

Bearers of Light

A message for all Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Many of us are re-emerging from our post election haze. Perhaps having drowned our feelings with turkey and gravy. Some of us are not. That is the nature of heartfelt loss—we all grieve differently. No matter where we stand, today, we are seeing what the election has cost us. It has cost us our progressive voices. We are now watching while a bully continues to hijack the presidency, a hateful Governor and destructive Senator take office while their followers are waving their palm leaves and cheering. So, it is our responsibility to say as Unitarian Universalists “it is time.” It is time for us to use our voices. It is time for us to get centered in our principles, stand in our truth, lock arms with other people of faith and be the firewall. NOW is the time. Today we are talking about responsibility. It is our responsibility to use our voices. It is our responsibility to speak out. But it is also our responsibility to understand human nature; to study emotional systems; to analyze things from ethical and theological perspectives. I believe it is our responsibility as Unitarian Universalists to be a moral voice; to be the leaders during dark and scary times. Buddhist Jack Kornfield writes, “The great inspiration of the Buddha's teaching is that we must each take ultimate responsibility for the quality of our lives. Given certain volitional actions, certain results will follow. When we understand that our lives are the unfolding of karmic law, that we are the heirs to our own deeds, then there grows in us a deepening sense of responsibility for how we live, the choices we make, and the actions we undertake.” We are the people who have to see the light, to point to the light to know that there is light in the darkness. As such, we cannot be silent. We must be bearers of light.

It is perfect timing for us to consider how we might be bearers of light. We are in the darkest time of the year. Both literally and metaphorically. Pagans will celebrate returning light with Winter Solstice celebrations, Hanukkah is the Jewish Festival of Lights celebrated in countries all over the world, Diwali, meaning array of lights, is a Hindu light festival. It symbolizes the triumph of light over darkness, during the nine days prior to Christmas, Mexican families march from house to house with candles looking for a room at the inn, Kwanzaa begins on December 26th to honor African harvest traditions. It was created in 1966. Candles representing the seven principles of Kwanzaa are lit each night for a week. Family and friends come together to take pride in their unique culture and to celebrate their common heritage, and of course we have our own candlelight ceremony here in this congregation on Christmas Eve. We must be bearers of light. We must be light in the lives of people around us as we navigate these desperate times.

When I was young we lived in a double house on the Canadian border. Our family lived in the back of the house while my grandmother lived in the front. It was a house my grandfather bought for his sons when they married after the WWII. Rumor has it that my grandpa did pretty well bootlegging whiskey during prohibition. But that’s another sermon. My dad’s family was a close-knit Scottish slash French Canadian clan. We were always together. Maybe it was because we lived in the same house, but we ate together many nights a week and always on Sunday. My dad’s family was loud and passionate, and they could yell at you one minute and hug you the next. One time our neighbor asked me why my family argued all the time, which was a great puzzle. We didn’t argue we were... well, colorful!

In March 1989, our color was surely drained when my father died suddenly. He was 48, and I had just turned twenty. I remember my dad's smile, his wicked sense of humor, and his laughter; it could light up a room. When he died, my mother went into mourning. As was the custom the bereaved wore black as a sign of their loss. I think it was a way to say to the world, "Be easy with me, I'm grieving." My mom said she did it out of respect, but I suspect it truly represented her deep sorrow. She wore only black for a long while. She hung on to her sorrow and her mourning clothes; it seemed as if she was stuck. She eventually began wearing her regular clothes again.

Now our close-knit family also included our neighbors Alphonsine and her clan. Alphonsine, a feminine and French name meaning noble and ready, was my mom's best friend. Our houses were so close; you could stand at the kitchen sink and wash dishes at our house and talk across the driveway to Alphonsine as she stood in her kitchen washing dishes. In the summer of 1989, Alphonsine decided it was time to help my mother move beyond her black mourning clothes. I don't know how their conversation went at all. But I remember the day clearly, as if it were yesterday. My mom left the house wearing black and returned hours later in a cloud of lavender. I can see her walking toward me, a big smile on her face and lavender beads around her neck. But more than dressed in lavender, or the even the beads, my mother looked different because she had her light back, a light that had been dimmed by her tragic loss.

In a book by artist Jeanne Dobie called "Making Color Sing," the author introduces the idea of mouse colors. That's right, mouse colors...m o u s e. They are subtle pale colors. When they are brushed up against a darker color, they illuminate the painting. They are almost imperceptible when you look from a distance, but their impact on the painting is profound. Mouse colors create a setting where it is possible for the brilliant color to come into its fullest bloom. Mouse colors are like the bit players who support the stars. I believe there are people in the world who are like mouse colors; they bring light to our dark places. They are most often subtle. If we are lucky, they come to us with presence and gentle influence at the exact time we need them. I think of them as light bearers. Our friend Alphonsine, in the story about my mom, was a light bearer. She cared for my mother and their relationship by showing up when needed and finding the right path that led my mom back to the color of her life.

