

The Rising Sun Sustains Us

November 7, 2021

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and welcome to this good day. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, November 7th and the title of this morning's reflection is The Rising Sun Sustains Us. The rising sun is our youthful spirit, the brave light with us all. It is the light of gratitude, the light of memory and the light of hope. Brave light is also the genuine possibility that we hold in our hands, the possibility of refuge and sanctuary. To all souls, I say welcome. It is so good to be together.

Good morning, sweet November. It's good to see you again, old friend. The frosty edges of the first parts of your days, your grey-orange sun that sets early... Summer spoils me so that I still pretend throughout the autumn, clinging to the warm days that remain. But your presence is undeniable now. I saw the sleet come down the other day. And there was snowfall on the summit of the mountain. Just a dusting. Quietly, you're whispering now. Winter is here.

Technically, not quite, of course. Technically speaking, winter does not start until the solstice, doesn't start until the longest night and the shortest day of the year in the global north...as this part of the world turn to face away from the sun for a while. The longest night and the shortest day of the year this time around is set for December 21st. 12/21/21. I'm sure that there are spiritualists and mathematicians busily working on the numerology—1-2-2-1-2-1. It looks auspicious to me but what do I know. When I looked it up online, Google answered my strange inquiry with a surprisingly fixed mortgage rate. So much for net neutrality. The web is often trying to sell us things.

Not all of the time, of course. The web is user-sensitive. You can find what your looking for but you have to already know what it is. Not everyone is trying to make a deal. Alan Watts is a world theologian and an ardent admirer of Buddhist. Yet, in the face of his obvious passions, he makes his theological position quite simple and plain. He isn't shilling and he wants us to know this...and it's important that we know. He wants us to know with certainty that he is not trying to make any money. He says,

I want to make one thing absolutely clear. I am not a Zen Buddhist, I am not advocating Zen Buddhism, I am not trying to convert anyone to it. I have nothing to sell. I'm an entertainer.

That is to say, in the same sense, that when you go to a concert and you listen to someone play Mozart, he has nothing to sell except the sound of the music. He doesn't want to convert you to anything. He doesn't want you to join an organization in favor of Mozart's music as opposed to, say, Beethoven's. And I approach you in the same spirit as a musician with [her] piano or a violinist with his violin. I just want you to enjoy a point of view that I enjoy.¹

Alan Watts wants us to see it his ways for a moment—not to best us in the argument and not to help him win the war, but to rejoice in the splendor and in the grandeur and beauty of life. No scheme and no subscription and no scandal. No strings attached, save those of the sounding piano and the singing violin. It's non-transactional. Either we fall and rise with the music or we walk away unmoved...or we walk by untouched...or we walk on oblivious ...

Fifty-one years ago, Joni Mitchell walked away and walked by...but she was neither unmoved or oblivious to the music that surrounded her when she wrote a song in 1970, a song she called For Free. She had been walking through a windy city. It's hard to tell what city it was. She was busy with the affairs of life. As she tells this story herself, she sings,

I was standing on a noisy corner
Waiting for the walking green
Across the street he stood and he played real good
On his clarinet for free

He was playing like a fallen angel
...playing like a rising star
...playing for a hat full of nothing
to the honking of the cars...

Nobody stopped to hear him
Though he played so sweet and high
They knew he had never been on their TV
So, they passed his music by

It's very different when you get famous. People listen and they applaud—sometimes, though, only because they know that they are supposed to...not because their hearts have been moved or touched.

Joni Mitchell was already famous back in 1970. By then, she almost never played for free. She was playing for music for a living and

she was doing very well. In the same song, she compares herself. She sings,

Now me, I play for fortunes
And those velvet curtain calls
I've got a black limousine and two gentlemen
Escorting me to these halls

And I'll play if you have the money
Or if you're a friend to me
But the one-man band by the quick lunch stand
He was playing real good for free

Not too many years later in her career, she changed the line to read:

Now me, I play for fortunes
And those velvet curtain calls
I've got a black limousine and sixteen gentlemen
Escorting me to these halls

Joni Mitchell was cashing in. After long years of trying, long miles walking the arduous path, the money was coming her way. Of course, I'm not making any judgments. There is no crime and there is no foul. There is no guilt and no shame in making money for the art that we put into this beautiful world. [] It's funny that I feel like I have to say that. It is so strange to me that in our culture how two opposing things are true. It's strange that it is possible to feel guilt and shame for making too much money from one's own artistry and, at the same time, it's possible to feel guilt and shame for not making enough money in this way...to be struggling. What's up with guilt and shame that has such a grip on us sometimes, that it conquers us, staking such claim...and claiming such purchase?

