

**WINTER REVELATIONS:  
ARE YOU WAITING FOR THE PRESENT TO OPEN?**  
Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church  
St. Petersburg, Florida - 12/03/17

**READINGS** (printed below, after sermon)

<b><u>Invocation</u></b>	<i>Give Us the Spirit of the Child</i> , UU Rev. Sarah Moores Campbell (Reading #664)
<b><u>Meditation</u></b>	<i>Connoisseurs of Nature</i> (Colin Tudge, <u>The Tree</u> ) - <i>Breaths as Seasons</i>
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	<i>The Expression of Being</i> , from the Gospel of John, chapter 1
<b><u>Readings</u></b>	<i>Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening</i> , Robert Frost

**SERMON**

A boy whom I know, not yet four years old, precocious and intent, went off to his room to write his Christmas gift list to Santa. He considered his gift list to be a given promise. Carefully he added his name, then a final cheery Christmas flourish, O-H, O-H, O-H. Oh, Oh, Oh!!!

If I were Santa, I would take that as a serious caution. Many of us take the promises of Christmas as givens, not to be messed with. But it seems that promises are not always kept. Sometimes a letter to Santa is never read, or even received. Such is the real way with promises; they are only possibilities, potentials.

If you asked educated people around the earth, Do you think that humans evolved across the eons from a singular source, I think they would say, Yes. And if you asked if they thought we have evolved many great potentials – promises in their very being derived from the very Source of being - I think they would also say, Yes.

Some might add on, “But we are fallen from the sustaining grace of God” or “But we are distant in comprehension from the original ancestors.” Still, every people seems to see that we humans have a lot of inalienable potential. And they seem to figure that the capacity for personal gladness derived from fulfillment of these potentials is evolved somehow from immortal gladness.

We see this in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, which is full of Greek philosophy and science. It says that God the Source streams forth in what we call light to become everything in existence and that, if a person accepts this light, then they gain the power to become children of that Source by likewise pouring forth their light, grace upon grace.

But not everybody wholeheartedly accepts this. Perhaps it is because various experiences at different stages of our lives from our beginnings keep many of us from truly realizing and accepting and acting on this understanding of reality. And this shortfall in understanding keeps us from being truly, fully, gracious empowering people.

Given that understanding of reality, how are we to realize the vastness of our potentials for making life glorious and joyous? How are we to know how to bring these potentials to fulfillment? From before the moment of birth, how can we come to accept at our deepest core that we have presents within us, waiting to be opened – and so does everyone else? Who is responsible for opening or helping open the present that is this moment in you and me?

In the face of such a quandary, I frequently recall James Morrow's novel, This Is the Way the World Ends, and the epitaph carved on humankind's gravestone by the last surviving human (who, by the way, is identified as a Unitarian): "They never understood how great they were; they never understood what they were here for."

Is it a conspiracy – that there are powerful forces who do not want us to understand? It is certainly not unknown that fulfilled people are not easily dominated or manipulated – and this does threaten the dominators and manipulators.

Or is it just difficult for us humans to keep this understanding in mind, because each night when we dream and each morning when we wake we are born again into the midst of everything at once, as poet Adrienne Rich says in our bulletin's epigraph – day and night born again into a booming blooming chaos.

Or is it that we don't want to accept the power of the light in us and the responsibility that goes with it? Indeed, it could be a very threatening expectation – to be expected to expand one's light outward like a gracious god of glory, grace upon grace. I remember times when I was a boy that life felt overwhelming. Then I would retreat and get myself swept up - not in Horatio Alger-type books about the self-made person - but in tales where the hero received great treasures simply by following a treasure map and getting lucky. It didn't occur to me that such heroes were really pirates and privateers and thieves, stealing from somebody else. It seems it doesn't occur to a lot of people.

As I understand it, what science tell us about our youngest psyches, as they are coming to be born, boils down to this: At the outset of life, we have great potentials – for survival, for safety, for discernment and trust, for relating, for caring - even as we are carried in the womb toward our Bethlehem. And many more potentials are to be presented to us with every new season of our lives. But what if we don't open them? OH! OH! OH!

Adrienne Rich laments, "No one ever told us we had to study our lives... that we should begin with the simple exercises till daring to leap into transcendence!" But the point of scientist and poet is that we can learn to live and we can learn to leap! Yet there's the rub: who will reveal to us that we can and what we can, and who will teach us how? Must someone make a terrible sacrifice to keep the light from going out?

A man stops by woods on the snowy darkest evening of his year. Perhaps it is Solstice – the longest darkness of the year – perhaps the third and final day of Solstice, December 24. And burdened with undelivered gifts, he is drawn to the ease and quiet of the dark woods, like Dante's lost traveler - tempted to escape even from his own light.

Who among us, burdened with gifts calling to be shared, is not tempted to stop and go no further? Perhaps the darkness is the present? Perhaps the treasure is the unwrapped darkness itself - no work to do, no promises to keep.

