

Insight |s 2021

January 3rd, 2021

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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and bravest welcome. I hope that this new day and this new year find us peaceful and finds you well. Good morning and welcome to the seekers of the spirit, to the wanderers and the worshipers. Welcome one and all. Welcome to the light- and to the heavy-hearted ones among us. Welcome to the open- and to the broken-hearted ones among us. Welcome to every blissfully imperfect soul who is just like me, blessed and beloved beneath the lucky stars of heavens, given in care and deep compassion for one another, given...as we all are with and forever for one another in grace...in good times and in tempest, in conflict and in consensus...held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds...

Let's jump souls first into this brand new year. Oh, my God! What a year this has been! What a powerful thing...to see and to love the sunrise in these last few, brand-new days. Let's fully turn away from what has been so hard for us as we turn towards the light and towards the warmth that is one way. Let's jump into its frozen waters. Let's crack the ice of life and make a hole and dip our feet—soles first and souls first into its waters—figuratively speaking or spiritually speaking, of course. For the darkest are over on this trip around the sun. Let us pray that this means all that we need it to mean on this good day.

Today is Sunday, January in 2021. The title of this morning's reflection is Insight is 2021. Ever since the science of vision gave us the words that were of us, we have been saying that hindsight is 20/20. To have 20/20 vision is not exceptional. To have 20/20 vision is to have average vision. Insight can be so much clearer than this.

This morning, I'd like to begin by sharing the first part of a sixteen-year-old poem with you. It is a poem about the first light of the sun. The poem is called The Warming of the Air. I dedicated this poem at 5:15 am on May 20th in the year of 2005. Its words are these:

the pond in new north country is misty-orange at the sunrise

children dip their feet—souls first—for good, continued health
they sat today for hours until the night air grew much warmer
and the flight of geese returned

with their great, sonic sense of wealth
landing in a v-formation, squawking...richly...like geese
the geese returned but the raptors are gone now
they come and go in shifts
the geese are cool and everything, but the raptors...
...the raptors know the warming of the air...

raptors are the teachers of the deeper things than fire
the things I need to bend my ear to know
speaking in a gentleness unmade by strong desire
'Yes, the grass is always greener, but it's just as hard to mow.'
they rise above the things that matter not at all
and I see you up there, beloved,
holding up the sky...

These are the first two verses. The full poem is seven. I will share it over the course of the reflection.

But right now, let's settle in. Let's sing our way into the new year. Please rise in body...rise in spirit and join in the singing of this morning's opening hymn, Ring Out, Wild Bells.

Good morning, everyone and happiest New Year. It is so very good to be together. Let's rise and sing...

In which way will we look back on 2020? It's hard to say [] and I offer no suggestion or advice except to say, 'Let us look back upon this year in a way that serves us well in the cautious optimism called Moving Forward/Moving On.' In the opening hymn this morning, we sang,

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild, wild sky
The flying cloud, the frosty light

The year is dying in the night
Ring out wild bells and let it die

These words carry the force of closure and finality. We also sang,
Ring out false pride in place and blood
The civic slander and the spite
Ring in the love of truth and right
Ring in the common love of good

These words bear the hope of remembrance and on-going care. Both of these are real and both are right. In part, I want to gather up all of my things from 2020, pack the car up tight and drive away. And, in part, I know I'm stained by 2020. It's left its impress. I'm wrinkled from it, broken by it in ways and can't yet name.

It would be satisfying to say that I am leaving it all behind and toss my stole across my shoulder and make a dramatic exit of some kind but the world is not like that. Time is precious and life is good. In the midst of the greatest of challenges, I return to this. It is the best way that I know to make things better.

Truly, life is messy. It doesn't always behave. It rarely behaves. Life's not that tidy...and its beauties and its sorrows intertwine. They linger on. They overlap. They intrude upon one another. The ALL that is our life stays with us—its past and future—and we live the vital tension in between.