In 2006, one year after Hurricane Katrina decimated Louisiana, Rev. Marta Valentin offered a sermon to the UU congregations of New Orleans. These Congregations suffered immense challenges, but most congregations struggle with difficult times and change. I think her words are relevant to all of us. In her sermon she described the bearers of light who showed up with aid and support during a tragically dark time for these congregations. This is what she said: "To be a bearer of light is to hold in the highest esteem the building of relationships. Bearers of light are not concerned with what they can take, but with what they can give to any situation, even one that might rile them. It can be a commitment one makes to lighten an experience that might seem heavy, to share an insight even when it might scare you to do so. It can be a commitment to remain calm, when all around you the world is spinning, to remain grounded when the urge is to take flight, to remain loving when the devil is knocking on your door, pushing you into the abyss that is misdirected anger."

Who doesn't need people like this often in their lives, people who love us and value our relationships and our community and are committed to hold the lantern when life seems so very dark? I think we all know that our body craves light. Anyone who lives on the Canadian border

in February knows this. Light stimulates our neurotransmitters; we produce more serotonin. It improves our mood, and lightens our life. But I believe our spirit craves Light too. We are hungry for illumination, enlightenment, the mystical experience, or...in Universalist language—a gentle stirring of love in our hearts. The presence of spiritual Light offers us a sense of healing in difficult times. Our ability to see this Light makes it possible to feel a sublime connection to one another. We blur our separation and our ability to see deeply into each other’s hearts opens us to true communion. When we do this, we become bearers of light for one another.

Now we all know there are times in our lives when we live in the Light and our world is in Technicolor. And other times we live in the dark, when the black hole of circumstance sucks us in. Like post election season. Times where there is no light, and we see no color, even as we look out at our vibrant world. Perhaps we lose someone we loved, we end a relationship, or we simply experience life changes, and we can get drawn into a dark lonely place. At these times of struggle, it is difficult even to see our own light. We find ourselves living in the shadows. We can become frightened and sorrowful and angry. As a young adult I thought the idea of mourning clothes was silly and outdated. When my own mother died, I wore a green suit with a lavender tie; it was her favorite color, after all. But in the months following her death, I felt so deeply and profoundly sad. I remember feeling as if I needed to wear black, because the wound I carried was invisible to others but wide open and gaping to me. I lived in the shadows; I went through my days taking care of my young family with little joy or brilliance.

I think we all have these shadows. They are sorrow and pain we don’t want to see; they are lesser qualities, our meanness, our stinginess, or our judgment of others. They are our inadequacies, the parts of ourselves that just don’t measure up to our self-expectations. Like a dormant virus, they sneak out especially during hard times. Political and otherwise. And it wouldn’t be so bad if we just waited for the virus to pass, but I’m afraid all too often, we project our shadow onto others, ascribing motives to them that simply aren’t true and that have more to do with us than with them. These are the times we need Light so we can honestly and openly see our hidden selves. There is a Sufi teaching story about a character, the Mulla, named Nasrudin. A man was walking home late one night when he saw the Mulla Nasrudin searching under a street light on hands and knees for something on the ground. “Mulla, what have you lost?” he asked. “The key to my house,” Nasrudin said. “I’ll help you look,” the man said. Soon, both men were down on their knees, looking for the key. After a number of minutes, the man asked, “Where exactly did you drop it?” Nasrudin waved his arm back toward the darkness. “Over there, in my house.” The first man jumped up. “Then why are you looking for it here?” “Because there is more light here than inside my house.

It’s pretty clear Nasrudin is looking for something very important, a key. And the key could easily symbolize an aspect of himself. Aren’t we all looking for that key? But in this case, the key is in the darkness of his house, so that is where he must look. This is also true of finding the shadow parts of our selves; it requires us to look in the darkness and uncover the key to our behavior. Perhaps there is a way to bring light to these dark places, our shadows. Perhaps that’s where the light bearers come in. To explain this, I’d like to borrow the concept of light from the Quakers. They believe that there is a light in each of us that is more than our intellect or conscience. This light within is like a flickering flame deep in our souls that when responded to and tended, grows to fill our entire lives with light. When this internal light is dim, and our shadows are long and dark, another person who sees us and sees the light can make all the difference in our lives.

This is the work of the light bearers. They mind the light. They pay close attention to all that connects us. They see beyond the shadows and hold a vision of us in the light. They see us as whole and perfect, exactly as we are, even when it's hard for us to see that. Now some people are gifted with this ability; I can actually think of a few people in this congregation who have this gift, and believe me, we are lucky because communities need these people. But most of us are more ordinary, and we need practice. Seeing the light and minding the light in others is in fact something we can learn. It takes willingness and commitment, because seeing the light in others is easy when they are pleasant and so much harder when they are not. It is really hard to feel connected or to see the light in other persons when they are disappointed in you or you them. But that's when they need it the most. If only we could wear black mourning colors when we are lost, or perhaps red when we are enraged at life, or maybe green when we are too tender to touch. If we had an outward sign of our inner most circumstance, maybe then we could tell the world around us, "be easy with me, I'm hurting, and I'm scared." But life isn't like that; there are no uniforms.

So maybe the key is to invoke the spirit of love or if you like, the spirit of—God. When we see others in the light of love, we find their challenges are probably no different from our own. We see beyond their shadow to the deep light within, and holding them this way we ensure that we are touched by their lives, by their pure humanness. The distance between us lessons, and our concerns become each other's. And in this way we become bearers of light...we see and mind the light in one another...and by doing that our own light grows brighter and together we bring understanding to the shadows between us. Perhaps we simply say Namaste—the light in me sees the light in you...

May it be so.