I'm fascinated with this question but, perhaps, this is a matter for another time. What is important for us this morning is less about what Joni Mitchell was expressing and more about what Alan Watts was expressing, even though both were expressing themselves and their differing perspectives on the selling of beauty. Mitchell was reminding us that, too often, we walk by what is beautiful and also free in life, having too well and foolishly learned the lesson that we only get what we pay for. On the other hand, Watts was reminding us that it is possible to be religiously passionate without proselytizing. He said, "I am not trying to convert anyone to it. I have nothing to sell. I'm an entertainer," which is to say that he has nothing whatsoever to sell.² He

just wants us to share in his perspective, for he envisions the world uniquely. He just wants us to enjoy the way he sees things for a while. It is so beautiful that we envision the world uniquely.

Now, the weight of the world tells us otherwise. Its sharp sides, its bleakness, the frost of its outer edges... They bid us, "Conform to expectation. Dim down your brilliance. Dampen your splendor, your grandeur, your beauty, the power of your voice and conform to the contours of the world that has been prepared for you. November, when you're not careful, sometimes you teach this much to me...as you lay the sun down so low on the horizon. The days are so much shorter when we leave them in your care. The arc from sunrise to sunset shallows to the south of us. The sun steps down a few rungs from the ladder that it climbs up in the sky and yet, its brief light is still enough to keep us going. Its brief light... Its brave light...

It would be difficult for me to explain to you what my church youth group was like in New Jersey. I don't know how well I would have fared without it. Throughout my life so far as I have known it, three men have been incredibly important to me—my father, of course, Leon Latimer Dunkley, Sr. (who, despite the faults that have become more clear to me since the time of his passing, remains one of the most spectacular people I have ever known); my minister, Rev. Harold R. Dean (whose ministry of memory and hope I cherish most powerfully); and Don Schoenewolf. Don was one of the leaders of my church youth group. He and his family have been so important to me.

I say that Don was a leader but he was also no such thing. When we gathered each week for youth group, he didn't have a lesson plan. There was no curriculum or anything. There were never any evaluations of any kind...save the ever-deepening, ever-maturing quality of our experience in life. Our lives were forged together by starlight and soulshine, by Mrs. Gibson's dinner lasagnas that we ate cold for breakfast at 4:00 am, by endless conversations about the meaning of life. Many of us are still quite close. We have become a family...not because we always got along and genuinely liked each other but because we always tried and genuinely loved each other. We sang so much together—James Taylor and Joni Mitchell; the Grateful Dead and Bob Dylan; The Beatles, Richie Havens, Joe Cocker and Joan Baez, of course; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young... We were young. We sang,
Four and twenty years ago, I come into this life

The song of a woman and a man who lived in strife
He was tired of being poor
And he wasn't into selling door to door
And he worked like the devil to be more

—4 + 20, CSNY

And we looked forward to being that old. We sang,
Darling, be home soon
I couldn't bear to wait an extra minute if you dawdled
Darling, be home soon
It's not just these few hours but I've been waiting since I toddled
For the great relief of having you to talk to

And now, a quarter of my life has almost past

—Darling, Be Home Soon, Joe Cocker

We were still in our teens. That was thirty years ago. Now, we look back on being that young.

I grew up in Unitarian Universalism. It was complicated...contradictory. We professed that we had no dogma, no religious beliefs that we had to embrace. We thought a lot of ourselves. We thought that we were above the fray somehow. We might have even thought that we were better than other people...because it seemed like there was not religious mandate, no litmus test. But, when you think about it—having no religious dogma—that was only sort of true. There are some central beliefs at the core of this faith. There have always been.

