

# Power Outage and the Sheer Enjoyment of Being

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**G**ood morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. The title of this morning's reflection is Power Outage and the Sheer Enjoyment of Being. It's draws on Eastern philosophy, the Book of Matthew and the wisdom of a 14-year-old student who blew my mind. She really touched me with the power of her thinking. I wonder, what brilliance she will reveal over time?

You know, they say that our true colors show up most clearly in the fall. In an old film called *The Lion in Winter* (1968), two men are facing judicial execution. The first man turns to the second one there. He turns in fear and bitterness. Frantically and unwisely, he claims that nothing really matters anymore. The second man did not join the first man's fear in bitterness. Rather, he stayed in his power and straightened his tie and dusted his jacket. And at this, the second man's gesture of relative optimism, the first man cried out, "You fool! As if it matters how a man falls down."

And the second man replied, "When the fall is all that's left, it matters a great deal." It is important to be careful with fear and bitterness.

They say that our true colors show up most clearly in the fall. In real life, right here in Woodstock, two leaves were preparing for the changes of autumn. The first leaf turns to the second in fear and bitterness. Afraid of the inevitable great leap that was before her, she claimed that nothing mattered anymore. The second leaf did not join the first leaf's fear in bitterness. Rather, she stayed in her and at this gesture of relative optimism, the first leaf cried, "You fool! As if it matters how a leaf falls down."

And the second leaf responded, asking, "Have you ever thought that you could fly?" There was a bright light in her eyes. The second leaf said, "because we have to leave this tree and flight is also possible. We can fall or we can fly. The choice is up to us. I choose to fly but that it takes a little work." The first leaf didn't quite know what to say and the second asked, "Do you read Toni Morrison? She said, 'If you want to fly, you have to give up the things that weigh you down.'" And with the next good wind off they

went. Who knows what happened but for that moment, the autumn sky was beautiful.

It's fun to imagine conversations between autumn leaves as their change colors, as they go through their wardrobes, wondering what they might wear on the wind. They say that our true colors show most clearly in the fall but I say that they show most clearly in the flight." What do you think?

Everywhere around us at this particular time of year, the leaves are changing colors and picking out their paths into mid-air. Autumn leaves are falling down and flying up everywhere.

I've always loved this season, this particular time of year. With certain gusts of wind—and for seconds at a time—the sky is littered with beautiful, colorful, falling and flying leaves. It is fleeting but in this season, the sky is filled with wonder.

Wonder reveals itself in different ways. It can be light and sentimental. It can be powerful fierce. It goes both ways. We need both ways. Both ways are required of us, especially now, when things feel so tense and conditioned by the on-going COVID crisis, especially now, when things feel so strange and challenging.

Toni Morrison said that if we do want to fly, we have to give up the things that weigh us down. I get weighed down by the heaviness of the world sometimes. I think that might have to do with why I love the morning as much as I do—not that I don't also love to sleep through it—but something lifts, something rises. I love the morning...daybreak right through to the sunrise. I start most reflections with the words, "Good morning" because something lifts and something rises when I say. I want to be a part of that.

I was so angry last week. I was angry and I was bitter about the presidential debate. I had spent two Sunday mornings away from North Chapel. I felt lonely and disconnected after going on a "stay-cation" in this strange time of the coronavirus. I couldn't vacation, like in normal times. I couldn't really go anywhere, not without feeling nervous and uncomfortable and at risk. That's not relaxing...so I stayed home. I had a "stay-cation" instead of a vacation. But I ended up feeling a bit empty and disconnected, especially when it ended.

I didn't "come back home" because I hadn't left in the first place. Before too long, I got back into the general swing of things but things swing  
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so differently these days. Things that used to swing so easily before seemed new and unfamiliar somehow. So, I was a little raw. I was insecure and unsure of myself before the presidential debates and I was further knocked off balance after they did. I was fearful and I was bitter...and I let those feelings take over. It was a rough but then, I made things a bit worse for myself...by clinging to the weight of all of this. This was a bad choice. It was heavy and it felt like such a drag. A poet writes,

Gravity is working against me  
And gravity always wants to bring me down

That was me. I wasn't making anything better for myself. I was just being righteous and dismissive. I was sinking away and shrinking away from the miracle. The poet writes,

I'll never know what makes this man  
With all the love that his heart can stand  
Dream of ways to throw it all away

That was me.

John Mayer wrote these words and their meaning is clear. Gravity is clearly working against us, working against us all. And gravity always wants to bring us down and it always will but flight is also possible...and if we really want to fly, we have to give up on gravity. We have to defy it for a while.

