

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

You Never Know

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

The Avowal

Denise Leverotv

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

SECOND READING

First Lesson

Philip Booth

Lie back daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

THIRD READING*from the book of Psalms, 121*

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
 My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.
 He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.
 Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.
 The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.
 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.
 The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.
 The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

You Never Know

*When despair for the world grows in me
 and I wake in the night at the least sound
 in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be
 I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water
 and the great heron feeds.
 I come into the presence of wild things who do not tax their lives
 with forethought of grief.
 I come into the presence of still water.
 And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light.
 For a time, I rest in the grace of the world
 and am free.*

[from Wendell Berry]

Some years ago, when I was in a quiet crisis - not a catastrophe for me or for those I loved, and not depression, but a sadness that I could not shake, and profound self-doubt (these are depression's less monstrous little cousins) - in that period I decided to commit to memory some poems, and some prayers, and some small bits of prose I loved. It took a long while. It took practice, copying them out, recording them into my phone so I could listen, speaking them out loud over and over to my dog when we walked - two dogs, actually: the dog we live with now and her predecessor (both, it turns out, lovers of Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Jane Kenyon, the Gettysburg address and the psalms). I think I was a little worried that when I get old I'll have nothing in the cobweb attic of my mind to comfort me except the goofy jingles from commercials I learned as a tv-addled child. So to center my spirit, now and in the future, I committed to memory a few things, a few dozen things, things that whisper without fail to me, in any kind of weather, *This is what you love. This is what you know. Remember who you are. All the world's a stage. Not by your will is the house carried through the night. Lift up your eyes to*

the hills, to the sky, to the water, to the trees, to the people, to the holy from whence cometh your help. Some things there are which shall not perish from the earth.

This has proven a good practice, and practice is the key because memory, like iron, rusts. Memory, like ink, can fade. Memory, like faith, can waver when it's tested, and then I'm right back where I started with nothing but the song for Campbell's soup. I forget and relearn, forget and re-memorize my loose-leaf scripture, and the dog relearns while I recite, and then, for a little while, we're good.

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the LORD*

-which in my mind is not a "lord," not a person or a thing nor even a deity at all, but a spirit, a breath; a whisper of light infusing this whole cosmos; a presence which is largely absent; the chemical, electric, magical and fully natural force of life in blood and dirt and stars; immortal, invisible, infinite, eternal-

*My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.
The LORD, whatever it is, "he that keepeth thee," shall not slumber, but shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, even for evermore,*

even when you're sad and the sadness will not lift; even when self-doubt floods in and rises, floating all the furniture of your being and leaving mold and rot behind when it recedes. You have to lift up thine eyes, get yourself to a window every day, at least once a day, lift up your eyes to the hills or the prairie or the river, or the sun or the rain or a friend, a book or a song or a prayer or your god, whatever will remind you rightly who you are and whose you are and how wondrously made; you have to practice this every day because faith, like memory, falters. Faith is not a thing you have, a thing you can cling to and claim, once and for all. Faith is a thing that you do. Sustaining it is more like replenishing the level of vitamin C in your body, or muscle mass. You do it every day.

Sometimes - wrongly, I think - we think of faith as fairy-dust. There's knowledge, which we glean from science and from evidence, the empirical facts of physics, gravity and history. *There's knowledge, we say, and there's faith, which is fluff, which is fake, flimsy, ignorant, delusional.* We think of faith like that sometimes, know-it-all Unitarians disillusioned with religions of our childhood, disappointed with childish, child-sized definitions of concepts that can't in fact be held by words, or commandments or homilies or litanies. Faith is not the same as knowledge or belief; sometimes it has no content. It's a different way of knowing, more like feeling, more like feeling at home - not at ease, necessarily, not convinced, necessarily, that everything will be okay. It's not an easy fix - though sometimes it's thrown around like that: *Just have faith*, say well-meaning friends. *Just clap your hands three times and wish upon a star.* But that's not it.