One hundred and thirty-four years ago, a Unitarian minister named William Channing Gannett offered his Statement of Faith entitled Things Most Commonly Believed Today Among Us to the 1887 meeting of the Western Unitarian Conference in Chicago. His Statement was adopted by a vote of 59 to 13. Even back then, we really liked to vote on things. Rev. William Channing Gannett's Statement began as follows:

We believe that to love the Good and to live the Good is the supreme thing in religion;

We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief;

We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old and new;

We had already transcended the Western religious doctrine that assumed the centrality of Christian and, subsequently, Judeo-Christian belief system. Late 19th-century Unitarians were becoming broader in

their religious perspectives and 20th-century theologians like Alan Watts would help us to continue on this path. We came to see the beauty of faith systems all around world. And yet, we still held on to our historically Christian roots. As the Statement by William Channing Gannett further expresses,

We revere Jesus, and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion;

And, yes, it was “men” back then. Of course, you know. That was the limit of the language. We knew better back then but we didn’t say it any better and how we tell our story really matters. In any case, Gannett further claimed and we affirmed that...

We believe in the growing nobility of [humankind and that]; We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order; to know this order is truth; to obey it is right and liberty and stronger life;
We believe that good and evil invariably carry their own recompense, no good thing being failure and no evil thing success; that heaven and hell are states of being; that no evil can befall the good [person] in either life or death; that all things work together for the victory of the Good;

Gannett went on for a while. In our youth group, we sat around and talked endlessly and argued—about gender and sexuality; about war and nuclear weapons; about nuclear power and its grave hazards; about race and cultural differences—but we never talked specifically about William Channing Gannett. Even though our faith was partially shaped by him. Mostly, we worked as hard as we could to truly get to know one other, to discover what is important in life and to choose our best ways forward while having as much fun as we possibly could.

We chose no sacred text to bind us or bond us to one another. We trusted life. We made our way to those texts through the music and theater—through the artists I mentioned earlier (and many others, as well...including ourselves); but also through plays, through Jesus Christ Superstar, through Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, through Godspell and, of course, through Hair. We were in it, imagining ourselves to be the dawning of the age of Aquarius. We were that light. We could feel the morning rising up in side our souls.

You know this light, don’t you? Outwardly, it rises up each morning in the east and it sets every evening in the west. It rises up each morning just as something sets in us, strangely reassured by that which happens every day. Something lays down us. A prayer is answered and we lay down some, small portion of the burdens that we

have learned to carry. We lay it down in gratitude and in memory and in hope, especially in November when the sun lays down so low on the horizon.

Do you know this light? It sets every evening just as something rises up in us, strangely reassured by that which happens all of the time. Something rises up us. A prayer is answered and once again, we lay down some, small portion of the burdens that we carry. We lay it down in gratitude and in memory and in hope, especially in November...because this season steals from us—like a white collar criminal, like a petty thief. November slowly steals away the sun in broad daylight. Almost magically. Hokus-pokus. Right before our eyes.

This time of year steals light from us—it always has and always will—but it leaves a sacred darkness in its place. And in this sacred darkness, we have before us a sacred choice. We can choose to cleave to gratitude and to memory and to hope or we can choose to give up on them. It's in our hands. It may not feel like it's in our hands sometimes but it truly is. It might feel as if we are wandering alone in the darkness but we are not alone, not unless we choose to be. This, too, is in our hands. It may not feel like it's in our hands sometimes but it truly is...no matter how real/how valid are our reasons for feeling otherwise. It's strange, but in our culture, these opposing things are true. Especially when we least expect it...especially when the coming winter steals from us...especially when life rips us from the world as we've come to know it. The artist named Tom Petty sings,

Somewhere, somehow, somebody
Must have kicked you around some
Tell me why you want to lay there
And revel in your abandon
Honey, it don't make no difference to me
Everybody's got to fight to be free
But you don't have to live like a refugee

This is no longer satisfying poetry. In some ways, we now live in a different world. Tom Petty wrote this song in 1979. The world has changed a lot since then. I don't think that Tom Petty would have made the same claim today.

