

**Sunday January 11, 2009**  
**“Out of the Darkness...”**

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*The light may be slowly returning, yet the dark still presses down hard upon us. This service is an exploration of darkness – themes and realities that shape our lives – in pursuit of sustainable, renewable sources of light.*

84 minutes. We are three weeks past Winter Solstice and we have regained 84 minutes of visible sun already ... it will be 88 tomorrow. That promise of light returning – it will be 92 minutes, more than an hour and a half of restored visibility and access to vitamin D–filled daylight, by Tuesday – that promise of light returning is dependable. We can count on it. It happens year after year, expected and reliable, like a trustworthy old friend who never forgets your birthday, but shows up year after consistent year. You could set your clock by it.

Out of the darkness, there is light.

It is the most simple, obvious statement. When you come – out of the darkness – there is light.

I had the great pleasure of sharing time with many of you on Winter Solstice afternoon – that day of the year when the sun is most scarce and we are called to sing and celebrate and remind ourselves, because the sun is not available for inspiration, when we remind each other that there is more light coming, more beauty to be seen, and more warmth to be felt.

On that long night – when the darkness presses down hard – we sing or dance, tell stories and laugh, and feed one another in body and in spirit.

But if we are alone ... or injured ... or broken ... or heartsick – it can sometimes be tempting to think that the sun will never return.

For many of us, when the darkness presses down hard, that night is too long.

It is a wonderful thing when we can gather together festively, marking the turning wheel of the year – but what about when the tone is not so festive? What about the darkness that we cannot alleviate with a party – the darkness that does not come, like winter, with a built in promise of spring? What about the darkness that looms over people, or behind them, or just up ahead – the darkness that comes with no warning, not easing in 4 gentle minutes a day – or the darkness that drags itself out over years, stealing away hope and beauty and love?

Unitarian Universalists take a lot of inspiration from the seasons, from the natural rhythms of life – where we are reminded, again and again, that life cycles – light and dark and light returning – warm and cold and warm restoring – life and death and life renewing – that life *cycles* around and around.

We take comfort in those cycles. It is painful to watch a favourite old tree fall, but we understand that the forest will be fed by its nutrients, that new life will grow up in its place, that we will miss our old friend but that its life is done and it now serves a new purpose – living on in our memory and in the evolving forest floor.

We apply these lessons to our human experience and it helps us grieve our loved ones – when our elders have lived out their years, we know that they are immortal in our hearts and minds, that their dreams have rooted in our imaginations and their hopes sprout out through our children’s hands. We feel sadness, but if we are lucky enough to have a grounding in nature and experience of life’s seasons, we know that

everything that lives must die, and we are better prepared to face the frailties of the full human experience.

Reverend William Murry advocates for this kind of humanistic religious naturalism in his book *Reason and Reverence*. Murry promotes the creation of “lives that are joyful and meaningful here and now. By understanding human life as rooted and grounded in nature, it finds religious meaning and value in both the natural world and human community.” He promotes a quest for balance, for a deeper understanding of our relationship to the earth and to our neighbours, and our corresponding responsibility to live sustainably, rather than destructively, within the natural rhythms of the universe.

If we understand the natural cycles of light and dark, we know that we will emerge from the darkness, all in good time. To every thing there is a season.

But life is not so tidy and we cannot count on our days to unfold in the generally accepted progression of nature, or even in the same pattern as our relatives before us. We may have an identical experience – live the same number of years as our fathers or mothers, suffer the same ailments, go bald or grey or deaf in a predictable ancestral pattern – where all the Smith men lose their hair in their 40s ... where all the Jones women start menopause at 53. Some families have uncanny experiences along these lines – but there is no guarantee of our lives unfolding within such reliable limits and expectations.

We do not all get the Canadian life expectancy of 80.4 years, or the average 1.7 children per family. We cannot always control whether we live to retirement age – or that our children will. Rates of autism and diabetes and HIV continue to rise. More vehicles bring more accidents; world travel includes exposure to diseases for which we have no natural immunities. Life has no guarantee.

