



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Toward the Light”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on February 3, 2013

I’ve just come home from a minister’s conference in Florida. In spite of some pictures I may have posted, I swear I didn’t spend that much time by the pool. Nor is my sermon about tanning, though from the title you might think that. The first few days there were the start of a two-year program in worship and preaching; 18 of us working with three mentors. We began with dinner and introductions. Then there was a worship service, and we were each asked to say something about what we’d left behind.

I thought of you, of course, you good people of this congregation I am blessed to serve. I thought of my family, and New England, and the cold weather I’d left behind. Then we were asked to share what we were bringing, and here’s what I said.

“I’m arriving here both tired and hopeful. I’m bringing a soul that feels pretty empty. The last few months have been hard ones for me. It started when one of my best friends died of a heart attack on October 1st, and then a number of other deaths followed. That month I led six memorial services in 16 days, including the one in California for my friend. Not long after, a friend asked how I was holding up, and I said, ‘I just feel dead inside.’ For a couple of months everything seemed like an uphill slog. Even Advent and Christmas, which I love. Then, in the first week of January, when I was feeling discouraged about having another sermon to write, something happened. Though the grace of God, writing that sermon brought me into a different, more hopeful, place. So I arrive here still tired and kind of depleted, but hopeful.”

That’s how I introduced myself to those folks I’ll be working with for the next two years. I share this with you, now that I’ve moved from a time of darkness into what feels like the dawn, because I hope it might be helpful. You’ve had your own times of struggle and loss, haven’t you? Aren’t some of you in that place right now? Usually we’re taught to hustle through those times, or numb ourself to the pain they hold, the way some of us would like to wish away the winter because we can’t wait for spring. But I’m convinced these times have something to teach us, can contain hidden blessings, if we will be open to them.

Today we’re halfway between the shortest day of the year and the first day of spring. In the pagan calendar this midpoint is called a cross-quarter day; this one is called Imbolc. We’re moving toward the light, but there is still more winter ahead. And I don’t know about you, but I have mixed feelings about the growing light, I don’t want to rush it, because there’s an invitation in

these darker months--it's a good time to be in touch with our own hearts and souls, to tend our interior lives.

Isn't that what Kate Barnes is talking about in our reading<sup>1</sup> this morning? She seems to identify with the flower bulbs she describes, "stirring in the full dark underground."

O warm light,  
couldn't you have waited a little longer?  
How safe we were in the dead of winter!  
How softly we dreamed!  
How beautiful it was to sleep under the snow!

Spring will come soon enough. What's this season have to teach us? I know, you're probably thinking, "That's easy for you to say--you were just in Florida!" But bear with me.

Nowadays, most people would say that that darkness I experienced was a case of malaise or a mild depression. But I sense it was something else, called a "dark night of the soul."

There's a book about this, called *The Dark Night of the Soul*, about the connection between darkness and spiritual growth. It's an exploration of what two mystics, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, wrote almost 500 years ago.

First of all, they understood this darkness not as bad or something to be feared. Rather, they saw it a gift that hides or obscures things, the way you lose your ability to see on a dark night. They said this darkness that obscures helps us, because when some change is happening in our souls, we would fight it if we could see it.

In the dark night of the soul, you find that things which used to bring satisfaction and pleasure have lost their luster. You may feel like you are losing your power to accomplish things and worse, you don't really care! You find yourself listless and wondering, "What is wrong with me?"

It's important to say something about the difference between the dark night of the soul and clinical depression. The two can overlap sometimes, and if you are suffering from depression, which has symptoms such as difficulty concentrating and making decisions, anxiety or hopelessness, pessimism or guilt, feeling worthless or fatigued, having decreased appetite or trouble sleeping or thoughts of harming yourself.<sup>2</sup> If you have these symptoms, then please seek professional help, and let me know, if you'd like my help.

I will say that, in our time, I'm afraid that sometimes we take what is a spiritual dis-ease, a holy longing, and rather than listen to what it is trying to teach us, we treat it as something to be avoided or rescued from. In this scientific and medical age, when there's a pill for everything, we've lost our understanding of the soul and its ways. There is wisdom there. What if, when we are sick or weary, we listened to it?

