

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

“Meeting the Shadow”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore December 9, 2012

READINGS

“The World is Too Much With Us” by William Wordsworth

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
 This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
 It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
 A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

“The Obligation to be Happy” by Linda Pastan

from *Carnival Evening: New and Selected Poems 1968-1998*,
 published by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc

It is more onerous
 than the rites of beauty
 or housework, harder than love.
 But you expect it of me casually,
 the way you expect the sun
 to come up, not in spite of rain
 or clouds but because of them.

And so I smile, as if my own fidelity
 to sadness were a hidden vice—
 that downward tug on my mouth,
 my old suspicion that health
 and love are brief irrelevancies,

no more than laughter in the warm dark
strangled at dawn.

Happiness. I try to hoist it
on my narrow shoulders again—
a knapsack heavy with gold coins.
I stumble around the house,
bump into things.
Only Midas himself
would understand.

“In a Dark Time” by Theodore Roethke

from *Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*.

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
I hear my echo in the echoing wood –
A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
I live between the heron and the wren,
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance? The day's on fire!
I know the purity of pure despair,
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall.
That place among the rocks – is it a cave,
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!
A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
And in broad day the midnight come again!
A man goes far to find out what he is—
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

SERMON

When I was young, I never had any trouble generating enthusiasm for Christmas. Little materialist that I was, Christmas was an opportunity to increase my economic position. This was the one time of year that my parents would loosen their purse strings and give us what my sister and I wanted. Not over the top mind you. I usually didn't get everything my heart desired by any means. But I did get much more than I needed, seeing the neglected presents in the corner a few weeks later.

I don't know if the anticipation of gifts made the holidays more magical or not. Putting up the tree and hauling out and hanging ornaments reminds me of old friends and family and past Christmases. At my UU Fellowship, eating *latkes*, lighting the menorah and learning about Hannukah was just as delightful as singing carols and drinking mulled cider. Everything about the season lifted my spirits. (And strangely, sharing them right now seems to be working for me as those memories come flooding back) My brain chemistry is biased toward the nostalgia feeling. I've always been this way, even as a teenager. Old before my time in some ways I guess.

Having little children, of course, makes it easy to reconnect with those feelings, watching their enthusiasm grow with the holiday preparations. Those of you who were here yesterday for the Holiday crafts workshop and FUUSA tree decorating party may have caught some of that kid spirit. The smell of glue and pine needles is so intoxicating isn't it?

Well, now that our son Andrew is out of his teenage years, the bloom is a little off the rose. And I'm aware that, for others, the associations with Christmas may not be so happy and pleasant. My wife Philomena's memories of family Christmases are more sanguine than mine. She remembers her much older brothers running around the dining room table trying to hurt each other and being frightened. Her mother didn't understand what she wanted either. The family moved to Buffalo from Ireland in the late 1950's when Philomena was young. Her mother didn't comprehend what was trendy among elementary school children. Philomena desperately wanted a Barbie just like the other girls had. Her mother didn't get that a [Tammy doll](#) wasn't an equally attractive alternative.

And sometimes the associations are much harsher. I've heard, more recently, about a family who has deep divisions over Christmas. The husband loves Christmas. It's his favorite holiday. The wife has very unhappy memories of Christmas as toxic family gatherings filled with drunkenness and fighting. When she looks back through Christmas albums, every picture has bottles of booze and people holding glasses of mixed drinks. She remembers her father buying her mother expensive gifts that she would open, lift her nose, and say, "I don't want it, take it back."

For others, who may have happy December memories, circumstances may be interfering this year. The loss of a job, uncertainty about future employment or a decrease in business, health concerns, a family crisis, or any of a number of sources of unhappiness can put a chill on any holiday spirit. One of the hardest is the recurrence of grief and sorrow mourning a loss.

Cold temperatures and bare trees easily lend themselves to support depressive feelings, probably the original motivation for all these holiday festivities in the first place. In varying degrees, many of us suffer from seasonal affective disorder as the light diminishes, days shorten and the shadows lengthen. It is as if nature is calling us to find a cave and join the bears, bats and squirrels who hibernate.

Mixed in with seasonal emotional turmoil may be an increase in dark, shadowy dreams so I thought this might be a good time to consider Jung's vision of the [shadow archetype](#).

Archetypes are universal symbols, patterns of behavior, and prototypes that organize our thinking. The platonic vision of ideal forms create the templates for all sensible objects and psychological models. Great myths, folklore and traditional stories usually have archetypal characters and situations recognizable across different cultures.

Jung's understanding of the shadow archetype expanded after he had this dream:

It was night in some unknown place, and I was making slow and painful headway against a mighty wind. Dense fog was flying along everywhere. I had my hands cupped around a tiny light which threatened to go out at any moment. Everything depended on my keeping this little light alive. Suddenly I had the feeling that something was coming up behind me. I looked back, and saw a gigantic black figure following me. But at the same moment I was conscious, in spite of my terror, that I must keep my little light going through night and wind, regardless of all dangers.

