

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Light Within Light

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING*Theodore Roethke*

It was beginning winter,
An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind,
Above the blue snow.

It was beginning winter,
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.

Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.

SECOND READING

Howard Thurman, theologian, 20th century

There is a spirit abroad in life of which the Judeo-Christian ethic is but one expression. It is a spirit that makes for wholeness and for community;

it finds its way into the quiet solitude of a Supreme Court justice when he ponders the constitutionality of an act of Congress which guarantees civil rights to all its citizens;

it settles into the pools of light in the face of a little girl as with her frailty she challenges the hard frightened heart of a police chief;

it walks along the lonely road with the solitary protest marcher and settles over him with a benediction as he falls by the assassin's bullet fired from ambush;

it kindles the fires of unity in the heart of Rabbi, Priest, Imam and Minister as they join arms together, bearing witness to a faith that transcends religion, race, and creed;

it makes a path to Walden Pond and ignites the flame of nonviolence, burns through liquid words from the Atlantic to the Pacific;

it broods over the demonstrators for justice and brings comfort to the desolate and forgotten who have no memory of what it is to feel the rhythm of belonging ;

it knows no country. Its allies may be found wherever the heart is kind and the collective will and the private endeavor seek to make justice where injustice abounds, to make peace where chaos is rampant, and to make heard the voices of the unheard.

It is the voice of God and it is your voice; it is striving of the whole human race toward a world of friendly peace underneath a friendly sky.

THIRD READING

from W.H. Auden, English poet, 20th century

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
And no one exists alone;
We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

Light Within Light

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An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
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Last Sunday morning we were driving, Luke and I, and many, many others, through a landscape just as the poet describes: prairie as wide as the ocean, glinting white, patches of brown, a rolling sea of frozen ground. Dakota in winter is a lunar landscape, at least to my east coast eyes, but it is infused with light. Last Sunday at

just this hour we saw how the morning light out there seems not to shine down from the sun, but to rise like mist from the earth itself: golden, silver, diamond light rising out of blue-white snow to cast a bowl of light above. Brilliant light: it's hard to look at it, and it's hard not to.

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We saw light rising from the land and we saw light shining from the people, thousands of people, women, children, men, young adults and elders, water protectors from hundreds of nations, hundreds of tribes, some camped in that place since last spring, in tents, teepees, yurts, pick-up trucks and trailers, and others, like us, and hundreds of clergy and lay leaders from all the over country, and hundreds, thousands of military veterans, arriving in their uniforms, with flags, ones who served in Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, and even Korea, the second World War. We saw light rising from the land and shining from the people.

We saw the river, and the bridge where people had been attacked two weeks before with water canons, chemicals, and rubber bullets; we saw the evidence of the pipeline's destruction. We saw the great Missouri and the sunlight on the water, the beauty of that and the power of that sacred place: *Oceti Sakowin*. We saw a buffalo made of snow, larger-than-life snow bison the size of a Prius, and its proud creator, a Native guy from Montana, who stopped every person walking by to ask, "Did you get a picture of my bison?" We saw joy out there.

We smelled sage and sweetgrass, smoldering, smoking, smudging us, blessing us, burning with cedar and pine; we smelled propane and coffee and cooking, food offered like a sacrament to anyone who came, and the smoke of the great central fire. We smelled North Dakota winter, and held with uneasy conscience the privilege of arriving there just after the first big snow and leaving right before the

blizzard this past Monday, with brutal weather yet to come. We were there on a soft and easy winter day.

We heard prayers in many languages, some native to the land, some the languages of travelers from many countries, who answered the call to come for an interfaith, international day of witness. We heard prayer flags snapping in the wind, banners hand-carried from Palestine and Peru, and sent from as far as Tibet and from the Anishinabe Middle School not far away at all, emblazoned with children's names and handprints. *We Stand with Standing Rock*. There are hundreds of flags – a colonnade of solidarity.

