

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Come What May

Reverend Victoria Safford

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651.426.2369 vsafford@wbuuc.org

FIRST READING

excerpt from *The Annunciation*

Denise Levertov

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whome she acknowledges, a guest.
But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage ...

She was free
to accept or refuse: choice
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another in most lives?

SECOND READING

Leslie Posterman

On my way to drink a coffee in the park,
I ran into an old acquaintance
on the corner of 4th and Lafayette. She spoke
of reading stories to children in the hospital,
teaching them to make meaning
out of abstract marks on the page.

All these days when I can only
read the news through
squinted eyes, as though
seeing print through blurred slits of light
would make the stories any less dire,

on these days

I stop for any chance encounters
standing on concrete with people whose stories

I want to hear with open eyes.

THIRD READING **Shantiveda prayer**
from a Buddhist scholar in India, in the 8th century

May I become at all times, both now and forever
 A protector of those without protection
 A guide for those who have lost their way
 A ship for those with oceans to cross
 A bridge for those with rivers to cross
 A sanctuary for those in danger
 A lamp for those without light
 A place of refuge for those who lack shelter
 And a servant to all in need
 For as long as space endures,
 And for as long as living beings remain,
 Until then may I, too, abide
 To dispel the misery of the world

Come What May

Posted to a Unitarian Universalist website, recently and helpfully, was this prayer from Elizabeth Nguyen, UU minister and activist:

Prayer for When You Get Confused About How To Be A Human

This time of year I get confused sometimes. Because I know we need to celebrate and huddle with community by fireplaces and over cocktails and under stars. We need ugly sweaters and the sweets that so and so always makes and a reason to get off the Internet and in front of each other's faces.

And I also know - [the department of immigration] doesn't take a holiday break, [they're ready to enforce new travel bans and deportation orders, ready for raids and detentions]; the jails are full every time of year and all the reasons for celebrating have some history of greed and taking.

How can we celebrate or rest when there's so much work to do?

Help me, she says, help me to not be a person who regrets not visiting a grandparent or taking the time to call my sibling or writing my neighbor a card. Help me to not be a person who stops singing or gives up on art or gingerbread or latkes or candles or whose loved ones miss me more than they see me.

Let's remember to be humans. Humans with loved ones in prison, humans who need rent money and don't get to go home for the holidays. Humans who go to parties and work other people's parties and forget our phones at home on purpose and bring each other cookies and tea.

I visited someone in detention last week. On the anniversary of the night on the bridge at Standing Rock with the water cannons and the tear gas and rubber bullets. And then went to work with apples, cranberries and pineapple for the jello salad. In each case, showing up as who I want to be required something from me.

Let's remember to be humans.

What's required from us is vigilant attention to what matters and what doesn't.

What's required to be human is the spaciousness and graciousness of deliberate breathing, in and out, no matter how busy you are – because without a steady flow of oxygen there's no way your brain or your conscience or your heart can discern the right thing to do, the right place to be, on any given day, in any given hour. Be hospitable to oxygen.

How can you remember how to be a human if you can't even remember what day it is, or where you left your phone?

What's required in this season, and in every season, is enough space, enough time, for your soul to sit down and remind you what kind of person you intend to be, what kind of love you intend to offer back, what light you mean to shine.

What required is that we stay open, to wisdom from within ourselves and wisdom from beyond ourselves to shake us awake and remind us.

Leslie Posterman, a poet, talks about reading the news; the dreadful news when it feels like our whole country is mired in a sinkhole, reeking of affluence and arrogance, duplicity and danger. She squints her eyes to read the paper, as if somehow that will help. She runs into old friend who's been reading books to children in a hospital, and it's an unexpected blessing, a flash of light and clarity and agency and love. "These days," she says, I'll stop "for any chance encounters with people whose stories I want to hear with open eyes."

This is how we remember how to be human, by remembering, on purpose, what inspires us and warms us, what delights us in the joy and bravery of others, or the beauty of the world; placing ourselves on purpose in places where we're likely to hear stories that we long to hear with our grateful eyes wide open. I think it's a large part of why people come to congregations on cold mornings- to brush up against other peoples' lovely stories. We are, in some ways, seeking out annunciations of glad tidings, if not from angels then from the next best thing, which is one another, whispering, singing, demonstrating by example: *this is what your life is for, this is what makes it beautiful, and breathtaking; this is why it matters.* It's so easy to forget these days that there are lovely things we're living for, and work that calls us by our name.