Mayer writes,

Twice as much is not twice as good  
And it can't sustain like the one half could  
It's wanting more that's gonna send me to my knees

When I hear these words, I can recognize myself within them. I identify because I am brought down so low by my own greed and by my own desire. It's shocking to me how consistently it happens. It always happens. In fact, it is never otherwise and yet I'm always surprised. When I get all needy and greedy, I feel dark and heavy in my heart. And I can feel that way a lot. I have the capacity for it. I can feel needy and greedy and dark and heavy in my soul...although I tend to justify myself whenever I can by judging and by blaming others. And when I do this, I'm always shocked by what I see when I'm not looking back at me. It's not a good habit. I will have to let that one go if I'm gonna fly.

I'm so full of beans sometimes. I can be hard-headed and righteous and angry with the best of them. And I can do something that is even more

dangerous. I can be this way with myself. I noticed this when I was reading my own poetry. I'd written something that surprised me. I'd written,

I don't believe in cocaine  
Or in any serum I can melt in a spoon  
Tripping on my own wings...  
And I don't believe in bad dreams  
When my youngest daughter lay asleep in my arms  
Rising like this day's youngest light  
And I don't believe in violence  
Or in these sorrows that I keep on the shelf  
Or in the impossible angers that I fire at you  
Or in the invisible arrows that I aim at myself

I loved these lines when I wrote them...or more, accurately, when these lines wrote me. The poem felt like it came through me. I felt like my job was is to stay out of the way.

The poem isn't literally true. I've not tried cocaine and I have bad dreams all of the time and I don't have a child. I don't have a daughter, certainly not a youngest one.

The point of the poem... It's not about facts. It's a flight of the imagination, a journey on which new things are possible. Its poet seeks the company of those who are just like me—those who don't believe in violence or sorrow, those who don't believe in the outbound anger fired at others or in the inbound arrows that cut us deep.

So, the poet is incomplete... He is unblossomed and unrealized until he crosses the magical bridge into its own unknown. For I also seek the company of those who are not like me. And I seek the company of those parts of myself that are hidden from me by my narrowness and by pretenses. I am not comfortable confessing this but I am not entirely non-violent. Sometimes, I do believe in violence, especially in cases of self-defense. So, I am in contraction. I am a complexity...and I suspect that I am not alone. I say that I don't believe in sorrow but I sure keep it in a jar on the shelf. I say that I don't believe in anger but I sure fire it at others. I say that I don't believe in the invisible arrows that I aim at myself but I am clearly injured by them...clearly bleeding from them.

On the surface of things, my poetry is rather strange. It doesn't make any sense. It is full of contradictions the deeper and deeper you go...  
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and so am I. And maybe that's the point. Maybe that's the wisdom. Maybe we should try to stop making so much sense for a little while...as if joy had a business plan and reportable measures of success.

Maybe that's what this changing season is teaching us...with its soaking rains and gusting winds and falling leaves and turnings. Maybe it's enough sometimes to step back and enjoy and bear witness to all of that. Alan Watts, that Eastern philosopher and Western theologian tied up as one, he had something interesting to say on the subject. He said,

The Japanese have a word—*yugyen*—and they describe *yugyen* as watching while geese fly and be hidden in the clouds, as watching a ship vanishes behind a distant island, as wandering on and on in a great forest with no thought of return. Haven't you done this? Haven't you gone on a walk with no particular purpose in mind?

It can be a powerful experience. The important thing to remember is that the world is just the world. It's not performing for us. We are active participants not passive observers, however it is that we choose to live our lives.

You know, one of my favorite movies is called *Dead Poets Society*. It's a story about a bunch of privileged high school boys who learn the value of poetry. They get really into it. They find the old books and they read the old poem and they bring the old magic to life. They kindle a flame in one another. They find their courage...even though they weren't looking for it.

The boys were live-in students at a stuffy and prestigious, New England prep school. On the nights of meetings of the *Dead Poets Society*, the boys would sneak out of their dorm rooms and they would gather at a place they referred to as the "Old Indian Cave." It was out in the forest, far beyond the rolling hills of the private school. And on misty nights, *yugyen* would happen. The boys would run into the mist and out of sight. The boys were just like ships passing into the darkness. They were just like geese that disappear into the clouds, filled all up to bursting with the sheer enjoyment of being alive. You don't do that to make a point. You just live life and you love it and sometimes, under the right conditions, life is miraculous. The miracle happens all on it's own. Our job is to be open to it. Our job is to let it happen, is to stay out of the way.

The point of all of this is that not everything has a point. The point of the poem is to be the poem, not to make our socks roll up and down. It's not entertainment. It's deeper than that. It is the joy of life. We can judge  
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the joy of life if we want to but it doesn't care. It just strolls through the world and sees and is and listens and writes its name on the water and gets carried away...like leaves that fall on the surface of a lake. In a way, life is like an experiment in pointlessness. Better said, life is like an experiment in the sheer enjoyment of being...and this sheer enjoyment, it's like the power that animates life. Alan Watts continues. He says,

You carry a stick with you and occasionally hit at old stumps? You wander along and sometimes twiddle your thumbs? It is at that moment that you are a perfectly rational human being. You've learned purposelessness.

