

**The Presence of the Present**  
**Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Va.**  
**December 16, 2018**

**Advent Candle Reading**

Each week until Christmas, we light a new candle on the Advent wreath. When so much asks for our attention, the lighting of one candle after another reminds us that this season must pass in its own time; birth cannot be rushed. We have the choice to be awakened and fully inhabit the present moment. The light of Advent grows brighter and brighter as we celebrate our coming together as a community.

This morning we light the third candle. We light this candle as a symbol of joy—not just any simple cheer, but the experience of joy that cannot be contained.

Advent asks us to proclaim our gladness as a gift to the world even when sorrow and uncertainty abound. May we share our hearts through our words, our music, and the way we live our lives. Let the fullness of our joy lead to more freedom.

**Prayer**

John O'Donohue "A Morning Offering"

I bless the night that nourished my heart  
To set the ghosts of longing free  
Into the flow and figure of dream  
That went to harvest from the dark  
Bread for the hunger no one sees.

All that is eternal in me  
Welcomes the wonder of this day,  
The field of brightness it creates

Offering time for each thing  
To arise and illuminate.

I place on the altar of dawn:  
The quiet loyalty of breath,  
The tent of thought where I shelter,  
Waves of desire I am shore to  
And all beauty drawn to the eye.

May my mind come alive today  
To the invisible geography  
That invites me to new frontiers,  
To break the dead shell of yesterdays,  
To risk being disturbed and changed.

May I have the courage today  
To live the life that I would love,  
To postpone my dream no longer  
But do at last what I came here for  
And waste my heart on fear no more.

**Benediction**  
An Inuit Prayer

I think over again my small adventures, my fears, those small ones that seemed so  
big,  
For all the vital things I had to get, and to reach.

And yet there is only one thing, the only thing, to live to see the great day that  
dawns  
And the light that fills the world.

## **Sermon**

Some of you may have learned this about me already: I am not a patient person. It can be deceiving, because I often look so calm and composed. But often I am calmly and composedly thinking about how much I want what is coming next to come NOW.

Consequently, I am the world's worst meditator. I know everyone experiences "monkey mind" when sitting, but mine is more like a chimpanzee on steroids. About the best I can manage is walking meditation, since that at least gives me something to do. There is rarely a time when I'm just sitting around doing nothing. I can't read just one book at a time, I usually have at least five going at any one point in time. Even when I'm watching television, I have to be doing something. Thank goodness there's an app for my iPad to do jigsaw puzzles — though my cats do mourn the loss of a chance to send puzzle pieces into the farthest corners of the room.

You've heard from people far more experienced than I in the art of deep meditation. So when I talk about the presence of the present I'm not necessarily focusing on a deep spiritual practice. I'm just hoping that we can think together for a time about how to focus on what is most important. Rather than obsessively rehearsing our lists of things to do to create the perfectly decorated home, the perfectly crafted dinner, the perfectly chosen set of gifts; how can we instead attempt to do what we hear constantly about at this time of year: find the true meaning of the season. Its ironic that we constantly hear this, when almost

everything surrounding us right now gives the opposite message. My favorite description of the frenzied-ness of the season comes from David Sedaris' hilarious description of having to work as an elf in Macy's SantaLand. He said, "On a busy day twenty-two thousand people come to visit Santa, and I was told that it is an elf's lot to remain merry in the face of torment and adversity. I promised to keep that in mind."

What I want to propose is not that we do the opposite of that: that we do nothing. Rather, I'd like to offer some stories of creating space. Creating space for something to come to us. That rather than making something happen, we let something unexpected happen to us. One of the most challenging things for me to learn about spirituality is that it isn't something that we *make* happen. In *Will and Spirit*, Gerald May makes the point that spiritual "fulfillment, if it comes at all, might have to come as a gift, rather than an accomplishment." This is pretty tough for us as westerners to learn.

I have a good friend who used to work at a top advertising firm in Boston, a pretty dog-eat-dog environment. After constantly being asked to help sell things that seemed to him at best useless, and at worst, harmful, Mark quit his high powered firm, took a job as a clerk in a bookstore, and started studying Buddhism intently. After a year of learning and practice he finally decided he had to quit that as well. He said, "I realized that despite my good intentions, what I was doing was trying to be *the best Buddhist I could be.*" Competitive spirits die hard. In *The Silence of God*, James Carse, says, "We can easily get this backward in the religious life, assuming that our primary spiritual assignment is to make ourselves presentable to God instead of presenting ourselves to God as we are."

A part of my challenge in deeper spiritual practice is simply that of experiencing silence. Years ago I attended a spirituality retreat that culminated in a full day of silence. We were at a beautiful retreat center and I had gone out for a

run in the lovely grounds, and was late in returning to the service where they were giving instruction for how to enter the silence. So as I came in, no one would speak to me! I was feeling guilty about being late, and couldn't even explain to anyone why I was late. The next 24 hours were excruciating to me. Until I finally realized what silence had meant to me in my life. In my family of origin, you were given the silent treatment if you were bad. So I had spent the day of silence at the retreat completely convinced that everyone was mad at me.

Since then I've come to know that silence can certainly be a shutting down of possibility. But it can also be an invitation to explore something deeper and more profound than we find in our concrete, literal world. Kathleen Norris speaks of the difference between the silence of obedience, and the silence of expectation. She was teaching poetry to a group of 3rd graders when one said to her: "silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go."

