in...had trouble seeing the flame, had trouble tending the flame that burned within her, the flame that feeds on oxygen and hope—the wisdom of the good, deep breath. For some reason (and I don't know what that reason was), the lady on the mountain got scared and she came to doubt herself. Somewhere in her travels, she had lost her inner light.

So, to compensate, to push back against the darkness, she developed a habit of looking elsewhere—of looking outside of herself—for what she lost and could no longer find within. As the song reveals, she took to...

Walking with a mason jar of fireflies...

You know about mason jars—right?—the glass jars of various sizes with the two-part lids that synch down nice and tight. I love those jars. There are so many of them in Vermont. The song reveals that the lady on the mountain was...

Walking with a mason jar of fireflies
[because] she can't find the light she needs within
You can hear her echo off the mountain side...

You can hear her cry into the darkness...her heroine's cry that looks out for the light...

She was calling out
She was calling out to you...
You've gotta do right by your woman
As she'll do right by you

This is our agreement. We accept the beauty of the free and fair exchange.

Lately, though, things have been hard. Things get hard in times of darkness (and we are heading into darker times). I don't suggest that the phrase "darker times" refers to the ongoing COVID challenges that we face. And I don't suggest that the phrase refers to the rancorously divisive and vitriolic political environment that we're struggling to get through. And, strangely for me, I don't even mean to suggest that "darker times" have been cast around us by the 213,000 American lives that have been lost to COVID—the more than a million lives that we've lost worldwide. It is so important to mark the passing, to honor the deaths and not make light of it. It's not important to indulge the temptation to

naïvely politicize things—the imagined culpability, the cure, the crisis itself. It's not important to indulge these temptations at all. They only deepen divisions.

Rather, it is important to honor sacredness of life and the sacredness of death. It is important to honor these fully...important to let their impressions mark us soul-level deep. Mark our bodies with beauty, with nobility and with grace so that we might more highly value these days that we spend together, these days that have our names written upon them...because—preciously, I say—it will not always be this way. There will be, in the days to come—long into the future, I pray—but there will be days that will not number any us among the living. For this, it is so important that we value life with dignity...that we value death with dignity.

Oh, Beautiful.

Our heroes proved in liberating strife
Who, more than self our country loved
And mercy more than life

It is important that we value truth with dignity. When we don't, the inner light burns out a little bit.

Years ago, I was so moved by a good friend and artist, Elise Witt. I met her several times when I was still living in Maryland. Elise asked questions with her music. She didn't waste much time. She asked,

Where to we go from here?
Where to we go from here?
I no longer have so much time in this world
Where to we go from here?

And this repeated.

What will I do with my years?

And with...

How will I hold my heart?

The trick to understanding this song, the secret to finding its wisdom is in knowing how to accept its invitation. We are asked to bear witness to the miraculous and fleeting beauty of the world in which we live. To ourselves, we must say, "Wake now, my senses and bring me to life!"

Open mine eyes that I might see
Glimpses of truth thou has for me
Open mine eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine

—Cris Williamson

So much is in store for us...in the forms of sorrow, joy and grace. How we meet what's in store for us is our soul's decision. Now, I incline myself to joy but I don't get there all of the time. I feel sorrow just the same. In part, it doesn't matter what I choose. Joy and sorrow are interwoven and intertwined. They relax into

one another. Expecting this, I can allow myself to release the tension that stifles my deep breathing. I can release the stress that shallows and shortens my breath. I can know peace, breathing in the oxygen, breathing in the hope that animates life and helps us honor its passing.

Last December, on the 29th, we recognized the 146 lives that were lost at Wounded Knee in 1890, 129 years ago that day. I wanted to perform a ritual to honor the lives of those who died. At ten second intervals, I was going to toll a bell of recognition for each life lost. That process would have taken about 24 minutes. So, it wasn't practical to include it but it helped me to understand that magnitude of things.

realize the magnitude of that loss. I wanted to make it real.

