

“Peace Here at Home”
3 December 2006
Unity Church–Unitarian

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The cold and dark have finally come again. The Unity elders are well pleased. We rise to pray each morning in the uneasy peace before dawn. I light a candle, take a deep breath, let it out with a sigh and lie down on my back to start the day. Most mornings now I wake up with my body full of bees. “How are you?” Janne will ask. “I’ll be okay,” I say. Years of experience have taught me how morning devotions soon drive the night terrors away. So I stretch out and I write for a while. I read and I breathe and I stretch out again and then I think of you and bow my head and pray.

I tell you this not to impress you with my piety but because I know so many of us spend time in the “old cave of calcium icicles, old echoer,” that place of cold night terror Sylvia Plath so powerfully describes. She’s pointing toward the emptiness. She’s trying to describe the hollow place inside us all that only God can fill.

Having gathered to give thanks for an abundant harvest we turn now to the empty-quarter, the place from which the storms sweep in, the time of year when wisdom counsels us to contemplate the empty place inside, to spend some time down in the “earthen womb” that stone-cold cave which both frightens us to death and promises new life.

You probably know how it feels to wake up with your body full of bees. But just in case you miss my meaning let me introduce you to my fruitful, frightening friends. I call them bees because they buzz, because they threaten to sting and because they can cross-pollinate. They flit around as random worries setting off alarms wherever they pause to hover in the inner-air. The fear is visceral. I know that they’re not real any more than dreams are real. But the fear is real enough. Their buzzing makes my breathing shallow. My heart speeds-up. I tense-up waiting to be stung. I start to forget what I know. Sometimes the fear just takes over and I myself become an angry bee stinging whoever’s closest to me, raging at the empty place that nothing ever seems to fill.

I know something about that emptiness, do you? I know it’s dangerous. I know we’re taught from early childhood that every hunger is meant to be filled. And so we try to fill the hollow place inside with all kinds of things that just can’t do the job. The longing for wholeness takes hold of us. We feel it physically. We can call it a disease and in a very real sense it is. Some of us attempt self-medication. We use drugs or alcohol to quell the yearning and fall into debilitating patterns of addiction. Others think that sex will do the trick. Some imagine food will provide the satisfaction that they seek and eat themselves into a stupor. Most frightening of all are those addicted to narrow, destructive ideologies, who imagine that they know God’s will and visit it upon their neighbors.

When we encounter emptiness our first impulse is to cure it. We want to make it go away. We want the suffering to stop. But hold on. Could emptiness be part of the design? Could the hollow place inside us be a standing invitation into depth? Instead of curing it, rather than finding some way to fill it up and seal it off and so escape the pain might we not work to find a different way? Might we not befriend and bow before the empty place inside?

“O love, how did you get here...love, love, I have hung our cave with roses...you are the one solid the spaces lean on, envious. You are the baby in the barn.” As our eyes begin to adjust to the darkness we catch a first glimpse of the Christmas star. Advent is a time for learning how to wait again. I won’t indulge myself or waste your time by yet again railing against the commercialization of Christmas. Even though I’m waking up each morning with my body full of bees, even though I can be an awful grinch this time of year I know that I’ll eventually succumb. The spirit’s just too strong in me. I’ve held too many babies in my arms to stand outside the stable in the dark. Let me simply point out that the holiday season enflames our yearning for wholeness and connection while at the self-same time it deludes us into worshipping false gods.

Our advent theme this year is “images of peace.” As we contemplate the coming of the Prince of Peace, we wonder if the wars will ever cease. I know there are some stern souls who question whether yet another sermon on the need for inner peace will undermine the urgent need to summon all our strength to confront and overcome the machinery of war. While I go on about the need for inner peace innocents are dying in Iraq and Lebanon and God only knows where else. Why aren’t we out in the streets by the millions? What are we waiting for? Listen to these words the Angel Gabriel is said to have whispered into Mary’s ear:

There is strength here like the sinew of a mother’s arm.
It shatters the brittle pride of wealth;
It levels the clay-foot thrones of tyrants.
It upholds the forgotten, the scarred.
Hunger both of body and soul will be filled.
Riches will no more be rewarded.
The holy one cleaves to those who keep faith;
It will endure in those who serve mercy.
And then promise made to legend ancestors will be kept.

I understand and often share the urgency but it does us little good. We live at the intersection of action and reflection. Self-reflection is no luxury which has to wait until more urgent matters are attended to. It is as essential to our lives as food and drink. When we don’t take time to get up early and befriend the darkness we all too soon are overcome by our own inner demons. Then all our efforts in the name of peace, encumbered by our rage and fear, will only serve to magnify the violence we so hope to quell.

What was “the promise made to legend ancestors”? Surely not peace everlasting though we should pray and work for peace with every fiber of our being. The promise is “the baby in the barn.” The promise is the possibility that you and I might come to know the holy one concealed in the darkness, not in some distant land but here at home, not in some long-ago but here,

today, right now. You are the promise. You are the one. Though "grief and loneliness have kept" you "you are the companion of the light that rises on all I know."

Now wait, don't turn away, don't be afraid, you're not the only one. Once your eyes have adjusted to the darkness you'll see the others shining there like stars. The child of God is everywhere for those with eyes to see. Let it be our first Christmas prayer for this and every year to look into each others eyes and see the holy light reflected there. It matters how we greet the day. It matters how we greet each other. It matters how we greet the many neighbors we have never known. So bow before the emptiness and bow before the light. The night is long this time of year to give our eyes time to adjust to the dark. The yearning is especially sweet and strong now. Don't fill it up but savor it instead that you might come to know its blessing.

"O love how did you get here?" What mystery is at work when love is born again? "Though I come to you in darkness, you are companion of the light that rises on all I know." Love, you know takes tending. And in love lies the possibility of peace.

We come to good by love; (the poet/farmer sings)
our words must be made flesh.
And flesh must be made word
At last, our live rise
In speech to our children's tongues.
They will tell how we once stood
Together here, trees whose annual sheddings
Made their way into this ground,
Whose bodies turned to earth
And song. The song will tell
How old love sweetens the fields.

May it be so and Amen.