It doesn't always have to do with silence though. Sometimes spiritual gifts can come through words and music and play. I loved hearing your examples of the things you treasure about your holiday memories. One of the memories that immediately came to my mind was our family tradition of my father reading "A Child's Christmas in Wales." After the meal was over and cleaned up; all the presents were unwrapped and the quiet started to seep into our evening, he would take out the beloved book and in his sonorous voice tell the tale we knew so well, but which never grew old. I still have a vivid internal memory of the village that it painted in my mind.

My father was a poet. Rather an unlikely poet since he never finished high school and worked as a self-taught marine and computer science engineer. Nevertheless his greatest passion was for poetry and he self-published a lovely book of verse. Almost 25 years ago he was diagnosed with lung cancer at the age of 63. He had personally installed asbestos on many of the ships

that he worked on and his lungs were full of shards of glass. He lived only three months after his diagnosis. When he was dying he asked me to read to him from his favorite poets: Walt Whitman, Dylan Thomas, Emily Dickinson. During one such reading he stopped me and said he had something he wanted me to do for him. The old bedside prayer of “Now I lay me down to sleep” kept running around in his head and he wanted me to finish a version of it for him. He said I don’t believe in a God that really cares whether I live or die. But I do long to feel that my life has mattered in some real way.

He started with “Now I lay me down to sleep / While God the universe doth keep.” I could not have been more humbled by this task and day after day I would sit with these lines willing a perfect finish to come to me. Finally, in a flash, it did: “Now I lay me down to sleep / While God the universe doth keep / And if I should die before the dawn / I pray that God as I pass on / Might doff a cap, perhaps a wink / That my life - and death - be worthy as I think.” I was just writing these words down when my mother came to tell me that my father had just died.

One could call it coincidence, or simply knowing that his death was so near that my thinking finally gelled. But I don’t really want or need an explanation for how that happened at that moment. What I do know is that I felt ultimately connected, not only to my father, but also to something beyond both of us, that brought profound meaning and peace to me. And I definitely know that it did not happen because I willed it so.

I keep thinking of the phrase “preparing the spirit.” How do we prepare our spirits in this time to be present to what is true and meaningful and good. It is the opposite of creating a perfect experience, a perfect form or a perfect thing. It is allowing the perfection of all things to come into us in a new way.

In Brooklyn, New York, Chush is a school that caters to learning disabled children. At a Chush fundraising dinner, the father of a disabled child delivered a

speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended. After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he cried out, "Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything God does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is God's perfection?"

The audience was shocked by the question, pained by the father's anguish and stilled by the piercing query. "I believe," the father answered, "that when God brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that he seeks is in the way people react to this child." He then told the following story about his son Shaya: One afternoon, Shaya and his father walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, "Do you think they will let me play?" Shaya's father knew that his son was not at all athletic and that most boys would not want him on their team. But Shaya's father also understood that if his son was chosen to play, it would give him a comfortable sense of belonging. Shaya's father approached one of the boys in the field and asked if Shaya could play.

The boy looked around for guidance from his teammates. Getting none, he took matters into his own hands and said "We are losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him up to bat in the ninth inning."

Shaya's father was ecstatic as Shaya smiled broadly. Shaya was told to put on a glove and go out to play short center field. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shaya's team scored again and now with two outs and the bases loaded with the potential winning run on base. Shaya was scheduled to be up. Would the team actually let Shaya bat at this juncture and give away their chance

to win the game? Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, let alone hit with it.

However as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher moved a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shaya should at least be able to make contact. The first pitch came and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. One of Shaya's teammates came up to Shaya and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher waiting for the next pitch. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly toward Shaya. As the pitch came in, Shaya and his teammate swung at the ball and together they hit a slow ground ball to the pitcher. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could easily have thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have ended the game. Instead, the pitcher took the ball and threw it on a high arc to right field, far beyond reach of the first baseman. Everyone started yelling, "Shaya, run to first. Run to first." Never in his life had Shaya run to first. He scampered down the baseline wide-eyed and startled. By the time he reached first base, the right fielder had the ball. He could have thrown the ball to the second baseman who would tag out Shaya, who was still running. But the right fielder understood what the pitcher's intentions were, so he threw the ball high and far over the Third baseman's head. Shaya ran towards second base as the runners ahead of him deliriously circled the bases towards home. As Shaya reached second base, the opposing short stop ran to him, turned in the direction of third base and shouted, "Run to third." As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams ran behind him screaming, "Shaya run home." Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit a "grand slam" and won the game for his team. "That day," said the father softly with tears now rolling down his face, "those 18 boys reached their level of God's perfection."

How do we prepare ourselves to live into this kind of perfection? A perfection of the soul that opens itself to the fullness of life itself, that accepts and welcomes our deeper perceptions, our greater sense of joy and wonder and even of sorrow.

James Carse says: “Each of us has a prayer within, a genuine voice of the heart, but one we never express completely. In our restless desiring isolated syllables and even phrases of that beseeching voice can be heard. Desire is the prosaic effort to silence that voice with one or another object, to captivate the heart, but the heart will not be quieted. It is inherently disobedient. But in this disobedience lies our truest hope. ... The ... response to God is to ask for that one thing we can truly receive, and which we can have only by receiving it – life itself.”

So may we listen deeply to ourselves and others, open our hearts and minds and spirits to the gifts of grace that surround us always, if we have but eyes to see. Let us enter into the season with this joy burning in our souls.

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