But then our horse-sense shakes its harness bells against some mistake. And deeper down in the human heart, where the one whose house is in the village also has a home, the hearth fire is stirred just as the cold is about to claim us. And a warming spirit of reverence rises from the dark of dreams, perhaps from the spirit of the child, and brings us back to the promises we have to keep. The source of light expanding exerts its own pressure to open the soul so a holy spirit may grow out.

I went up to Gainesville Friday morning to do a funeral service for an old friend. Driving into town was surprisingly nostalgic, like returning to my childhood hometown had been this past summer. But this time it was adulthood memories – of connections to people and reciprocal influences for better or worse - at road intersections, churches, parks, shops, libraries, neighborhoods, political rousting and roosting spots.

And I saw a young mom walking her child hand-in-hand to the elementary school to which I used to walk my daughter hand-in-hand – and I remembered all the after-school activities we did – art classes, theater groups, soccer teams, swimming lessons, cookie breaks, scooping the streams for sharks’ teeth, riding bikes through neighborhoods, walking the dog, late sleepless nights sitting under our streetlight with all the neighborhood cats – always something testifying to the wonders of life. Who is responsible for turning on such light?

The days are shortening toward the darkest evening. There’s less time to be responsible for anything or anyone. How had my deceased friend managed it – mother of five, grandmother, great grandmother, artist, musician, seamstress, office worker, survivor of many challenges, yet insistent fun-maker – the one whom all acknowledged was responsible for teaching three generations how to play and laugh and be part of family and community and whose spirit would be carried on?

Henry Van Dyke, the author of our first hymn, *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*, also wrote:

"Time is  
Too slow for those who Wait,  
Too swift for those who Fear,  
Too long for those who Grieve,  
Too short for those who Rejoice,  
But for those who Love,  
Time is not."

Surprise! Love – the appreciative, caring, giving kind of love – that love, I would say, is how to open up the present. It is the key to immortal gladness. It is the promise you get to keep. It is your light even when, at last, you have to sleep. You will still be helping open someone’s present.

For your life so far, *masel tov* – and for your future, *HO HO HO!!!* - Don’t let the light go out.

## READINGS

### Thoughts for Gathering

No one ever told us we had to study our lives, make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history or music – that we should begin with the simple exercises first and slowly go on trying the hard ones, practicing till strength and accuracy become one with the daring to leap into transcendence. And in fact we can't live like that. We take on everything at once - before we've even begun to read or mark time, we're forced to begin in the midst of the hardest movement, the one already sounding as we are born. – Adrienne Rich

**Invocation**     *Give Us the Spirit of the Child*, UU Rev. Sarah Moores Campbell (Hymnal #664)

Give us the spirit of the child. Give us the child who lives within:

*The child who trusts, the child who imagines, the child who sings.*

The child who receives without reservation, the child who gives without judgment.

*Give us a child's eyes, that we may receive the beauty and freshness of this day like a sunrise;*

*Give us a child's ears, that we may hear the music of mythical times;*

*Give us a child's heart, that we may be filled with wonder and delight.*

*Give us a child's faith, that we may be cured of our cynicism;*

*Give us the spirit of the child, who is not afraid to need, who is not afraid to love.*

**Meditation**     *Connoisseurs of Nature* (from The Tree, by Colin Tudge) - *Breaths as Seasons*

"I like the idea that each of us might aspire to be a connoisseur of nature, and the connoisseurship implies a combination of knowledge on the one hand and love on the other, each enhancing the other. Conservation - of all living creatures, including trees - has little chance of long-term success without understanding, which depends in large measure on excellent science. But conservation cannot even get on the agenda unless people care. Caring is an emotional response, to which science has often been presented as the antithesis. In truth, science cannot be done properly without a cool head. Yet when the science is done, its primary role is not to change the world but to enhance appreciation....: science in the service of appreciation, and appreciation in the service of reverence - which, in the face of wonders that are not of our making, is our only proper response." - Colin Tudge

Prepare now for a moment of meditation. Listen to your breath, coming and going through your nostrils, coming, going, coming, going, each breath a season of your life. Listen also to the voices that intersect the sound of your breathing – voices unheard till now, voices unknown till now. Hear them, know them now – then go back to hearing the sound of your breathing ... In appreciation and reverence may we continue to breathe.

**Reading**      *The Expression of Being*, from the Gospel of John, chapter 1

In the beginning is the Expression of Being, and the Expression is with God, and the Expression is God. All things come into being through It, and without It not one thing comes into being. What has come into being through the Expression of Being is life, and life is the light of all people.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, is in the world. Yet the world does not know It. It comes to what is Its own, and Its own do not accept It. But to all who accept the light and trust It, It gives power to become children of God, born not of the body nor of the will of a human being, but of Being Itself. And from Its fullness we all receive, grace upon grace.

**Reading**      *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.