Weeks ago, on September 11th, we held a vespers service around a fire in the backyard, behind the church and very near the Ottauquechee River. If we had done a similar ritual to honor what was lost in 2001, the ritual would not have been much longer. It would not have lasted for 24 minutes rather, it would have lasted more than 8 hours. If we were to do one for the COVID crisis in the United States, it would be longer still. If we started the ritual at church time, at 10:00am this Sunday morning, on October the 4th, our bell would ring every 10 seconds until the afternoon of October 27th. And if we were to honor what the world has lost at this point, our bell would ring until 9:28 on the evening of Sunday, January 31st in 2021.

It's hard to think about that but it's important that we turn and face our grief. When we don't, the inner light burns out a little bit.

Two weeks ago, I jumped into a lake. [The suit jacket is fine, by the way]. Literally, I fell into beautiful life. The alternative was unacceptable. And that's the point. We get to choose. We can either fall into beautiful life or we can fall into darkness. Which way lets us tend that inner flame?

I don't want my inner light to burn out but the darkness can be tempting. Darkness is nothing to fear. It occurs quite naturally in its season...but it does not have to steal our inner light. Right now, darkness is still our inner light. What's the deal with this darkness

Now, I watched the presidential debate last week and I watched it in real time. Like many, I was saddened by what I saw. It was so far from civility. It was not informative. It was not enlightening. It was abusive and impoverished. Dana Bash from CNN described the debate perfectly and succinctly but I cannot quote her without cursing from the pulpit...and that is not my choice today.

Instead, I have taken the high road on Michelle Obama's good advice. I'm taking the high road not because I am better than my neighbor in any way but because the belligerence that just tried to pass as presidential politics is beneath us all. And I choose to rise and not to fall. That's what my inner light tells me. I have chosen to stand up straight. Dignified, just like my mother and Martin Luther King taught me. King said,

Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom.

If we want change in our country, we must choose the high road of dignity...not bitterness. The high road of dignity ennobles us and ennobles everyone around us. Nothing less is worthy of the soul.

The high road of dignity comes in many forms. There is nothing wrong with Dana Bash's road. It's just that this one is less well suited for profanity. As long as she stays honest, she stays on the high road. Her inner light is hers to carry. We have an inner light of our own.

How do we nurture the inner light in this time of coming darkness? How do we heal the heart and soul in all of this brokenness?

They say that in order to heal, we have to clean the wound. To that end, I will say this. We just watched as a sitting American president—COVID-positive at the time, as we've learned—sought to rattle his challenger by attacking his sons on live TV...by attacking his living son and his dead son as well.

What kind of man would do such a thing? What kind of father could bear it? I was mad at Joe Biden at the time. I wanted him to fight back harder but I was wrong. Joe Biden did what was right for Joe Biden. He suffered his opponent with as much grace as he could muster. And I cannot ask more from him. This wasn't a screenplay. It was real life. Not reality TV—real life.

I found that part of the debate to be abusive...not abusive to Joe Biden but to the value of family. If Joe Biden feels as I do, then this is his to say. That inner light is his to carry, not mine. I have my own. My job is to nurture and to tend this inner light of mine.

Public discourse must be better than it is. No one should have to face so vile a thing. It was undignified. It was more vulgar than vulgarity, more profane than profanity, obscene than obscenity. It was just grotesque in brand new ways. It was presidential hate-speech at it circled the drain and stained the porcelain before leaving the toilet. It clogged before the chase and backed up on us, needing to be plunged. It is not meaningful when we are impressed by this kind of bullying behavior. It is not worthy of a great nation. We can do better. And we must.

A dearest friend of mine wrote a song that personified the city of New Orleans. She wrote,

In the rush and the spin
In the flush of my sin
She'll be rolling her eyes
While she beckons me in
God, let me love truly
Forgive every nation
And walk like a woman again...
Please take me in your scented arms
New Orleans, I'm coming for you

Not long after Katrina, if memory serves, my dear friend wrote these words.

We have the capacity to rise up from the ashes. We've done it before and we'll do it again. This is a human capacity. I believe that we are on the threshold of incredible grace. I believe that our best days, lie ahead and not behind and if

we do right by the woman of the mountain (meaning, the life-giving and sun-lit energies that live within all of us, no matter who we are and no matter how we identify), if we do not falter in our task, it is forever possible, handful that we are and rarest in all the world, to keep that inner light alive.

Where will we go from here? I really don't know but I can't wait to see. As if with mason jars filled with fireflies, we will share the inner light.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.