

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Don't Go Back to Sleep

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FIRST READING

Contraband *Denise Levertov, 20th century poet*

The tree of knowledge was the tree of reason.
That's why the taste of it
drove us from Eden. That fruit
was meant to be dried and milled to a fine powder
for use a pinch at a time, a condiment.
God had probably planned to tell us later
about this new pleasure.

But we stuffed our mouths full of it,
gorged on *but* and *if* and *how* and again
but, knowing no better.
It's toxic in large quantities; fumes
swirled in our heads and around us
to form a dense cloud that hardened to steel,
a wall between us and God, Who was Paradise.
Not that God is unreasonable- but reason
in such excess was tyranny
and locked us into its own limits, a polished cell
reflecting our own faces.

God lives on the other side of that mirror,
but through the slit where the barrier doesn't
quite touch ground, manages still
to squeeze in- as filtered light,
splinters of fire,
a strain of music heard
then lost,
then heard again.

SECOND READING

from Hafiz, a Persian poet from Shiraz, in present day Iran. He lived in the 14th century.

God
pours light
into every cup,
quenching darkness.

The proudly pious
stuff their cups with parchment
and critique the taste of ink

while God pours light

and the trees lift their limbs
without worry of redemption,
every blossom a chalice.

Hafiz, seduce those withered souls
with words that wet their parched lips

as light
pours like rain
into every empty cup
set adrift on the Infinite Ocean.

Don't Go Back to Sleep

Maria Mitchell is standing in the front parlor of her humble family home on the island of Nantucket on a biting winter Saturday in 1831. Beside her, a shiny brass telescope points out through the removed windowpanes. She is too ablaze with excitement to feel the gusts of February freeze rushing in. A glass bowl filled with water hangs overhead, dappling the room with rainbows. Through a piece of smoked glass, she lifts her eyes to the darkening noonday sky, ready to count the seconds of the eclipse. Twenty-one minutes past noon, a metallic light begins to turn the houses, the hills and the harbor into a living daguerreotype. Someone across the narrow cobblestoned street stops playing Beethoven mid-bar. A young whaler down in the bay leans on his harpoon to look up.

This scene is from a new book by Maria Popova, a kind of collage-biography of several 19th century scientists, artists, and writers, mostly women, and mostly Unitarians or Transcendentalists or Quakers. She goes on:

Against the deepening cobalt of the sky, the Moon glides before the sun and carves a slowly slimming crescent. When it settles for a moment into a glowing ring, Maria counts 117 seconds and feels like she is peering down the gun barrel of time, gold-rimmed and eerie. She is twelve years old. She is besotted with the splendor of the cosmos and the sturdy certitude of mathematics- an intellect undimmed by the limitations of her time and place. No woman can receive a formal education in higher mathematics or astronomy anywhere in the world. No woman in America can vote, [nor will in her lifetime]. Night after night, year after year, Maria Mitchell will point her steadfast instrument at the nocturne and sweep the skies with quiet systematic passion, searching for a new comet against the backdrop of familiar stars. One autumn evening in her 29th year, she would slip out of her parents' dinner party to climb onto the roof and station herself at the telescope, surprising herself with a spontaneous gasp when she sees, at half past ten on the first day of October in 1847, a new telescopic comet. What

invigorated Maria Mitchell that evening, and would drive her for the remaining decades of her life, was the ecstasy of having personally chipped a small fragment of knowledge from the immense monolith of the unknown.

That year, she became the first woman inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Scientists; she was the nation's first female professional astronomer, and the first paid by the federal government to calculate navigation; she founded the Nantucket Athenaeum and established the astronomy department at Vassar College, where she told her students, "Mingle the starlight with your lives and you won't be fretted by trifles. Accept nothing as granted beyond the first mathematical formulae. Question everything else." She was all about letting light in.

My favorite part of this passage, other than the fact of a 12 year-old convincing her parents to remove the glass from their parlor windows in New England in the winter, is the phrase "quiet, systematic passion," which I think may be part of what defines us as human, or at least defines us as alive and awake: not just passion, but intentional, systematic curiosity, and not just thoughtful intention, but passionate, wild, unquenchable love, of life and learning and possibility, of geometry and mystery, of wonder and *what if*: a burning desire to let in more light.