Faith, for me, is more a matter of right perspective: a sense, an intuition, trust, that my own small being (with its problems, dilemmas, fears, mortality, night terrors) - my own small being is part of something larger than itself, something not magical, but mystical, and utterly mysterious. It's

where theology meets astronomy and then keeps traveling, far beyond where we can see. Faith offers no solution to any problem, but it restores me back to proper scale and somehow there is comfort there for me.

Philip Booth's poem, *First Lesson*, is about teaching his child how to swim. This is how I think of faith:

*Lie back [child], let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down... [Child], believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.*

There's no evidence that's true; there's no evidence it isn't. You never know. To me, faith is right relation to unknowing and to mystery. It's not the opposite of doubt; it's the *soulmate* of doubt. Without doubt, you really don't need faith. The opposite of doubt is arrogance, and ignorance. Bravado. Hubris. Swagger.

One poet, Yehuda Amichai, says, "From the place where we are right," where we know everything, where we believe we're in control,

*From the place where we are right,
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.*

*The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.*

Doubt and faith, like love, are brave and curious and open; the windows are wide to sunlight and to darkness also – all the mystery that transcends our understanding. Faith is open to reality,

whatsoever it may bring. We long to give ourselves over to it, but so often we don't because we're too proud or too empirical, too intent on problem-solving, too well-schooled in a humanist philosophy insisting that if you just think hard enough, just work hard enough, apply good process and reason and logic, then everything will unfold as planned. That bootstrap theology is as cold and dangerous as the false piety that claims if you just pray hard enough for what you want, it'll come: new toy, a new partner, a job, a cure, world peace. That's not faith at all. Faith lets go of every outcome, awaits possibilities as yet unseen and unimagined. It seeks the grace to dwell right here, right now, breathing in, breathing out, without or with the thing we think we want.

*As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.*

There's something about ego here, about letting go of ego.

We like to think we know things and to some extent we do. Science gives us clues, little lily pads of data to hold our weight as we cross the deep and roiling waters of this life. We like to think we know a lot, but I'm telling you: it takes only one tsunami, wiping out an island; one hurricane; it takes only one senseless war, or one senseless death; it takes only one horrific diagnosis, out of the blue; only one betrayal; one loss; one disturbing Senate confirmation; one drop of sadness or self-doubt that will not dissipate. I'm telling you, it takes *just one thing* to make you un-know everything you know – and then what do we go on? I'm talking about what holds you through the night.

And on the other side, let's hasten to admit, and remember and confirm, on the other side, you think you know things, but I'm telling you: it takes only one new baby, damp and purple, wriggling in your trembling hands, screaming in its first moments of life for air and milk and love – and you're undone! It turns out you don't know a thing about where babies come from. It takes only one sunrise sometimes; one golden maple aflame in October's rare and stunning light; one reprieve; one heartfelt apology that you did not expect; one miracle among the many that fall out of the sky into our hands every day; it takes just one or maybe two of those to make you un-know everything you thought you knew about cynicism and despair - and then what do you go on? Faith holds open possibility. It bridges us over when the water is roiling and wide. Faith shakes us awake from our complacency and anchors us in what we know we love, but had momentarily forgotten.

It is not a solitary craft. It feels like the most intimate and private thing, between you and your God, you and your heart, alone in your bed in the night in the dark, alone in your life. It feels

like the most private, solitary thing, but it is not. It's communal and contagious. This past week we've been reminded that faith is what our hands hold all together, when none of us is strong enough to hold on by ourselves. I've been fortified this week, my faith made strong, by text messages, emails, posts, phone calls, small impromptu gatherings, where women and others call to say they're feeling such despair about the Supreme Court, and someone else will say, "Yes. It's true – the times are bad, and will be now for a long, long time. But truth has been spoken. Truth has been heard, if not by those in power then by the rest of us, with our own collective, mighty power, which is rising. We are rising. We are many." This is like a relay race, where the baton is passed from one tired runner to the next: faith works like that sometimes, texting all around.