Life is that brave station that hovers always in between where we've been and where we think we're going. In the craziest of ways, these two things are interconnected—the past and the future—connected by fragile bridges of the heart. We are as connected by hope and remembrance as we are by closure and finality. This is what we see with the eyes of the soul.

These bridges are everywhere around us...and we see them when we're ready. I saw one once at 5:15am. It was sixteen years ago...on May the 20th back in 2005, a while ago now. That was the morning after my old dog Lahpy died.

I had two dogs back then. I was still living in North Carolina—ten miles north of Durham—and teaching at Duke. I had Samori Marksman Dunkley, the best dog ever, my beautiful and perfect Yellow Labrador Retriever. Samori—Sams, I called her—she was five back then but we had been together since she was seven weeks old. Here is a picture of us on our first day together. [paws ☺ for five whole seconds] A few years later, I adopted an older dog named Lahpy. Lahpy belonged to a friend of mine who had a newborn. So, things were easier this way. Lahpy and Samori got along famously. Here is a picture of the two of them together. [paws ☺ for another five whole seconds]



Lahpy died on a Thursday afternoon...March 19th of 2005. Sams and I got up at the break of day the following morning. Both of us were totally exhausted. We turned away from hayfield that opened up to the north and we headed southeast across the lawn, across the driveway and into this wide-open meadow as the sun was beginning to rise. You could see the glow behind the silver pocket of the clouds on the horizon but not the sun, itself, as yet. The details of the world were in the process of filling themselves in...and then, I saw them—the turkey vultures, uniformly perched atop the five fence posts the stood between me and Noah's Pond. There were all



sitting at attention, as if in the driver's seat of life but with no hand on the wheel and driving forward with confidence...at attention, as if they had rock-star, front-row seats to the first, live concert of life itself. They noticed me and Sams but they were not concerned with us. They kept their hawk-eyes on the prize. They watched the morning miracle, the first one that our dear, Lahpy got to paint all by

herself. It cast an orange glow across Noah's Pond. It was beautiful.

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the things I need to bend my ear to know
speaking in a gentleness unmade by strong desire
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raptors rise above what that matter not at all
and I see you there, my beloved,
holding up the sky...

you, like them, follow the slow curve of morning
on clear, brave days like these
when the sun—out of silver pocket—rakes a comfortable burn
across the waking of the world
graceful plumes of smoke,
lighter than air and to my eye, invisible
drafting up,
like cool steam from this child-dipped splash of water,
rising up to catch her underwing

I learned back then that raptors see more clearly than we do...that they look at the air
itself. They can see it rise and fall. And they're drawn to heat plumes and in them,
they circle round and round and round. They may look like they're just circling but

they're actually working a rising column of air, using it like a natural elevator. They're kind of surfing. I continue to be amazed by that idea.

raptors just seem to soar

but for them there is some degree of work
well-suited and keen-eyed
vision that is 8x sharper than our own, they say
what is it to see rising...

...to see the warming of the air
that winds like Kansas-upside-down tornados to the sky
and to place yourself accordingly for the bird's eye view
an excellence of real estate just floating where few dare
singing location, location like somewhere over the rainbow...

I cannot see the waves of the wind in the ways that raptors can
just its impact on the trees and on leaves of grass
just the fletch across a tiny bit of sea
across this pond in new north country,
misty-orange at the sunrise
where children dip their feet—souls first
...for good, continued health

If I could make a toast to this new year, it would be this:

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot and auld lang syne.
For auld lang syne, my jo,
For auld lang syne.
We'll take a cup o' kindness yet for auld lang syne.

If hindsight is 20/20(as we're staring down last year in the rear view and as we're leaving the terrible, challenging things behind), then insight is 2021...for we know what to take with us...the gifts of intuitive understanding, the inner seeing, the heart's vision, our wisdom, our keen-eyed, soul-wise way of looking at the world anew. May this new year be every blessing that we need. Let's jump into it with both feet.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.