I'm thinking of a person here, one of you, who almost always, when they call or send a note or show up for a meeting, starts the conversation by saying, "Hey, tell me one beautiful thing you've seen this week, one glad thing or fleeting glimpse of something glorious. Tell me one fun thing that you've got planned for later today. Hey, before we start, tell me about something this past week that cracked you open." And I've always been hard-pressed with this, sometimes a

little impatient, a little too busy and blindered and self-righteously beleaguered to respond to this whole-heartedly, until one time after yet another awkward, empty silence on my part, I realized that this person's questions were not an imposition but a gift; not frivolous but serious, deadly serious. It was sometime this past year, this harrowing year, when I understood, finally, that these queries were not in any way chirpy, chipper conversation-starters, not a waste of time, but actually the opposite: the most important, needful thing, a radical and purposeful reclamation of attention, devotion and desire. This person is doing some heavy spiritual lifting when they call. These questions are a kind of loving summons. And I knew then that I hadn't been answering because sometimes I'm afraid I have no answer. Here is someone asking for signs of life and signs of light in a very dark, depressing and disorienting time in human history, someone desperate to hear with open eyes a bit of a story, someone brave enough to understand that we're all a little desperate these days, who knows that to ask, "Have you seen one beautiful thing?" is the same as asking, "What do you still love?" – because if you can't name it, there's no way you can defend it. "Tell me something beautiful today" is the same as placing your two hands on someone's shoulders, or on each side of their face, and asking them point-blank, "What is saving your life right now?" – because if you can't name one thing, what exactly is the point? "Are you remembering what it means, and what it takes, to be a human, when inhumanity is rampant?" - because if you can't remember, who will? "Have you visited your grandmother lately, or looked at stars or laughed with friends? Have you written to someone in detention?" We are here, on this earth, to remind each other what's beautiful and true and good and worthy, what's possible and not impossible. We are here, in some ways, to be each other's angel Gabriel, announcing unanticipated news: *I saw something glorious today* (even the smallest thing: the way that snow looks. The way that bird looks. The way you all look this morning.). *What have you seen lately?*

If we're too despondent or too "busy" to find beauty in distinctly ugly times, to claim joy in decidedly depressing times, to stay hopeful and grateful and open, youthful in spirit, curious and buoyant, in these darkening times, if we're too low to find beauty and laughter, I don't think we'll find our calling either. We won't show up (not in any gladsome way) for the friends and family who depend on us for jello salad and for cocktails and for so much more; we won't show up for our children properly, or our parents; and nor will we show up, in any kind of useful way, any way that isn't pure and bitter drudgery, for the hard and holy work of justice, which is fortifying, healing work. We'll forget that another prayer we mean to pray is this old one out of India, the Shantiveda, a prayer to recite not with grudging obligation, but because it gladdens you to say it; it anchors you, reminds you who you are:

*May I become at all times,
 A protector of those without protection
 A guide for those who have lost their way
 A ship for those with oceans to cross
 A bridge for those with rivers to cross
 A sanctuary for those in danger
 A lamp for those without light
 A place of refuge for those who lack shelter
 For as long as space endures,
 And for as long as living things remain...*

This longing is a love song, not a weary manifesto. It whispers through every tradition, from the sayings of Muhammad to the teachings of Jesus. To be human, we know, is to care and to laugh, and sometimes, so easily, we forget to do both.

December, when the winter dark comes down, is a good time for remembering.

December, when the winter cold seeps under your collar and under your door, when we are driven literally inward, is a good time for breathing deeply in and out, recalibrating breath like small mammals when they go to ground, preparing yourself to be open to omens and unanticipated portents whencesoever they may come. Our work in winter, even in the twenty-first century, and maybe especially now, is to center down: not hibernation exactly, but what one poet calls “severer listening,” listening with open eyes for signs for beauty, signs of life, what really is our calling: to watch and notice and respond.

One of you sent a poem not too long ago, when for the first time since last March, it was snowing:

*If you have seen the snow
under the lamppost
piled up like a white beaver hat on the picnic table
or somewhere slowly falling
into the brook
to be swallowed by water,
then you have seen beauty
and know it for its transience.
And if you have gone out in the snow
for only the pleasure
of walking barely protected
from the galaxies,
the flakes settling on your parka
like the dust from just-born stars,
the cold waking you
as if from long sleeping,
then you can understand
how, more often than not,
truth is found in silence,
how the natural world comes to you
if you go out to meet it,
its icy ditches filled with dead weeds,
its vacant birdhouses, and dens
full of the sleeping.
But this is the slowed-down season
held fast by darkness
and if no one comes to keep you company
then keep watch over your own solitude.
In that stillness, you will learn*

*with your whole body
the significance of cold
and the night,
which is otherwise always eluding you. (Patricia Fargnoli)*

This is a good time of year to remember what it means to be a warm-blooded animal and a human, a good time to stay open, stay hospitable, to a certain kind of ancient news.