I have a deep, unfounded faith, and it is not corroborated by any evidence uncovered by an FBI investigation. I have a deep, unfounded, unprovable, improbable faith that I feel bubbling within me like pot boiling on stove, faith that despite everything we've seen and heard in recent weeks and recent months and really all our lives, despite the composition of the Senate and the House and the Supreme Court, despite our President and all that has happened, this is a watershed moment, that the tide is going to turn. Not soon, but in time. I have faith in this, unsubstantiated faith in the women and in others who are speaking and listening, naming and hearing, stepping into the light and seen now in their shining, ordinary dignity. We will not be going back, none of us. Someone said to me the other night that a friend of hers, a supporter of the nominee, said last week in frustration, "When will this #MeToo stuff end?" as if it were a hairstyle, as if it were a weather pattern, inconvenient to the picnic. The fact is, it will not end, because it is a revolution. It's like saying, as people did not so long ago, when will this wacky campaign to convince us that the earth moves round the sun end, so we can go back to our comfortable pre-Copernican ideas? When can we stop burning all these pesky heretics and witches?" But we're not going back, because once you're truly awake it's impossible to go back to sleep, and I have this shaky faith that we are waking up. This faith does not come from within me, it comes from you and from millions and millions of others, girls and old women, boys and old men – this is binary language because I am thinking of specific people here, but I mean everyone, it's all of us. I have this rising faith in all of us, because I *can't not*, and it needs renewing every day, like every fragile miracle, like a little seedling in a cup, or a baby at the breast. Faith is not fantasy. It is not a solo performance. It is not quantifiable or guaranteed, but it is real, and it will bridge us over.

When in your life have you let go of the known shore and floated out on faith into unknown water?

When in your life have you had to let go of the known world and take the next step pretty much in the dark?

What held you safe?

Who held your hand?

Whence came your help?

What poem or prayer or psalm or song reminded you who you are, what you are, how wondrous?

It's not about wishful thinking. It's not about believing just because somebody – a god, a priest, a minister, a senator, a snake-oil salesman, tells you that you should. It's not about strapping

horse blinders to your face so reality cannot press in. Faith is all about reality, trusting that the ground beneath your feet is real and it will hold you. It's not about belief so much as love.

There's a beautiful medieval text, a Christian text in Middle English called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written in the 1300's as a kind of instructional manual for young monks in the monastery. The anonymous author understands that there is so much the young scholars cannot comprehend, will never comprehend, about the nature of God, or life itself, suffering and death, mystery and wonder. The author knows that they'll be frustrated, and even frightened by this, shaken in their faith, because they can't have all the answers no matter how diligent their study.

Thou sayest, "how shall I think on God and what is he?" but to this I cannot answer thee. Thou hast brought me with thy question into that same darkness, and into that same cloud of unknowing. Of all other creatures and their works, and of the works of God, may you through grace have fullhead of knowing, and well can you think of them: but of God Himself can no one think. He may well be loved, but not thought. By love may He be held; but by thought never. The only way through the thick fog of mystery, the cloud of unknowing, says the author to the student monks, is to love God, not to try to understand God. The only way through this mysterious life when you can't find your way, can't see your way clear, can't imagine hope or change or peace of mind, is to love what you love, fiercely, with heart, mind, soul and strength, to remember gratitude and wonder, and let love guide you through the mist. Faith is not blind trust that God or anyone can fix this broken world. **Faith is the assurance that we love it and each other well enough to try.**

From Eavan Boland, poet of Ireland:

Tree of Life

*A tree on a moonless night
has no sap or colour.
It has no flower and no fruit.
It waits for the sun to find them.*

*I cannot find you
in this dark hour
dear child.
Wait
for dawn to make us clear to one another.
Let the sun
inch above the roof-tops,
Let love
be the light that shows again
the blossom to the root.*

Let us trust that love will find us in the morning.