

**WINTER REVELATIONS:
IS THERE REASON TO MOURN THE DYING OF THE LIGHT**

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church
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READINGS (printed below, after sermon)

<u>Invocation</u>	<i>We Belong to the Earth</i> , attributed to Chief Seattle
<u>Meditation</u>	<i>Generation to Generation</i> , Antoine de St. Exupery
<u>Reading</u>	<i>And Moses Said to the People</i> , from Deuteronomy 10,30, 34
<u>Readings</u>	<i>Do Not Go Gentle</i> , Dylan Thomas

SERMON

We are in the season of the dying of the light. Every day, more darkness. In response the life forms of earth are going a little wild and crazy. Trees have been flaming red and gold, like burning bushes; houses and yards are bursting suddenly with strands and strands of light like emerging galaxies. At the same time, some like bears are going underground alone in sleep or sadness and some like snowbirds are following the sun to faraway places.

In his poem, the Welch bard Dylan Thomas seems to suggest a different response to the dying of the light: Rage. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. Everyone does, he said – the wise, the wild, the good, the grave – and so the aged, too, should burn and rage at close of life's day.

But wait. I have to recall that in my years as a Hospice chaplain and church pastor visiting hundreds of dying patients and their families, I have never seen rage be the response to dying.

The first Hospice visit I ever made was in 1989. The patient, in his mid-thirties, was dying of AIDS. "Am I happy about dying from AIDS? Of course not," he said with rhetorical flourish. Then he swept his arm around the room of the little countryside cottage to embrace the five men caring for him there. "But am I blessed and happy to be alive? Yes. My friends have brought me to this beautiful place and have not left me for a single moment. They have made being housebound a joy." I could see in the faces of the surrounding men that loving friendship was their joy, even in the face of loss.

Yes, in dying we see grief, bereftness, bewilderment, even despair, as well as searching, discovery, relief, and even gratitude. But in the vast numbers dying of natural causes – which excludes of course the loss of a child or an act of violence – I don't think we see rage at the dying of the light.

So I look again at Dylan Thomas's poem and what do I see now? I see that in his plea to his father he is not citing all people who are wise, good, wild, or grave; only those who have fallen short of potential and a sense of completeness in life -- the wise whose words forked no

lightning, the good whose frail deeds did not brightly dance, the wild whose way only hurried their decline, the grave who were blind to the blaze of life.

If that is the underlying theme, what was his father's failing against which he himself was raging? The last verse suggests that his father was dying without ever coming down from some sad paternal Olympian height, never caring enough to curse Dylan's propensity toward alcohol and violence, never caring enough to bless Dylan's beautiful and prophetic voice struggling to release old light and new – or perhaps more likely, the old Welch father just did not know how to break with a traditional bondage on the expression of family pride and love that is blessing. It seems that shortfall to such bondage calls for regret rather than rage.

The poem's deep point seems to me to be that life in the season of the dying of the light is to be made complete in an act of love, freed of regret over past waywardness and shortfall. And one way to do this is by discerning in one's own life what has worked for blessing and what has worked as curse, then letting the next generation know. I would say that it is by insight mixed with love, far more than praise, that elder people bless the new light growing in younger people. If we don't share with our children about both our successful and our failed hypotheses of life, our lessons will be lost and of no credit to us and no help to them.

There is ancient support for this response to the dying of the light and there is modern support. Moses, we can presume, was very old and tired after leading the Israelites for 40 years in the desert. It was a time of the dying down of the light in the burning bush, the fiery pillar, the mountain top, the prophet's eyes. But he did not neglect two final duties. First, he reminded the people of the laws of *Yehovah*, the laws of Being, that would serve them most well. And second, he diligently trained Joshua and others so Israel would continue to have wise and just guidance in understanding life and living it well.

The scripture says no one knows where Moses is buried. But isn't that for the best? His memorial place is the tablet with the wisdom of the ages in ten words. I've seen other memorial stones that struck similar light. How about, in the contrary, "Gone but not forgiven"? Or, on a couple's gravestone, positively, "Educators for a better world. Two of God's most gracious." Or the marker over a former slave in my hometown, "Though a slave to the vice of slavery, he practiced those virtues without which kings are but slaves." Any of those could provoke the search for wisdom.

At all the holy days - All Saints/All Souls *Dia De Los Muertos*, Thanksgiving, Bodhi Day, Hanukkah, Christmas, Epiphany, Passover, Easter, Independence, many others – the spirits of times past, present, and future can somehow be made known and nurturant through remembrance and sharing.