And so – even though we have a sense of the natural rhythms and understand that everything must die in its season – sometimes babies and children die, which never ever seems to be in the right order ... and sometimes adults are taken from us, before they have reached their prime ... and sometimes, before we even get our feet on solid ground, some of us are harmed by physical or mental illness, changing the course of our lives, and our families lives, forever.

Grief weighs heavy on many hearts – and for countless experiences in life. We suffer losses, not only to death, but also to friendships gone sour, or businesses that fail. We have careers and jobs that end – even if it is at a seemingly natural junction like retirement, which can precipitate catastrophic rifts in our being, in our understanding of ourselves. We lose dreams and opportunities, relationships and abilities. Maybe we are not strong enough or talented enough or fit enough or smart enough to follow a chosen path and our identity comes into question. There are many endings that fall both within and outside of the natural rhythms we expect in life, endings that can precipitate complicated grief and loss.

It does not always follow a predictable pattern. It is hard to wrap our heads around a life cut short, or around decades of suffering. And in the case of war or torture or other violent crimes, it is even harder to make meaning and to continue living with any sense of balance.

We want the light to return – but there are times in many of our lives, when we cannot find a way out of the darkness.

When we find ourselves trapped inside the darkness – when we lose hope, lose our connection to the light – we need something to hang on to, something to help us through.

Reverend Murry has another book – a personal favourite of mine – called *A Faith for All Seasons*. In this timeless little volume, Murry reviews the gifts of our liberal religious tradition – looking explicitly at death and dying, grief and loss, pain and suffering, in the context of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Without the certainty of religious creed or dogma, without the promise of a rewarding afterlife or a Saviour to rescue us, what do we have to offer one another in difficult times?

In my childhood religious tradition, the wonderful white haired Sunday school teachers explained Hell as “separation from God”. It was not the Hell of fire and brimstone that we coloured during story time at my friend’s church, but it was still torturous. The white haired ladies saw God as synonymous with Life, Love, Intelligence and Truth – so separation from God was technically impossible. The only way to be separated, as they understood it, was to create such a devastation in one’s mind – you could only be in Hell if you believed yourself to be there, and such belief came from not knowing, or forgetting, that God loved you and protected you and cared for you at every moment.

For all its failings, this was one of the gifts of my childhood tradition – the understanding that Hell is a creation of our belief system – not a place outside of us, or a punishment for wrong-doing.

Hell is a place we get trapped – when we feel separate, alone, isolated, hopeless, beyond help, desperate. It does not require the notion of a nurturing deity for it to be useful to us. It is the place we land when we feel separated from our understanding of what is important, what is precious, perhaps even what is divine. It can be separation from God or, more poignantly, it is separation from one’s self ... separation from one’s community ... separation from one’s sense of peace.

It is easy to understand then, in the context of great pain and suffering, why people might turn to a fundamentalist tradition. Any place that can offer unflinching love, that promises joyous relief and rewards in the afterlife, if not now, holds a special kind of attraction. Life is complicated and messy, and science does not have answers for all of it. If someone is in need of an answer, if someone is gripped with doubt or despair, any answer that promises relief can be tempting.

For those of us who gather here, who have – for the most part – given up on the notions that there is a God who intervenes, or that the peace we seek will be provided upon our death – it is necessary to find our answers and our relief in the context of the earthly human community.

Reverend Forrest Church, minister to the All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York, devoted his career to spreading the message that “religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” Facing his own imminent death from cancer, he has written prolifically about his experience. It has given him the opportunity to see if all the things he said at peoples’ bedsides through the years, if they really hold up, now that he himself is the one dying. Relieved, he stands behind his liberal religious understanding, and offers this as a summary of how to both live well, and how to endure suffering. There are three tenets:

Be who you are, do what you can, and want what you have.

To be who you are – not living to other peoples' expectations or carrying out other peoples' dreams, but following the path of your heart and mind – this is the way to an authentic life.

To do what you can – not to get overwhelmed by the gravity of a situation or exhausted by working beyond your capacity – this is the way to be effective and balanced.

To want what you have – not to want the cancer, but to identify the gifts of your situation – to see all your loved ones around you and to embrace that, rather than focusing on what is not good – this is the way to peace.

