



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Let There be Light, and Dark Too,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on December 1, 2013

One night last week, Sally Liebermann led a gathering here she called “Embracing the Darkness.” She described it this way: “In this time of fading light and long shadows, people across the ages have welcomed the invitation to ‘return to the hearth’; both the physical shelter of warm space and a retreat to deep inner space.” That is what she created here that night, a dark and warm space, within which to be in touch with the invitation of these days--to slow down, to draw near sources of light and warmth, to find those sources within ourselves and in others.

One thing that struck me about this gathering was that most of the people who came admitted they didn’t really like this time of year. No--they said they tended to struggle through these dark days, and try to just get through them, until the light returns. But they came, curious about ways to embrace the dark, rather than hide from it, and I was grateful for their presence and their openness to exploring a new way.

Tonight brings the fifth night of Hanukkah, the Jewish holiday that celebrates the miracle of oil that lasts way longer than it was supposed to, after the Macabees had retaken the temple that had been looted and desecrated. And today is the first Sunday in Advent, the first of four Sundays that precede Christmas. And it’s the end of Thanksgiving weekend, our national day of gratitude and feasting, and the start of what is called “the holiday season,” that time of great expectations, of unrealistic expectations about what we ought to give and receive, what we ought to do and buy.

Though these winter holy days, Hanukkah, Advent and Christmas, the Solstice and Yule, each have something to do with light and darkness, let’s not pretend they are the same. They each come out of different contexts and represent the traditions of different peoples. Their stories and rituals are quite different from one another, and I’m not going to try and synthesize them in a mini-course on world religions. No, today I want to explore the invitation that comes this time of year, the invitation that Sally offered, to embrace the darkness.

My theory is simple--to the extent that we are open to the darkness, will we be able to apprehend the light. This time of year confronts us with dark and cold, with emptiness--and how do we respond? If you stood back and looked at our culture from a distance, you’d have to say, wouldn’t you, that in this time of darkness, we turn on as many lights as we can? We try to chase away the dark. In this time that invites us to be still, there’s all kinds of pressure to run around, frantic. You know what they say: “When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.”

Two years ago, on this day, at the end of Thanksgiving weekend, something caught me by surprise. Our older child had come home from his freshman year in college, and his cousin, our niece from California, a freshman at a college in Maine, she'd been with us too. And it was wonderful to have those young people around, to have us all gathered around home and hearth to celebrate Thanksgiving.

But you know what happened? Sunday afternoon came, and they left! They went back to school, leaving me with a feeling of emptiness I did not see coming. I told a friend that it seemed more of a loss, more real, than three months earlier when our son had left for college.

In the scheme of things, this was not a big deal. It's part of the natural order of things, for children to grow up and leave home. We all experience little losses and leave-takings, as well as big ones. And in this life, we need to be able both hold to on and, when it's time, to let go.<sup>1</sup>

The invitation, and the necessity, is to be present to all of it, as best you can. The poet and farmer Wendell Berry says it this way, in words that are a kind of prayer: "In the night make me one with the darkness, in the morning make me one with the light."

For those of us who aren't farmers, whose lives are less connected to the rise and fall of the sun and the turning of the seasons, it's easy to lose track of this wisdom. But we are called to be poets, aren't we, the poets of our own lives? To reflect on what we see and experience, the joys and the sorrows, and weave a life out of these varied and multicolored threads.

The invitation each season brings is to be present to this moment--to what is happening here and now. Not to go through these dark days with your head down, not to run away from the dark but to try and embrace it. Yes, there is emptiness and loneliness and loss. But what if you sat with that, and tried to get to know it and even befriend it?

My theory is that the crazy commercial Christmas many of us complain about is a natural result of the fact that we, as a people, have forgotten how to be comfortable in the dark and empty places. So we make ourselves busy, we shop till we drop, we overeat and overspend in order to push away those sad and empty and uncomfortable feelings.

I'm not against celebrating, or feasting, or even shopping, in moderation. But you need a balance. When I think of how commercialized Christmas has become, it all just seems so artificial, so fake, so designed to lure us into chasing after the wrong things. I think of all those florescent lights in the big box stores, and all the street lights everywhere, that make it hard to see the stars.

Now I could probably get on a high horse about the commercialization of Christmas and how our culture seems to be going to hell, but doesn't that seem contrary to the spirit of this season, which invites us to be present, to one another and to that Spirit in which we live and move and have our being? The last thing we need, these days, is more angst and conflict and made-up drama. What we need, what I need anyway, is a quiet presence, an attitude of grace and gratitude for what is. It's that kind of presence, of letting go and letting God, as they say, that I want to have, and, I

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver, in her poem "In Blackwater Woods": "To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

suspect, you want too. The good news is, life presents us with opportunities to practice this all the time!

Listen to this Thanksgiving story, told by my colleague Elea Kemler, pastor of the UU church in Groton. It happened just three days ago, when she and her family celebrated Thanksgiving. Here are Elea's words:

"I am grateful my life has moments like these: Gathered with family today at a nice restaurant in a nice hotel for a beautiful dinner created by a staff of who knows how many, all of whom are working today to make it possible for other people to gather. So I thanked the staff for working today which is such a small thing to do. I had the loveliest moment with the man working the turkey carving station. 'Thank you for being here today,' I said. 'It is my pleasure to be here,' he said. 'That is very generous of you to say,' I said. We smiled at each other but then really looked into each other's faces for a moment. 'No,' he said, 'Last Thanksgiving I was unemployed and things were... bad. Now I am employed and my family has food today so it IS my pleasure to be here.' Both of our eyes filled with tears and we smiled again and I went back to my table and he went back to carving. It was an honor to be served by him."

Things are always more nuanced, more complicated, than they first appear. And often, more beautiful too. Isn't this true? And isn't the invitation always this: to be awake, to pay attention, to these moments, these opportunities for gratitude and grace?

The first book of the Bible begins with these words:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness (Genesis 1:1-4, KJV).

Light is good. But that doesn't mean darkness is bad. Darkness is good too. We need darkness; we need time to rest and be restored. We need darkness in order to apprehend and appreciate the light. If it never was night, we'd never see the stars.

Our Advent vespers services begin this Wednesday at 6 pm. If you come, you'll see what I'm talking about. We keep this sanctuary dark, and that changes things. It creates a different kind of space, in which just a few candles cast a lot of light. And it's beautiful.

For some of us, this month brings a frenzy of activity. For many of us, it brings sadness and loneliness and memories of loss. For most of us, perhaps, it brings a mixture of light and shadow, sorrow and joy.

Advent is a time, in the church anyway, if not in the wider culture, for quiet waiting, for preparation, getting ready for what might come. In a culture that's so oriented toward light and noise and activity, Advent is a time more for darkness than light, for quiet hymns in a minor key. It's a time for being open and present to what is, including those things we might rather push away: our emptiness and brokenness, our grief and loss.

Many of us grew up being taught to be afraid of the dark. Can we, in these days, take the poet's advice and let evening come? It's coming anyway, so why should we fight it so?

Let the stars appear  
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
in the oats, to air in the lung  
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.<sup>2</sup>

Let there be light, yes, and let there be dark too. Let us be open to it all: to the wonders of this life, and of this season, to one another and to that Love which will not ever let us go.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Kenyon, "Let Evening Come."