

The First Waltz  
(or The Threshold of Possibility—Part Two)  
March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister here at North Chapel in Woodstock, VT. Welcome one and all. It is so good to be together.

Welcome to the dreamers and the seekers of spirit, to the singers and the dancers of life. Welcome to the wanderers and the worshipers. Welcome to the darkness and the light. Welcome to every blissfully imperfect soul who is just like me, blessed and beloved beneath the shelter of late-winter skies, given in care and compassion for one another, given...as we all are with and forever for one another in grace. To all souls, I say, “Good morning. It is so good to be together.”

Today is Sunday, March the 7<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning’s reflection is The First Waltz. As you remember, we danced The Last Waltz last Sunday. So, this Sunday is sort of a sequel in reversal, if you will...complete with a telling subtitle, The Threshold of Possibility—Part Two.

What are the ways by which we best see beauty? Have we learned to see in the world around us a reflection of the beauty that lies within? And how do we protect that beauty from being stained, tarnished or broken? How do we do our best to set it free? It is interesting to me—is it the same for you as well?—the reflexive quality of beauty...the beauty of music...of dance...of art. It seems so simple, really...though, sometimes, the artists make it seem more complicated. The artist named Kandinsky is a great example of this. He had a complicated way of saying things.

I like that about him. I like complicated things. I like what Kandinsky says but not everybody does. Not everyone likes his abstract artwork but I experience it like a prayer. I really do. I’m drawn to things that seem at first like they don’t make commonsense...like puzzles. I’m drawn to things that unfold over time...and Wassily Kandinsky, this early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian painter, he does this for me.

I feel his paintings inside of me. I don't just see them with my eyes. They reach out and they gently touch my heart, my soul. I feel them. It wasn't always like that. When I first encountered Kandinsky, I didn't get it. I don't think that I "get it" now. I just feel it more somehow. It was what he had to say about art in general that really helped me on my journey.

In 1911, Kandinsky was part of The Blue Rider Exhibition, a tour that started in the city of Cologne. Here, he talked about the reflexive quality of beauty. He said,

It is clear that the choice of object—[which] is one of the elements in the harmony of form—must be decided only by a corresponding vibration in the human soul.

These words might have seemed clear enough to him but I was baffled. It wasn't clear to me. His art was like a puzzle that had not yet come together. I thought, "Maybe, it wasn't supposed to come together." That was intriguing. So, I had to read through his words a few more times. I had to break them down. I had to check it out—piece by piece. I think that he was saying that the beauty of what an artist chooses to paint starts within the artist, not the art. He was saying that beauty start with the way in which we look upon the world. I think that he was saying that as artist, we have to be already resonating with the beauty that we bring into this world. He was saying that beauty begin within us and I think he's right.

I love Kandinsky and his complicated ways. I love this thought because this thought improves my life. Now, when I look west and watch the late-winter sun going down—with its heavy-deep grey clouds and its cool-light blue sky tones that fade to black, I think to myself, "This is a reflection of how beautiful we are right now. All of us. The whole-wide world is just this beautiful, here and now." That's Kandinsky, what he gave. He's complicated but he makes me smile.

My friend John Cummins was different—more plain-spoken, straight-forward and matter-of-fact. Reverend John Cummins. He was a minister in Minnesota, at First Universalist Church of Minneapolis. John didn't postulate. He didn't conjecture. He didn't theorize. He wasn't complicated. He just asked questions. Really good questions. He asked, "How do we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives?" It was a simple question and it has deepened over time. How do

we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make our lives? I wonder if Kandinsky would have appreciated my friend, John.