There's a window in our kitchen with a broken sash cord. The window won't stay open by itself in the summer; we have to prop it up with a block or a book or a fan or a roll of paper towels or a wooden spoon. I feel sometimes that this is what my mind is like, and sometimes my heart and my spirit: they don't stay open on their own. They've got plenty of information already, plenty of wisdom and certainty, all the answers they need. They're lazy; they run on automatic; and sometimes they're more than a little wary, my mind, my spirit, my heart, guarded and girded against the unfamiliar and the unexpected. I have to pry them open, prop them open, with quiet, systematic passion, every day, to let the light and fresh air and fresh hope come rushing in; to let in stark reality, which I might rather not see, and bright promise, which I maybe convinced myself wasn't feasible; and comets of new understanding, and the bright light of other people's wisdom, and the clear, undeniable, shattering radiance of other people's sorrows, other people's stories, experience, opinions. My mind closes all the time when I'm not looking, like a computer screen set to "fall asleep" every three minutes; my heart and spirit slam shut when I'm tired or afraid or distracted or discouraged. How do we keep ourselves awake?

Our theme this month has been "awakening: the practice of letting in light." I think I sometimes misconstrue "awakening" as a one-time experience, like waking up in the morning: you do it once, after sleeping, and then you're good for the day. But *awakening*, as we mean it here, isn't like that. Sometimes we think a religious conversion happens in an instant: you went along believing one thing and now, all of a sudden, you believe something else, and you'll never look back; or we think of a spiritual awakening as a one-shot upgrade, where with a little practice or by grace, enlightenment strikes like a lightning flash, and you're good to go. We speak of "The" Enlightenment like this, that period in western philosophical history, in the 18th century, when we've been taught that reason and democracy and science eclipsed superstition, tyranny and dogma once and for all. But eclipses don't last long, as Maria Mitchell observed (117 seconds), and religious conversion is the work of a lifetime, we hope, not just a trade-up from one

orthodoxy to another. We're always waking up, spiritually, emotionally, blinking our eyes, shaking off the blankets of denial and delusion. (How many times in a day?)

Think of Maria on the roof of her house, not just once, but on every clear night from the age of 7 or 8 until she retired from the observatory which bears her name at Vassar, and on the cloudy nights, the stormy nights, the nights when hurricanes rocked Nantucket to its foundation, she sat up late with a whale oil lamp, running the numbers, refining the celestial calculations based on years of rigorous watching, teaching her mind to sing the beautiful music of mathematics, describing the colors and the breathtaking beauty of the stars in plain-spoken articles so anyone could understand and see, This work, this awakening, was as constant and continuous as breathing, in and out.

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.*

This comes from Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, Muslim poet and philosopher, born in Afghanistan, maybe a hundred years before Hafiz.

*You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
The door is round and open,*

the door to enlightenment, knowledge, wisdom, light, hope, inward peace, truth,

*The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.*

She didn't. After Maria Mitchell discovered the comet in 1847, people came to Nantucket to look through her lens (Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Elizabeth Peabody, Frederick Douglass), and as her universe of deepening friendships expanded, so did her engagement in social justice, particularly in the movements to abolish slavery and grant full citizenship to women. She observed that just as human understanding of the cosmos had shifted over time and was still shifting, so did her own understanding of human bodies in their orbits shift. Were white people, male people, wealthy people, people of privilege and power, at the center of all things by virtue of natural law, or by divine decree, or might it yet be proven that, like the planet earth itself, the sun does not revolve around them, and everything could change? It was a disquieting question. Maria was compassionate and humble, and she made her observations with quiet, systematic passion, propping open all the windows of her mind and soul, to see what light could do.

Her parents and 9 siblings were Quakers who established a liberal theological firmament under her feet, but as a young adult Maria quit the Friends meeting, attending Unitarian services instead. She was a genuine scientist, whose love of mystery and truth, the dance of mystery and truth, awakened a mystical spirituality. Traveling in Italy, she wrote in her journal about Galileo:

I knew of no sadder picture in the history of science than that of the old man, worn by a long life of scientific research, weak and feeble, trembling before that tribunal whose frown was torture, and declaring that to be false which he knew to be true. And I know of no picture in the history of religion more weakly pitiable than that of the Holy Church trembling before Galileo, and denouncing him because he found in the Book of Nature truths not stated in their own Book of God – forgetting that the Book of Nature is also a Book of God. It seems to be difficult for anyone to take in the idea that two truths cannot conflict.

For her, the Book of Nature was holy scripture, and the Book of God a metaphor, song of praises, poems and prayers awestruck with Creation.