We heard children laughing on sleds, dogs barking and howling when the people sang, we heard jingle dresses; we heard horses whinnying and galloping, and car radios, and drones buzzing overheard their not-secret surveillance, and everywhere drums we heard drumming. We heard Winona LaDuke speaking to the BBC, asking with that relentlessly lucid intelligence she has, why the most powerful nation in the world cannot harness its imagination and its will and its wealth to build a pipeline to Flint, Michigan, and carry to the people there what they really need, which is not fossil fuel, but clean water. We heard theologians and priests. Late in the afternoon, we heard a voice through a megaphone or speaker, saying, *Friends, please spread out now and make a circle, encircle this camp*. He said it over and over, politely. Luke said that after an hour or so the guy had said it maybe 40 times, this patient voice saying, *People, I know you can do this, just grab the hands of other people, someone you don't know, and spread out in a circle*. And after an hour, maybe more, on the 41st try, we did it: thousands of people standing in the mud and stomping in the snow, rooted in some kind of faith, joined hand to hand in a great wheel of prayer, clergy and veterans and British reporters, water protectors, organizers, children. The circle was so big that people on the far side of it looked tiny. It was to that sacred wheel, late in the day, that the news from the Army Corps of Engineers arrived, passed down the line around the camp, and met with cheers and tears and whooping and shouting, and fireworks apparently later that night- but received with caution also. You could see it in the way the people cried - their dignified pragmatism after centuries of lies and broken treaties. We saw joy that was both incredible and, wisely, incredulous; such relief and such gratitude, vindication - but braced for whatever decision those in power, now or soon, may yet hand down. They are staying.

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 A lively understandable spirit
 Once entertained you.
 It will come again.
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 Wait.*

The water protectors are waiting with the patient impatience of Advent. Like trees planted by the water, they are rooted. They are alive, aware and wide awake. At this time of year, every ancient story we have ever told, from the solstice fire to the lights of the Menorah, to the Advent candles one by one- all these stories promise, “The light will return, but you must go and meet it. The great light will come back, but you must kindle your own small lights to guide it back. The light will return because you have kept an ember of it burning all along- your hope, your faith, your resistance, your resilience, your love. These little lights, the lights within you and among you, are important.” There’s a verse in the Gospel of Thomas, where Jesus says, “There is light within a person of light, and it lights up the whole universe. If it does not shine, there is darkness.” Our calling is to shine like stars, especially in the dark.

It was clear to us last Sunday, as it’s been I think to others of you who’ve traveled there, that the good news did not come to Standing Rock from Washington. The good news was always, and it remains, in the circle itself: this non-violent, prayerful, prophetic resistance of people planted on the land. This is, in our lifetime, an Indian uprising of unprecedented power and proportion. It’s about the Dakota Access Pipeline, and it is bigger than that pipeline. A few weeks ago I heard an elder interviewed on the radio. The reporter asked two questions: “Do you really think you can stop this pipeline? Are you hopeful?” The elder was silent. Then he said, “No. Probably not. Look what’s arrayed behind me here, the entire militarized force of American corporate power, the whole fracking, fossil fuel industry and the weapons that defend it. No, I don’t believe we will defeat this pipeline. It’s mostly built. And yes – I am hopeful, because I know that in the end we will prevail. Nonviolence will prevail. The land will prevail. This fight is not new for us. We are warriors. This is a spiritual fight, it is a global fight. and I am

hopeful.” The good news was strong in the circle long before Sunday’s news arrived. We saw light rising from the earth and shining from within those people and it was, it is, a holy, hopeful thing.

Luke said it beautifully in a post this week that was a prayer:

*At the river, the people gathered -
tending sacred fires
which have been lit for generations.
Then the elders processed on horseback
and all the gathered drew the circle wide
hands clasped in prayer, each to the other.
The children kept sledding on the hill
the sacred fire kept burning
and we prayed
for generations past and generations to come
and the proclamation
simple and so sacred, was spoken into being:
Mni Wiconi. Water is Life.
And it was.*

Mni Wiconi. Water is Life. And it was. And it is and evermore shall be, world without end, amen.

In recent weeks it has felt a little, or a lot, like the end of the world, the end of the world as we’ve known it. We returned from Standing Rock early Monday morning to one catastrophic cabinet appointment after another, from an Education Secretary who has publicly said all her work for reform, including school vouchers, has been done “to advance God’s will,” to a HUD secretary who, as a presidential candidate, spoke scathingly of the poor and of programs that protect them, to a labor secretary who is set against a living wage, from the NSA to Homeland Security to Health and Human Services, from the Attorney General to the Environmental Protection Agency, this is a darkening time, a fearsome, fearful, cynical, self-serving, immoral, dangerous time. It feels like the December of an age, an ice-age of the spirit, a time for hunkering down and maybe hibernating, shutting down, shutting out the awful news and its awful implications. We came back from North Dakota in the dark just after midnight, Monday morning, and it feels even darker right now.