Life is like that. It's paradoxical. Life is brilliant and exciting. My memory flashes and I remember this experience that I had in Wyoming. Wyoming is an incredibly beautiful state (least populous, by the way...they beat out Vermont for the title by having 62,000 fewer people). Anyway, I was walking up this dirt road on the side of one of the mountains, admiring the landscape. I was nearing the top when the air turned suddenly cold. The trail map said that just below the summit, there was a lookout station. I went for that. It was nice. It had great-big windows and places to sit. There were rustic restrooms (outhouses, really). You could fuel up energy bars and rehydrate with bottled water. It was very cool. There was even an open-air deck up top where you could check out the view. Once you were on the deck, you could see that there was a cool-looking staircase that went up even higher, to a ranger station under the peak. I can't even imagine how the view must have been up there.

Anyway, I wasn't on the deck very long before the ranger came down, all panicked...trying to hide his feelings and doing a pretty bad job of it. He brought us all inside because a thunderstorm was coming in. Being outside during a thunderstorm is dangerous—obviously so—because of the lightning. The ranger said that lightning sometimes retraces patterns that begin on the ground. That was convincing. I went inside immediately. We all did. We watched the thunderstorm from behind the great big windows. It was beautiful...and if Kandinsky was right, the beauty of the storm began within me somehow.

I think that all of us are brilliant and powerful—like a storm in the mountains of Wyoming...like its thunder and like its lightning. In fact, were lightning not so dangerous, we'd write more poetry about it. We do write some, I know. Emily Dickenson wrote about it. So did Robyn Petrik, although less famously. Robyn writes,

I would turn your beauty into  
lightning bolts if I could,  
showing you off in impressive  
bursts across the sky

I like this poem but I promise you, the panicked ranger was not thinking about beauty. He was not thinking about poetry when he rushed us off

the deck. He was thinking about keeping everybody safe...which is beautiful.

Some lightning starts, not in the thunderclouds above, but in the earth beneath our feet. Some beauty starts not in the sunset but within the good heart that beats. Be still and know the beauty that you are and the beauty that you ever will be. Take a deep breath and ground yourself. Settle in, be still and know.

Be still and know... This phrase is from the Psalms. It is from Psalms 46. The full line is, "Be still and know that I am God!" There's a line for you. Palms 46 is short and is sweet, designed for safety and for protection. It reads (or sings, actually) as follows:

God is our refuge and strength  
a very present help in trouble  
Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with tumult. Selah

"Selah" is a kind of exclamation. Continuing,  
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God  
the holy habitation of the Most High

There's a river flowing in the soul, as we sang earlier and there is a river flowing beneath city of God in Psalm 46...this city, probably being Jerusalem, there and then...and this city, probably being the human soul, here and now. There is a river flowing in the heart of the city. And that city is us. And its waters break forth in sanctuary, for the cleansing of the people.

[singing, 4<sup>th</sup> line of melody]  
There's river flowing in my soul...

It's so powerful. As Psalm 46 nears its closing, it reads,  
[God] makes wars cease to the end of the earth:  
...breaks the bow and shatters the spear:  
...burns the shields with fire.  
"Be still and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth."

It is a peaceful energy that is so exalted here—ending war, breaking weapons, taking down our shields of defense. In the presence of this peaceful energy, we are safe. We need not adorn ourselves with armor. We are wholly protected by its blessing.

So, what do we where? How do we adorn ourselves? How do we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives? [breathe] By taking a deep breath and by grounding ourselves, by settling in, by being still and by knowing the power of peace.

Peace. Peace. The word, itself, is a poem, a prayer, a song, a hymn, an exclamation. Selah! The word, itself, is a river gently flowing, carrying us. The word, itself, is beauty and burns like a fire, cool to the touch. Peace is a spectacular simplicity.

There is a melody that I am trying to learn how to play on slide guitar. The Tennessee Waltz. It's quite lovely. It was famously sung by Patti Page. In 1950, she recorded it. A quarter of a century later, her recording was the biggest-selling song ever in Japan. It's a beautiful song...and a tragic one. It just about kills me every time. Its opening words were these:

I was dancing with my darling to the Tennessee Waltz  
When an old friend I happened to see  
Introduced her to my loved one and while they were dancing  
My friend stole my sweetheart from me

It's brutal. Zero-to-sixty thousand tears in forty-one seconds flat. The Tennessee Waltz is so brutal...and so beautiful at the same time. As an old friend reminds us, reassuringly, joy and sorrow are woven fine. It is a complex simplicity that captures our hearts. It is a sorrowful joy, both in Nashville and in Okinawa, as it turns out. It's funny. It is a funny, little world we live in...a funny, little, beautiful world.