*God
pours light
into every cup,*

said the poet Hafiz, far from Nantucket, and far from here, in Persia in the 1300's. Hafiz, like Rumi, was a Muslim, and so he spoke of God. But you might not; you might instead say "mystery," or "nature" or "life" or "truth." You might say,

*This shining cosmos
pours light
into every cup,
quenching darkness.*

*The proudly pious
stuff their cups with parchment
and critique the taste of ink*

while the cosmos pours light

*and the trees lift their limbs
without worry of redemption,
every blossom a chalice.*

*Hafiz, seduce those withered souls
with words that wet their parched lips*

*as light
pours like rain
into every empty cup
set adrift on the Infinite Ocean.*

What lets the light come in? How do you become a living cup? What keeps us wide awake and questioning, like an astronomer or a poet or a child? What keeps us open, when we're scared, to new hope? What keeps us present, when we're weary, to reality, harsh as it is? What keeps the

windows of our soul propped open just enough for the light of kindness to get in, propped open just enough so the need for our kindness in return will call us out? What keeps us alert to disquieting questions, and curious, and supple and unguarded, even when we think we know all we need to know?

The Unitarians Maria Mitchell heard on Sundays were shaking the old established order of Congregational Protestant churches. They weren't just propping open windows - they were punching out the panes of glass, letting all kinds of wild wind and heresy blow through. Better translations, biblical scholarship, new evidence and archeology, not to mention natural selection, infused the dusty corners of fundamentalist doctrine with brilliant, blazing, scorching light. Exposure for the first time in America to sacred eastern texts awakened questions about Christology and God and what religion could mean going forward in a pluralistic world. Science and reason joined scripture and tradition as reliable sources of faith. This was the flowering of Unitarianism as we experience the movement now. It was unprecedented, and courageous and elegant and strange, to suggest, essentially, that the periodic table of the elements might be as holy a scripture as the Christian bible; that the fossil record might be in fact a sacred text, each layer revealing glimmers of divine truth and our place within it.

Mitchell said that two truths cannot conflict, that if they are both true, they have to co-exist. She spoke of the Book of Nature, meaning science, and the Book of God, meaning mystery, I think - what the soul knows and the spirit asks and the heart feels without any empirical evidence at all, nor any need for proof. This was not superstition, but openness, awake-ness, to light of a different kind. In the decades and the century that followed, the Unitarians leaned hard toward fact and reason; empirical proof; a heady humanist intellectualism; and a kind of haughty atheism focused on individual freedom more than collective liberation or any kind of beloved community. They leaned hard toward one truth only. Emerson, descended from a long line of Unitarian clergy, called it "corpse cold," and left his pulpit and the church entirely. Henry Thoreau, who like Maria Mitchell spent his hours and days and weeks and years observing the natural world, recording every accurate detail in the great wild laboratory that was Walden Pond, trembled at the beauty before his eyes, beneath his feet. He asked, "With all of your science, can you tell me how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?"

Denise Levertov tells what happens when we rely on facts and figures only:

*The tree of knowledge was the tree of reason.
That's why the taste of it
drove us from Eden. That fruit
was meant to be dried and milled to a fine powder
for use a pinch at a time, a condiment.*

*But we stuffed our mouths full of it, [and]
It's toxic in large quantities; fumes
swirled in our heads and around us
to form a dense cloud that hardened to steel,
a wall between us and [the holy].
... reason locked us into its own limits, a polished cell*

reflecting our own faces.

God lives on the other side of that mirror, she says, and you might say “mystery,” or “wonder” or “solace” or “the ineffable,” or “holiness,” or “magic,” or “grace.”

*Through the slit where the barrier doesn't
quite touch ground, it manages still
to squeeze in- as filtered light,
splinters of fire,
a strain of music heard
then lost,
then heard again.*

The stars, like every other natural thing, are made of fire and ice, and elements; their distances from here are measurable, their age and size and density; the starlight is a decipherable mathematical signature. But mystics in every age, in countless languages, some of them priests, some of them pagans, some of them philosophers, and some of them astronomers and physicists, have always said that what's holy in us, what's fiery as long as we are living, is the inner light, primordial light, what Quakers call the light of God, what others call the force of life. It is what rushes into the room when a baby is born (invisible, immeasurable and palpably there), and it is what quietly recedes when someone dies, whether the windows are open or not. That's the light we shine while we're alive. To stay awake, attuned, fully present to the light that's shining all around us, from everybody else and from the universe itself, that's our calling while we're here, to stay amazed.

From Rumi, hundreds of years ago, which is an eye-blink of time:

*For years, copying other people, I tried to know myself.
From within, I couldn't decide what to do.
Unable to see, I heard my name being called.
Then I walked outside.*

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.*

The stories here about Maria Mitchell, and the direct quotes about her life and work, are adapted from *Figuring*, a new book by Maria Popova.