From Memories, Dreams, Reflections by C.G. Jung

Jung had a deep insight after reflecting on this dream into the nature of that shadow. Unlike Freud's view of the shadow as the repressed parts of our personality, Jung recognized it as something less defined and more significant. Yes it was a part of him created by his little light, his consciousness, but it was also something much larger than himself, an expression of the collective unconsciousness of humanity, maybe even something bigger than that. Yes, he needed to be occupied with tending and protecting his light, his consciousness, from the headwind, he interpreted as the advance of time and aging. He needed to go forward "into study, moneymaking, responsibilities, entanglements, confusions, errors, submissions,

defeats.” But he needed to respect and appreciate that dark figure as something greater of which he was an individualized expression

This is all pretty heady stuff,. What is important for us today is that these shadowy figures in our dreams can be messengers for us. So too any situations or people in our lives to whom we are strangely and highly reactive. Our nemesis is likely to be a shadow figure for us. If we are attentive, they may have a lesson to teach us, as happened in Elias Howe's dream:

Howe finds himself in Africa, fleeing from cannibals. They pursue him through the jungle. He flees in desperation, but the natives capture him, tie him up hand and foot, and carry him back to their village slung from a pole. There they dump him into a huge iron pot full of water. They light a fire under the pot and start to boil him alive.

In his dream, as the water starts to bubble and boil around him, he discovers the ropes have loosened enough for him to work his hands free. He tries repeatedly to take hold of the edge of the pot and haul himself out of the hot water, but every time he manages to heave himself up over the edge of the pot the natives reach across over the flames and forcibly poke him back down into the pot again with their sharp spears.

Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill: Using Dreams to Tap the Wisdom of the Unconscious by Jeremy Taylor

When Howe woke up, he was intrigued by the dream more than frightened. There was something very odd about it. The spears the natives were poking him with had holes in the points. Howe had been working on how to create a sewing machine. He couldn't figure out a way to do it that worked. Everyone for thousands of years had sewn with a hole on the back end of the needle. Suddenly he had that eureka moment. Holes in the point of the needle would make the sewing machine work!

I first heard this story from UU minister Jeremy Taylor I mentioned last week. A dream worker heavily influenced by Jungian thinking, I'll quote him now because he explains well the value of the shadow:

In Howe's dream, the cannibal natives manifest one of the deepest truths about the archetypal energy of the Shadow—that from the point of view of conventional waking consciousness, everything that is unconscious and not yet clearly manifested and understood in the world of ego appears nasty, ugly, frightening, “dark,” and dangerous. However, since the deep unconscious contains all that waking consciousness desires and longs for the most—the energies of love, creativity, and felt communion with the Divine, to name only the most salient and obvious—then the dark and frightening mask of the Shadow always hides the thing devoutly wished and sought.

Now, with what you've heard so far, listen again to first part of Theodore Roethke's poem:

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,
 I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;
 I hear my echo in the echoing wood –
 A lord of nature weeping to a tree.
 I live between the heron and the wren,
 Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul
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 That place among the rocks – is it a cave,
 Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

I just love this poem. In a dark time, vision can become more clear. A shadow is in a way like an echo, reflecting who we are. The human condition really is a living between worlds. Each of these lines is rich with meaning. The last line in particular, “The edge is what I have.”

I had a disturbing dream on Friday morning. As I woke up I had a stabbing pain in my heart. This almost never happens to me so it grabbed my attention. I'd been wrestling with how to finish this sermon and wasn't sure what I wanted to say. Maybe I was just waiting for a shadowy dream figure to guide me – be careful what you ask for.

As I struggled with the shadowy energy of the dream, I thought about its edge. I reflected on the nasty, ugly, frightening, “dark,” and dangerous elements as threatening to my ego, my safety and security. Then I brought loving-kindness to the disturbing parts, gently accepting them and asking for their well being. The pain began easing its grip on my heart. My equilibrium reestablished itself. No holes in the needle style revelation yet, but I'll keep you posted.

We are always pinned between the past and the future, not sure, exactly, what we are seeing. Is it a cave or a winding path or something else? The picture on the cover is a [Brocken Spectre](#), a visual effect that happens when on a mountain ridge with light shining from an angle down into a foggy area below. Jung recognized the shadow created by his little light as one. They can be pretty spooky if you don't know what they are as the shadow gets bigger and smaller depending on the shape and density of the fog.

What I do know is bringing an open and loving heart does make a positive difference when meeting life's shadows.

I'll close with one more poem:

in celebration of surviving by Chuck Miller

from *Northern Fields: New & Selected Poems* (Coffee House Press)

When senselessness has pounded you around on the ropes
and you're getting too old to hold out for the future
no work and running out of money,
and then you make a try after something that you know you
won't get
and this long shot comes through on the stretch
in a photo finish of your heart's trepidation
then for a while
even when the chill factor of these prairie winters puts it at
fifty below
you're warm and have that old feeling
of being a comer, though belated
in the crazy game of life
standing in the winter night
emptying the garbage and looking at the stars
you realize that although the odds are fantastically against you
when that single January shooting star
flung its wad in the maw of night
it was yours
and though the years are edged with crime and squalor
that second wind, or twenty-third
is coming strong
and for a time
perhaps a very short time
one lives as though in a golden envelope of light