

Sweet Darkness

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, September 23, 2018

For the month of September we have been looking at various aspects of the question “What does it mean to be a people of vision?” and on this first full day of the autumnal equinox, at this place of balance between the light and dark of our days, it seems perhaps the perfect time to dance a bit with darkness and it’s necessary role in our visioning.

Essayist Rebecca Solnit gives us an angle on darkness from which to begin. She opens the first chapter of her book *Hope in the Dark*, titled “Looking into Darkness” with these words:

On January 18, 1915, six months into the First World War, as all Europe was convulsed by killing and dying, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, “The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think.” Dark, she seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. **We often mistake the one for the other.** Or we transform the future’s unknowability into something certain, the fulfillment of all our dread, the place beyond which there is no way forward. But again and again, far stranger things happen than the end of the world.

“Dark, she seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other.”

Quaker teacher and writer Parker Palmer reminds us that:

In the visible world of nature, [in this “season of paradox that is Autumn] a great truth is concealed in plain sight. Diminishment and beauty, darkness and light, death and life are not opposites: they are held together in the paradox of the “hidden wholeness.” In a paradox, opposites do not negate each other – they cohabit and co-create in mysterious unity at the heart of reality. Deeper still, they need each other for health, just as our well-being depends on breathing in and breathing out.

Because we live in a culture that prefers the ease of either-or to the complexities of both-and, we have a hard time holding opposites together. We want light without darkness, the glories of spring and summer without the demands of autumn and winter, the pleasures of life without the pang of death. We make Faustian bargains hoping to get what we want, but they never truly enliven us and cannot possibly sustain us in hard times.

When we so fear the dark that we demand light around the clock, there can be only one result: artificial light that is glaring and graceless and, beyond its borders, a darkness that grows ever more terrifying as we try to hold it off. Split off from each other, neither darkness nor light is fit for human habitation. But the moment we say “Yes” to both of them and join the paradoxical dance, they conspire to make us healthy and whole.

Poet and philosopher David Whyte in his poem “Sweet Darkness” issues us an invitation to consider:

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone,
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn

anything or anyone

that does not bring you alive
is too small for you.

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”

- *Carl Jung*

If Jung is right, then perhaps Paradise is no more than seeing the light forming in the dark. Perhaps being awake is paying attention to the ongoing moment of life that we so often take for granted, that moment – like conception, like seed cracking open – that is happening even as you [hear these words].

Yet, as a headlight grows dimmed by driving through all kinds of weather, the gift by which we perceive gets covered by experience, and our ability to see is diminished until we clean the gift. This is a lifelong process, one that never ends, but always begins.

So the care of one's being is imperative and continuous, as simple and hard as wiping the residue of experience from your mind and heart, letting your original face again light the way. Though, like scratching the middle of your back, we often need each other to regain our sense of Oneness.

It helps here to tell an old Sufi story about a thirsty man who follows a muddy stream into a cave. He carries a lantern, holds it before him, and finds the clear source which he can drink from. **When feeling muddied and troubled, we must not drink from the mud, but trace its source carefully.** Carrying the lantern of our spirit before us, we must enter the darkness of our troubles if we are to drink clearly again from the source. This is making the darkness conscious, and compassion is swaying your small light near others too troubled or muddied to see their way. (Excerpt from *The Book of Awakening*” by Mark Nepo (pg. 414-15)

Hear the words of the poem again:

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone,
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn

anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive
is too small for you.

“The dark will be your womb tonight.” That line reminds me of the question posed by Valerie Kuar in the prayer she wrote the day following the 2016 presidential election: “What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?”

Elea Kemler, UU minister of First Parish Church of Groton, MA, used Whyte’s poem in a message titled “What Thrives in Rubble and Ash” – delivered on Sunday, April 21, 2013 - the week of the bombings at the Boston Marathon. Her words, though written for a very particular tragedy, resonate for us in our day and time, a fear-filled present often referred to as “dark times”, an ongoing tragedy:

To restore ourselves, to renew our strength and our hope and our vision, and to remember that the world was made to be free in — **these things are not luxuries. They are necessary.** They are necessary because there will be challenges in the days ahead.

[...]

The Presbyterian minister and theologian Frederick Buechner writes, “Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid.” This line is often quoted by the writer Anne Lamott who says she wishes she weren’t afraid and maybe in her next life she will come back as a cloistered Buddhist monk but in this life she is just a regular, screwed up, sad, worried faithful human being. As are most of us. Lamott writes, “But it is hard not to be afraid, isn’t it? Some wisdom traditions say that you can’t have love and fear at the same time, but I beg to differ. You can be a passionate believer...and still be afraid. I’m Exhibit A.”

And yet, Lamott reminds us that in the midst of all the fear, there has been such “amazing love and grace in people’s response” to the [many] terrible events of this week. She writes,

*“It’s like white blood cells pouring in to surround and heal the infection. It just breaks your heart every time, in the good way, **where Hope tiptoes in to peer around.** For the time being, I am not going to pretend to be spiritually more evolved than I am. I’m keeping things very simple: right foot, left foot, right foot, breathe; telling my stories, and reading yours. I keep thinking about Barry Lopez’s wonderful line, “Everyone is held together with stories. That is (what) is holding us together; stories and compassion. That rings one of the few bells I am hearing right now, and it is a beautiful crystalline sound... **People are hungry to know how we are to live in the face of chaos.** Part of the answer for me is that we stick together. We share.”*

(from Anne Lamott’s Facebook post, April 19, 2013)

<https://uugroton.org/Sermons/whatthrivesinrubbleanddash.html>

We listen to one another’s stories and we tell our own. We take fear by the hand, we enter the sweet darkness, and we learn.

Music for Reflection

“I Can See Clearly Now” - by Johnny Nash; cover by Haeda

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUUcQ3CdGi8>