We live in a very different world. We live in a world that constantly produces refugees. We live in a world that is doing so more quickly than it ever has. We are free to sing like Petty did, free to rehearse the words he wrote, free to say, "you don't have to live like a

refugee.” But how can this poetry matter to the many millions of us who do?

According to the report of Steven Donziger, the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNHCR),
At the end of 2020, there were 82.4 forcibly displaced people in the world...of which more than a quarter are refugees. This number has doubled since 2010 and is higher than it has ever been.

According UNHCR, there are 26.4 million refugees in the world and half of them are under the age of 18 years of age...and each and every one of them is blessed by the same star in the November sky.

In 1979, it was more possible/less ridiculous to sing, to rehearse and to say that “you don’t have to live like a refugee.” We could buy it back then...and they sold it to us. Tom Petty made millions. This time, he was cashing in. After long years of trying, long miles walking the arduous path, the money was coming his way. I’m not making judgments. There is no crime and there is no foul. I am just taking notice of a common experience.

We used to talk about such things in youth group. We would talk about the how and the why of everything. We would ask, “How can this be happening?” and “Why is this the case?” We’d ask, “What kind of world is this?” and “When can we change it?”

This morning, I raise a related set of questions, spiritual questions, religious questions: What things must we ‘most commonly believe among us’ in order to seek justice in our days, in order to seek justice these days that have our names written upon them? Who must we be? Who must we strive to become? Who must we remember that we already are? What must we do to remain aligned with a ministry of memory and hope?

I would like to close this morning with the story about a nine-year-old Syrian girl, an unaccompanied minor named Amal. Amal in Arabic means “hope.” Little Amal is three-and-a-half meters in height. That’s right. She is eleven-and-a-half feet tall. This hope named Amal is the ‘child’ of a man named Amir Nizar Zuabi. He sends such a brave light into the world. He says,

I was born in East Jerusalem in a tough part of town between the Beit Hanina neighborhood and the Shu’fat refugee camp. I’m a mixed child. That means my mother is Jewish and my father is Palestinian. So, the refugee experience runs deep in the DNA of my family. When my Jewish grandparents were fleeing Europe because of World War II, they came to Palestine and drove the

other part of my family into exile. When I was 14, I stumbled into a theater show in this tough part of town and I fell in love.

It was this love that created hope, the hope that he called Amal. Amal is a puppet. She is a towering puppet. She is beautiful and magnificent. She is arresting. One is instantly compelled—heart, mind and soul. One can only look up to her. She is fantastic.

Amal was created by Handspring Puppet Company, the renown puppet company from South Africa. Handspring closely matched by the Bread and Puppet theater company up in Glover, Vermont. Amal is a refugee. She is in deep need of sanctuary. In order to complete her journey, in order to find the refuge that she seeks, Amal must walk 5,000 miles. This is the theater project, the act of faith that was created by Amir Nizar Zuabi. This project, this act of faith was called The Walk. According to Zuabi,

“The Walk” is a rolling arts festival that will cross 8,000 kilometers, 65 cities, towns and villages in its way, and will create 120 events of welcome.

It takes a team of four puppeteers to bring Amal to life. Three teams will make the journey with her. Twelve in all will travel from Gaziantep, a city on the Syrian border, through Turkey, Greece and Italy...through France, Switzerland and Belgium...and then, on across the Channel into England.

There is a TED Talk about Amal. More than a million people have already seen it. More than a million people have watched as hope has walked into their cities...has walked into their towns and villages...as hope has walked into their lives. ...captivating the attention of children of all ages, from infancy to old age. In the Book of Isaiah, it is written,

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

Maybe we hold this commonly among us and maybe we do not. I don't know. What I do know is that the brave light of hope does shine, no matter how much this season steals from us. The rising sun still sustains us all.

So, good morning, sweet November. It's good to see you again, old friend. As you lay the sun so low on the leaf-bare horizon, its brief light is still enough to keep us going.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

¹ Source: <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1935679-alan-watts-i-want-to-make-one-thing-absolutely-clear-i-am-no/>

² Source: <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1935679-alan-watts-i-want-to-make-one-thing-absolutely-clear-i-am-no/>