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Barnes' poem "Bear Trees."

<sup>2</sup> Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, p. 157-58.

The dark night of the soul feels different from depression. Even though it's a trying time, it isn't immobilizing the way depression is. You have the sense, deep down, that you wouldn't trade this dark and trying time for a more pleasant one; that it has something to teach you.

The author of this book, Gerald May, says the dark night comes to free us from those things that are holding us back, keep us from being in touch with the divine spirit. As humans we naturally become attached to all kinds of things that help us move through our days. But if we hold them too tightly, they come between us and God. A few years ago I heard an Advent sermon in which the preacher said, "It's ok to want an iPhone for Christmas. Just don't mistake it for God."

You may have noticed, (but I wish you hadn't), I like to please people. I want to be liked. I want my work to be fruitful and successful. None of these, in moderation, are particularly bad. But when I get too attached to them, then I begin to lose my way.

What happens during the dark night of the soul is that the usual desires dry up. In the past couple of months, I simply cared less about what others thought. I just didn't have the energy for that, so I did what I could and figured it would have to be enough.

In that time, I wasn't feeling the presence of God in my life or prayers, which is another symptom of the dark night--a time of spiritual dryness in which God seems absent. One Sunday our *lectio divina* group read Psalm 139, which begins

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away...

<sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?

I've held these words close since then. They brought me comfort, their promise that there is nowhere I can go to get away from God was a balm to my soul. I took refuge in these words, they gave me hope. I knew they were true, even when I couldn't be in touch with God myself.

Have any of you ever felt this way--disconnected, discouraged, like you're wandering in the desert? Carolyn McDade, who wrote Spirit of Life, probably the most beloved song in our hymnal, says that when it came to her she was feeling worn out and as dry as dust. She sat at her piano and the song came through her. She says it was not written, but prayed.<sup>3</sup> The paradox is that these unwelcome times of darkness and dryness can open us up, so that something greater can flow through us.

When you find yourself in a dark and lonely place, take heart--you may be right where you need to be. In those times, please ask for help--you need a companion in the dark night--you don't have to go it alone.

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<sup>3</sup> Carolyn McDade's telling of this story can be found in *UU World Magazine*: <http://www.uuworld.org/life/articles/35893.shtml>

Isn't that why we're here? I love the church because it's a place where we can share not only our light, but our shadow. Where we be real with one another. A safe place for becoming who you are. For finding companions who will love and support you.

But I hope it's also a risky place. A place where we take the chance to grow and change, where we challenge and encourage one another to do this. That's the way of transformation and liberation, and isn't that why we're here?

When I was wrestling with whether to go to seminary, I visited several different schools. At one, during a panel discussion, a teacher talked about that school's commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression work, and how hard that work is; how it asks you to be uncomfortable, to confront your own prejudice and privilege. He said, "We expect this of one another here, of everyone, so please don't come here if you don't want to be changed." That got my attention, and made it clear that was where I wanted and needed to be.

We are meant to be that kind of transformative community too. Will we ever get to the point we need to put a warning label on our website and outside our doors?: "Do not enter unless you want to be changed."

Of course, you don't always get to choose! The dark night comes uninvited. But this side of it, I can testify to its blessing. Because being pushed down, as the Quaker hymn says, "where you ought to be," I came face to face with my deep need for that higher power which has searched me and known me. Where can I go from its spirit? Where can I flee from its presence?

In her invocation, Mary Austin says, "I am asking toward the light." Isn't that what we are seeking? Courage to go forward through the shadow and toward the light?

After coming through some time of darkness, I am compelled to bear witness to the light, to that love which will not let us go, that calls us only to be who we are.<sup>4</sup> That says, "I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20).

Today my prayer is one of thanks and praise. For you good people and for this community of companions on the way; for the darkness and for the light, and most of all, for that source of life and love.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,  
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> These words are from Elaine Prevallet, S.L.

<sup>5</sup> *Amazing Grace*, words by John Newton, hymn #205 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.