This is *yugyen*. This purposelessness is liberating. It is not a defeated thing—quite the opposite. It is vitality itself. It is the very life of life. Watts reminds us that...All music is purposeless," which is to say that it is filled with a vitality that can inspire us...bringing life to lifelessness. Watts asks,

Is music getting somewhere? If the aim of a symphony [he posits] were to get to the final bar, the best conductor would be the one who got there fastest. When you dance, do you aim to arrive at a particular place on the floor? Is that the idea of dancing? The aim of dancing is to dance.

Why rush? Why rage? Why worry? Not that I don't do these things.

I rush and I rage and I worry. I do these things all of the time but it rarely do they get me anywhere. In fact, they always bring me down...just like gravity. Is it more or less the same for you? If so, what keeps us from the lightness? What keeps us from having the confidence that we will be alright, in spite of all of the evidence to the contrary? We rush to get to the meetings on time, even the ones on Zoom. We rage when our political world seems strained to point of breaking. We worry about our money, about our hair, about our clothes...when we don't have to worry about such things, not as desperately as we do. In Matthew, it is written,

Look at the flowers of the field, how they grow. They neither labor nor spin; and yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his [glory] was not arrayed like any one of them. So if God so clothes the wild grass which lives for today and tomorrow is burned, shall He not much more clothe you, [O, ye of little faith]?

This is deep, this teaching from the Gospel of Matthew and I am moved by  
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it. We don't have to worry so much about our money, our hair and our clothes...not when it distracts us from a higher good. The question is not, "What shall I wear to impress the world today?" The question is, "How will we clothe in truth and in beauty the moments that make up our lives?" The question isn't, "What shall I wear to the prom at the junior high school?" but "How beautifully will I choose to dance? How tenderly will I invite those around me to do the same?"

I was angry with some friends of mine, dear friends who are different than me. I love them dearly but they don't see the world in the same way that I do. And they are times when that truth confronts us so powerfully, all of the wind goes out of my sail. Like in a power outage, all my lights go out. It is a suddenly lost power in the neighborhood of my life.

The news had come out. Bad news. After years of his reassurances to the contrary, after years of being told that the President's taxes were in order, the bad news had come out that they were not. It can be hard when things break in the way. And I called my friend, a friend of more than forty years, and I asked him, "What does that mean for you?" I was hoping for a connection that was not possible before but it didn't happen.

My friend responded quickly. He said, "He didn't break any laws." And something within me sank. I knew as he was saying this that doing so brought him no joy. I felt that in him and I felt that in me. I felt like we were falling and no longer in flight. I felt the presence of fear and bitterness.

I was stunned and disappointed. I wish that I had responded better than I had. I said nothing at the time. I wish that I had turned to him compassionately and said, "It doesn't matter that, as you say, he did not break the law. It matters to me—and perhaps, to us—that he did not abide by it. It matters that we honor the spirit of the law, not simply its letter. We are wiser than what we can get away with in court."

We are at a turning point—culturally, politically. No matter what happens in the coming weeks, things will never be the same. Nothing made me see this with more clarity than the closing moments of the vice presidential debate earlier this week. The moderator, Susan Page, the Washington Bureau Chief at USA Today...she ended this last debate most eloquently. She asked a question that was written by a Utah student in junior high. The question itself restored the power in me—perhaps, in us. An eighth-grader named Brecklynn Brown had this to say, had this to ask:

When I watch the news, all I see is arguing between Democrats and  
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Republicans. When I watch the news, all I see is citizen fighting against citizen. When I watch the news, all I see are two candidates from opposing parties trying to tear each other down. If our leaders can't get along, how are the citizens supposed to get along? [She said] Your examples could make all of the difference to bring us together.

How do we do this now? How do we bring ourselves together to restore the power that has gone out, to become indivisible once again?

Toni Morrison said, "If you want to fly, you have to give up the things that weigh you down." So, we have to give up some things. If we don't, then, perhaps, the fall is all that remains. We have to give up the things that weigh us down but we don't have to hold on to and cherish that which lifts us and keeps us free. In other words, we don't have to give up on one another. When we do, we lose touch with what is real. No. We have to give up the fantasies that lead us astray. We have to give up ignorance that keeps divided, in conflict and at war. We need each other as we are moving into a time of great challenge in our world, in our nation and in our very hearts. We have to give up on the rush and the rage and the worry that makes life too heavy. However it is that we find it, we have to find the faith that makes us free...free enough to restore the power we need in the neighborhood of our lives.

The fall is not all that remains, not by any stretch of the imagination. Flight is also possible. Good flight. Real flight. Healthy, restorative flight—not flights of fantasy, not flights of ignorance but flights of creativity and imagination...flights of wonder. In other words, flights of grace. In a book called *Gravity and Grace*, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual named Simone Weil wrote this:

ALL THE natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.

However it is that we find it, whatever name we assign to its gift, let's find grace. Let's defy some gravity for a little while, shall we?

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.