This is the direction to which Antoine de St. Exupery pointed in this morning's meditation: cross the gulf between generations with loving ceremonies of passage - when we wed, when we are blessed with a child, when we die – build memories of understanding and care so the inheritance of accumulated spiritual progress will not be lost and our children and their children

will better understand the meanings of things without having to rediscover them all over again by themselves.

That we do not concern ourselves with this process is, I think, an unconscious failing around the modern world these days. I remember two young women in my Peace Corps group in the Pacific Islands who won a grant to start a Head Start program. Why some American program here in paradise? I wondered.

Well, had I noticed that more and more of the food the islanders were eating was imported and store-bought from overseas, displacing the gathering of the bountiful island foods? And that at night we gathered by the light of imported kerosene lamps rather than moonlight and coconut oil? And that the handsome unsinkable canoes carved from local trees and the great sails woven from pandanus leaves were largely displaced by imported aluminum boats, outboard motors,, and gasoline? Or that local music and art and clothing were being replaced by imported radio music and photographs and manufactured clothes? And on and on.

So the Head Start program brought island elders to the school every day to teach the children the old stories and songs and dances of celebration, community, and love, the weaving of fishing nets and grass skirts, the planting of taro, the preparation of breadfruit, the making of shell and flower jewelry. And on and on – and the kids took these things home and in their excitement reminded the elders to pass on their life-sustaining light.

Who knew? The necessity of intentionally passing wisdom in family and community circles had not occurred to me. And yet, I know my extended family members all have a copy of a letter in this spirit sent by our maternal grandfather to his seven young children, then ages one through eleven, my uncles and aunts. He sent it while they were in the country on summer vacation and he back in Boston in the early stages of a fatal blood disease.

The letter was full of affirmations and advise. A couple of lines read, “You should always keep in your mind how good God has been to you and to us all, and never stop praying for future guidance from Him. As young people act during their early years, they generally continue the rest of their lives, so this is the time for you to form the best of habits and always be a credit to yourself and to your family... I know of no mother or father that has a lovelier, sweeter and happier group than Mama and I have.”

Parents and grandparents still write these kind of cherishing letters with their best wisdom, and we should not stop. Ta-Nehisi Coates, for example, has so written to his son and to us all in his letter-book Between the World and Me. No matter how dark the times, light is not lost that is shone into them. We can all do it – children as well, and siblings and friends.

It is why we hold funerals and memorial services – to fix in our memories the most important lessons a person’s life might bestow on us. In the last couple of years, two long-term members passed away – Waldo Rowell and Joan Barclay. At their memorial services we were reminded of what made them so special to us – for example, their similar attentiveness and care for a

community of specific people (us) blended with a care for the wider community of all souls in all places.

Much can be lost and mourned in the dying of the light. But much light can be retained by passing it on. The passage of the light can come at times such as baptisms, coming-of-age, vocational choice-making, marriage preparation, memorial services. The passage of light can be initiated by the questions of both younger folk and elders. The passage of light can be part of family dinners, holiday celebrations, or walks in the woods. The passing on of the light can even happen on thought-provoking gravestones – like “One of God’s most gracious.”

I have seen the array of standard Hospice questions open up passage of the light in families and friendships:

- Where have you lived? How have you lived? Who have you loved? How have you loved?
- What have you learned? What has it meant? What’s to remember?
- What do you still want to learn? What do you still want healed? What do you still want?

I think these are some of the questions that shine a light on our darkness and help us find and pass along the wisdom that helps brighten our lives. They are questions to be asked by those whose days are shortening. They are questions to be asked by those whose light could well be expanding into the world. I hope we will all be fellow explorers of that passage.

READINGS

Invocation *We Belong to the Earth*, attributed to Chief Seattle

This we know: The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.

This we know: All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.

All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.

We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it.

Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Meditation *Generation to Generation*, Antoine de St. Exupery

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds.

Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.

Therefore we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage: when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with a child;

When we depart and when we return; when we plant and when we harvest.

Let us bring up our children, hand to them their heritage,

impart to our children our knowledge and ideas, lest they lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder.

Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys.

We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

Reading *And Moses Said to the People*, from Deuteronomy 10,30, 34

And Moses said to the Israelites, "What does the One, the Being of your beings, require of you? Only to be wonderstruck by Its Being, and to walk in accordance with Its laws, and to serve It with all your heart and with all your being.... See, says Yehovah, I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

Having spoken for the Being of beings to the people, Moses went up to the top of Mount Nebo and gazed across to the land of Canaan. And there he died without ever crossing the Jordan with the people, and was buried in a valley in a place unknown to this day, and the Israelites wept for Moses for the thirty days of mourning. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Being of beings knew face to face.

Readings *Do Not Go Gentle*, Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rage at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though the wise at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

The good, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The wild who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

The grave, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.