In the Christian calendar, Advent coincides with the waning days before the winter solstice, these four weeks before Christmas. It's a time of waiting without knowing what you're waiting for, getting ready for you know not what, gathering yourself, the way seeds snuggled down in the dark for months and months are gathering strength to burst through sod in the spring. You don't know yet what it means, you don't know yet what it's for, not what could possibly be asked of you. But come what may, you are readying for transformation.

Waiting without waiting, with a wintry patience that is not idleness but watchfulness, vivid listening, vigilance.

Listening for clues about our place in all this mystery.

In the old story, an angel comes to Mary. That's a troubled, troubling story, for all kinds of reasons; there are parts of it I have to place gently and respectfully on the altar of unresolved theologies. After thousands of years, I think we are learning to question old scriptures, no matter how sacred they seem, in which women are given the words, "let it be with me according to thy will." This is a complicated story, so I place part of it on the altar of perplexity. But there is wisdom also: sometimes, when we least expect it, light comes in to us, and grace, and new courage and new calm, and we understand that come what may, we're ready, and we can be, we will be, as loving, as open, as generous, as hopeful, as playful, and as brave as ever we've wanted to be. Sometimes light comes in. In the old story, the news comes through an angel. But sometimes you stumble into old friends on the sidewalk. Sometimes someone calls or starts a meeting with strange and wondrous questions. Like Mary, you have to ponder these things in your heart. Sometimes, on a winter night, you have the presence of mind, a rare flash of genius, and you put down your phone, close the laptop, switch off the TV, or the looping soundtrack of holiday anxiety, and you step outside. It's icy cold. You look up at the sea of stars, and just like the shepherds and just like the sheep, you greet your old friend, your winter friend, Orion, you take his hand and together you recalculate. *What's saving your life? What do you love? What brings you joy? What should you do? Who needs your help? And isn't it beautiful, this enfolding darkness in December in the north when we're waiting all together for the light?* Out of nowhere, answers come like comets – not many, but enough. Enough to give you light to go on, no matter what's ahead.

In the old story, an angel flies through the window. That hardly ever happens nowadays. But there are other ways. Lucille Clifton, great poet of the 20th century, tells in a poem how she found her power after year and years of running from it, how she found her footing and her voice after a lifetime of silence, how she remembered, after decades of forgetting, how she could and should and must be a person in this world.

the light that came to lucille clifton

*came in a shift of knowing
 when even her fondest sureties
 faded away. it was the summer
 she understood that she had not understood
 and was not mistress even
 of her own off eye, then
 the man escaped throwing away his tie and
 the children grew legs and started walking and
 she could see the peril of an
 unexamined life.
 she closed her eyes, afraid to look for her
 authenticity
 but the light insists on itself in the world;
 a voice from the nondead past started talking,
 she closed her ears and it spelled out in her hand
 "you might as well answer the door, my child,
 the truth is furiously knocking."*

This is about hospitality. We close our eyes, we shut our ears, we run away, but if any bit of us stays open, light will likely find us. Sometimes news comes from a chance meeting on the sidewalk; sometimes from a phone call or a text; sometimes from inside yourself, the wisdom you finally slowed down enough, shut up enough, to hear. "You might as well answer the door, my child, the truth is furiously knocking."

In this darkening time,
 the season of busyness and also of visible breath,
 the season of deafening noise and also startling silences,
 the season of the longest night and also of the light's return,
 this moment of national trauma and global trouble,
 may we breathe deep the breath of life,
 keep open to miracles and wonder,
 opening the doors, opening the windows,
 even in the cold,
 to the truth and the light and the hope
 that are always knocking on our spirit.
 May we keep open to each other.
 May we keep open, come what may,
 to transformations we can't yet
 even
 imagine.

silence

These words in closing come from Nancy Galland:

Woodpile

*Pieces of deep forest
rest one upon another,
once home to beetles,
birds and moss,
now layered tightly under tarps.*

*Cut, split and delivered,
handled sixteen times
from forest to stove,
each piece explodes with fire:
life-saving heat for
cat, old woman, old man.*

*And like the woodpile
under snowdrifts,
friends and times past
layered in memory
release their warmth,
saving our lives with love.*

*Across time and space,
let us shine brightly
into the cold Truths ahead,
lighting each other's way
with courage, compassion,
wisdom and vigilance.*

We will light each other's way with love.