I thought Dolly Parton sang that song but I was wrong. It was Patti Page. Dolly sang a different song called In My Tennessee Mountain Home.

In my Tennessee mountain home  
Life is as peaceful as a baby's sigh  
In my Tennessee mountain home  
Crickets sing in the fields near by

I don't listen to Dolly Parton or to Patti Page nearly enough. So, I'm not surprised that I got these songs confused.

Dolly Parton was in the news the other day. She was in the COVID-19 news but don't get worried. This COVID-19 story is a beautiful story.

Country music legend Dolly Parton was vaccinated against COVID-19 [last Tuesday], less than a year after she made a \$1 million donation to Vanderbilt University [which is in Nashville, a donation] that helped fund research into Moderna's mRNA shot. Parton shared video of her inoculation on social media with a caption [that read] "Dolly gets a dose of her own medicine."

Parton said,

Well, hey! It's me! I'm finally going to get my vaccine! I'm so excited! I've been waiting a while. I'm old enough to get it. And I'm smart enough to get it. So, I'm very happy that I'm going to get my Moderna shot today. And I wanted to tell everybody I think you should get out there and do it, too.

She even changed the words one of her songs. "Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene" is now "Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine!" She's pleading with us, "Please, do not hesitate."

The world is so different now. Life is different. We are different. Who we are and how we are with one another is uncomfortably new. Everything around us has changed and everything around us is change. The earth has moved beneath our feet. The skies are new above us. And yet, we still know so much of beauty. Why is that so? ...because our first waltz in this strange, new world is inspired by the last...is inspired by the last waltz of love...and of peace...and of the beauty soul-level deep that flows through us like a river.

Now, I confess to feeling absolutely done with this pandemic. I confess to being exhausted, tired, broken and mired down, saddened, isolated, frustrated by what we've been going through...for a whole year now...and with so much devastation, consequence and loss in all of our lives. I try to keep a positive attitude. I try to maintain a forward-looking posture. It's a choice that I've made, not an easy one. I have faith that we will make things better as time moves on. This is a spiritual commitment for me. It's like a prayer. It is a confidence I have in what will be. It's like a blessing. It is a joyful agreement that I have

made with myself, a joyful agreement that was born in a time of sorrow. This is not surprising...for I am a student of Arundhati Roy. Roy is a wonderful author. She wrote a book called The God of Small Things. She inspires me. In the aftermath of 9/11, her words helped me to keep my faith. In a time of great sorrow, she said,

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”

Can you hear the new world breathing? Can you tell that she’s on her way? She’s coming. I’m sure that she is...and when she gets here, she’s going to ask us to dance...and we’ll be ready.

How do we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives? We dance. We dance with grace and we dance with elegance, with gratitude, with compassion.

It might be a little scary but I do think that we’re ready. I believe that we are grounded enough, settled enough. I think that we’re finding our stillness, finding our wisest ways of knowing. I think that we are finding our strength, our powers of beauty and lasting peace. We may be stepping into our power now, here, on the threshold of possibility.

As Rev. Rebecca Parker reminds us,

There is a ghostly skeleton...that we must learn to dance with. We must find how we can hold loss in our arms and move in rhythm with it. [We cannot fully live] until we learn to embrace life’s realities of betrayal, violence, suffering and grief. How to hold all of this in our arms and not be destroyed by sorrow I [do] not know. Maybe music would show us. Maybe ritual would carry us there.

Maybe we dance.

May we dance our way forward together, waltzing from Tennessee to Japan and beyond. May we dance through the illusions of our separation—both in good times and in tempest. In both conflict and consensus, may we be held-whole-together by a love that knows no bounds. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.