In 1939, with fascism on the rise worldwide, and the Third Reich firmly planted among people (good, intelligent people) who claimed later that *they never saw it coming, they must have been asleep, they'd just had no idea*, in that darkening time, W.H. Auden, a young poet, captured the despondency of the moment, and also, urgently, a flicker of hope:

*All I have is a voice, he said
To undo the folded lie,
And no one exists alone;
We must love one another or die.*

*Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages...*

He ended with a kind of prayer:

*May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,*

May I, composed of nothing more than love and dirt, nothing more or less than dreams and bones, mortal hope and fragile faith and very little else except the evidence of history, science, ethics, art and love -

*May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
[May I] show an affirming flame.*

It is an ancient discipline, an old December discipline, in the northern world, to watch for light whencesoever it appears and nurture it, kindle it, fan the little flame, draw other people toward it to warm their frozen hands and feet, to flare it up, and pass it on. This is old religion on the darkened side of winter solstice, mid-December, singing the sun back into the sky when the long nights threaten to swallow the world. We think we have outgrown, outwitted the pagan urgency, but our hearts have not. This is old religion at Hanukah, at Advent, building the light

candle by candle, night after night, with nothing to go on but legends and trust; following stars that make no kind of astronomic sense, and angels who tell you, “Fear not. You carry within you, within your own body, the light of the world, hope of the nations, peace and good will. It is just waiting to be born.” We think we have outsmarted the spiritual mystery, but our souls have not. This is old religion in December, and an ancient discipline, to watch for the light, not let it go out, to shine your affirming flame. The light is already within you, already in the fire in the center of your circle. It’s not always easy to believe it.

I’m thinking this morning with gratitude of the volunteers who worked here this past Friday. It was a long day – 2 memorial services back to back– and these volunteers kept coming, as they have so many times before and as they will again, in little overlapping shifts of two or three or four, all day. There must have been 12 or 15 or 20 in all, setting tables, pouring coffee, cutting fruit, plating up cookies and crackers and cheeses and bread, washing the dishes again and again, serving two families whose only work here that day was to gather and grieve, remember and cry. It was ordinary little light these volunteers were shining - no great revolution, nothing radical at all – except that it is. It is radical and subversive to the standing order of our habitual human selfishness and busyness, this willingness to serve and help, and show up and shine the little flame of kindness and resiliency, a spark of the light we kindle here every Sunday morning, that says *life will go on. Life is beautiful, and it will go on. We may not stop this particular sorrow, we cannot piece back together your hstatered heart, we cannot sprare you this loss, but ultimately, love will win.* They shine, by their presence, an affirming flame, and it is simple, magical, and essential. This is no empty optimism, and no easy thing, as simple as it seems. It is the defiance of December, light in the dark, that shows up in a thousand ways, from caring for each other, to caring for the world. It’s a fierce tenderness, whether on the front lines of a mighty global demonstration, or on the front lines of compassion here at home.

Howard Thurman, the great African American theologian, had no reason to be hopeful in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. That was another darkening time. He traveled to India at least once, as did several black religious leaders, to study with Gandhi, who was putting into practice what he had studied in the work of Henry David Thoreau - this is how light moves round the world. Thurman wrote on his return:

There is a spirit abroad in life of which the Judeo-Christian ethic is but one expression. It is a spirit that makes for wholeness and for community; it finds its way into the quiet solitude of a Supreme Court justice contemplating civil rights; it

settles into the face of a little girl as she challenges the frightened heart of a police chief; it kindles the fires of unity in the heart of Rabbi, Priest, Imam and Minister as they join arms together, bearing witness to a faith that transcends race, and creed; it makes a path to Walden Pond and ignites the flame of nonviolence, burns through liquid words from Atlantic to Pacific; it broods over the demonstrators for justice and brings comfort to the desolate and forgotten who have no memory of what it is to feel the rhythm of belonging; it knows no country, this spirit. Its allies may be found wherever the heart is kind and seeks to make justice where injustice abounds, to make peace where chaos is rampant, and to make heard the voices of the unheard. It is the voice of God and it is your voice; it is striving of the whole human race toward a world of friendly peace underneath a friendly sky.

At this time of year, in these darkening days, every ancient story we have ever heard whispers the same promise: the light will return, but you have to go and meet it. The light will come back, but you have got to kindle lights to guide it back. The light will return because you have kept an ember of it burning all along- your hope, your faith, your resistance, your resilience, your outrage, your tenderness, your love – these little lights, the lights within you and among you, are important. This is the light of the world – and darkness shall not, the darkness cannot, overcome it.

BENEDICTION

Friends, go shining.

In these darkening days,

remember who you are

and what you love

and that to which you give your life,

the work of your hands and your heart.

Remember that truly we stand in one great circle

with a thousand, thousand others hand to hand.

You really are the light of the world,

and your love is a beacon of hope.