These three things – to be who you are, to do what you can, and to want what you have – these are deceptively simple and yet so profoundly powerful. When there seems to be nothing but darkness – for a wise talented man likely to die at only 60 – Church is transforming it into a purpose filled space and time. In the short time since his terminal diagnosis, he has written a book entitled “Love & Death”, inspired countless people through sermons, lectures and interviews, and offered up his most tender insights for our growth and development, at the same time focusing on his family and saying his goodbyes. And he has now outlived his father, and his grandfather, who both died at the age of 59. He has made meaning out of what might be tragedy.

Church's words are sustainable, renewable sources of light. They test true, over and over again. If we can love what we have, we shine light into the darkness of our situation. If we do what we can, we are not trapped in the spiral of helplessness. If we be who we are – not who we think we need to be, or should be – if we truly be ourselves and accept that as enough, we are set free from so many crippling struggles.

But to do these things, to find the simple truths in our situations, we are likely to need help. Forrest Church is a minister who spent his life making meaning with people, shining light into dark places and casting out shadows. Perhaps he entered his crisis much closer to peace than many of us could even imagine. He is likely surrounded by people who get it, who love him, and who will support him through his final days. What about the rest of us, who have been busy doing other things, or are blindsided by crisis, or simply just out of our element. What if we have spent a lifetime not being ourselves, not doing what we can – or even knowing what that might be? How are we supposed to manage?

This is where Murry shines – in the practical chapters of A Faith for All Seasons. He reminds us that all of these resources are already here, at our fingertips – both within ourselves and our faith tradition – vested in the community that we call home, our families, our friendships, and our church.

When we are surrounded by darkness, we have the evidence of the ages to sustain us, lived out in the lives of our community members. We know, because we have learned, that when tragedy strikes, when people lose a child for example, that there is really nothing that we can say or do to make that immediately better – that only time and love and safe places to talk or cry will even begin to ease the sharpness of the pain – but what we have learned, time after time, is that the only thing worse than the grief of losing a child would be going through that experience all alone. The great gift of our liberal religious community is the community itself.

We are partners in the journey of life. We ride the rhythms and cycles together. And when it gets out of balance – when the darkness is followed by more darkness instead of light – being able to sit with one another, to hold one another, to walk a few steps together, is the best way to draw in light, even if only for a few seconds at a time.

In every moment, there is ample evidence to prove both the possibility of renewal and the possibility of despair. The challenge of our lives is to decide, in every moment, which evidence we will choose to hold up as the truth. When we are lost in darkness, it is more difficult than ever to see the possibility of renewal, but it exists in the hearts and minds and deeds of our beloved community.

The lives we live, when we are being who we are, are beautiful and inspiring. We do not need to be heroes in the earth-shatteringly fantastic sense of hero. We do not have to have everything figured out exactly or be paragons of virtue to be useful in one another's lives. We need primarily to show up – to do what we can – to make the simple gestures like sharing a story or offering a hand. The fact that we have lived through darkness in our own lives may be just the evidence someone needs, to connect them with a possibility of peace.

Life is not perfectly bright all of the time. Like the turning seasons, when we humans begin to emerge from darkness we may only gain four minutes a day, small increments that begin to restore faith, tiny hints of warmth that inspire us to believe that it could be warm, or bright, or even just comfortable again.

We offer to one another the gifts of faith and hope – the vision of a better life – the possibility that the sun will return. We hold one another as we wrestle with life's challenges. We help one another to choose renewal rather than despair. And when it is our turn ... and it will be our turn ... our investment in this liberal religious community offers faith and hope back to us.

I cannot promise you heaven or an afterlife – that is well beyond my comprehension. But the promise of light returning is dependable. We can count on it. It happens year after year, expected and reliable, like a trustworthy old friend who never forgets your birthday, but shows up year after consistent year. You could set your clock by it.

Out of the darkness, there is light.

It is the most simple, obvious statement. When you come – out of the darkness – there is light. And we come – out of the darkness – one by one ... together.

~ peace ~