

In a Dark Time
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
 he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
 he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
 thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

“In a Dark Time: by Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

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

I first heard the opening line of the Theodore Roethke poem – “In a dark time the eye begins to see” – several decades ago, maybe back in the early 1980s. It wasn’t until years later that I actually read the entire poem, when it was printed in a little anthology published not long after 9/11 by the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Poems to Live By in Uncertain Times* (which would of course be pretty much all the time...).

In any case, “In a Dark Time” is quite a ride of a poem, as you’ve just heard: From “the deepening shade” and “beasts of the hill and serpents of the den” to “my shadow pinned against a sweating wall” and “a ragged moon” to “death of the self”... yet finally...

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.

What journey have we just been on with this poet?

Well, whatever else is or was going on in that poem, we can be fairly certain that Roethke was drawing from his personal experience with devastating depression off and on over the course of much of his life.

This said, though I have not suffered from nearly that degree of depression, I find that the poem still speaks to me, and speaks to me powerfully.

“In a dark time the eye begins to see.”

The poet is on to something, isn’t he. Which means that his poem ends up being as much or more a universal metaphor for the spiritual journey as it is a psychological description of the poet’s rising from depression.

(And please take note of this: When it comes to what is considered clinical depression, rising from it is not so easy as a poem – professional help, often including medication, may be essential.)

When it comes to the spiritual journey (to the life journey for that matter), though, contemplative masters often speak of “the dark night of the soul” as almost a requirement of the path towards... well, towards what: transcendence, light, wholeness, union with God by whatever name.

So when Roethke writes of “Death of the self” he is squarely at the center of every spiritual tradition, east and west, which teaches that we must die to the ego, the small self, in order to be born into a larger wholeness, or to realize we have never not been part of that larger wholeness, which Roethke names at the end of the poem, as we just heard again:

The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

Ah, but if the poet has it right, what a price! Must we pay such a price?
Do we have a choice?

After all, the reality of our lives is that we all, one way or another, one time or another, live through dark nights. The only question is in what spirit will we live through those nights and how we come out the other side.

Perhaps it can help to be reminded that indeed “in a dark time the eye begins to see.” No metaphor only.

We all know the experience of our eyes quite literally adjusting to the dark. Turn off the lights and all seems quite dark indeed, until slowly yet right away you do begin to see just a little more and then a little more – because unless you are in a cave, there is in fact always a little light to be discerned.

And, miracle of miracles, you don’t have to consciously do anything – the eye knows how to do this, iris expanding, rods and cones adjusting, doing what they know how to do. We just need to be patient with the process.

Grief is like this, isn’t it. I’ve learned this more than once. As most of you have – or will, if you haven’t yet. The initial darkness of grief may feel inexorable, unresolvable, without end. But almost right away there is a seeing more clearly even in the midst of that darkest grief: Seeing more clearly what really matters in our lives, seeing more clearly that care and kindness are more important than the passing glitter of accumulation and achievement.

To put it slightly differently: Most of us have had – or will have – *this* experience: Someone we love dies and the rest of the world seems to go on as if nothing had changed, tending to so much that suddenly seems trivial and not very important. While for us everything has changed, and in the midst of that change we may have this clearer perception of what matters than perhaps we had had even a week, maybe even a day or hours earlier.

There is a truth to this that helps us when it is named.

One of the most helpful letters of sympathy I received after my father died did just this. It was almost thirty years ago, and only a week before I officially took up my call here as your minister. The note was from an Old Ship parishioner I had just begun to know, herself no longer among us, having moved away; she named in her note precisely that experience she had had after her own father had died. And that simple affirming of what I was experiencing helped me to understand what it was that I was seeing more clearly in the midst of my grief.

“In a dark time the eye begins to see.” Indeed.

Putting this a little more generally, one of the facts of our lives that we may not want to fully accept – and understandably so – is that we don’t always learn very much when things are easy, when everything is going well, when the light is shining at full wattage for us and our dear ones. Now, we surely *need* those times of goodness and love, of course we do; and we want them, of course; and we may also learn from these good stretches too if we are paying close enough attention. But the fact is that we also learn and grow, and maybe with more lasting effect, from the dark and hard times.

I surely wish my mother, for example, had had an easier final few years. But she didn’t, and there is no changing that and there was no changing it. But this I know too – I think I grew and learned immeasurably during my time of helping to care for her: Learned more patience, deepened my love, enlarged my compassion for others going through similar journeys. Would I trade it all were that possible in exchange for an easier time for my mother? Of course.

But one does not have such a choice.

The choice we *do* have is to take the gifts where we find them, including the gifts found in the midst, even if more often than we would like, of the dark times.

I think this applies even to politics. Those of us who fall on the liberal end of the political spectrum are (I certainly hope anyway) maybe seeing more clearly what matters politically in our nation these days when it comes to all sorts of issues. Now is not the time to make the list, but I think you know what I mean. The larger truth here is that wherever one falls on the political spectrum, when you are on the losing side you are given the opportunity, like it or not, to see more clearly what values matter most to you, what is worth working and fighting and living for.

Now, last week I reflected on the two stories of Jesus' birth, in Luke and in Matthew. As these stories come to us – perhaps more mythical than historic, but carrying no less spiritual truth for that – we imagine this baby born at the darkest time of the year, this baby born in very difficult circumstances, no room at the inn, no mid-wife or doctor, manger for a cradle, and a cruel king Herod wanting this baby's death.

Talk about a dark time for a child's birth. Yet, as I said last week, all the more meaningful for us, the readers all these centuries later, as we hear of love born in such "dark" and dangerous circumstances, the light of love maybe all the brighter in the midst of such circumstances.

"In a dark time the eye begins to see."

True in the natural, cosmic scheme of things too of course. Here we are about ten days from the winter solstice in our northern hemisphere. And even in this part of the world saturated with human-made light, when we step outside on a clear night we see in the black velvet of the winter's night sky more and brighter stars than at any other time of year. All the more of course if we are off somewhere away from city and suburb.

The paradox of more light in the midst of dark. I like that metaphor quite a bit.

Well, finally let me return for a moment to the 23rd Psalm, which we heard earlier. First, notice this: The first part of the Psalm addresses "the Lord" in the third person:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.

Beautiful and comforting images for sure.

Yet then, in the second part of the Psalm the voice shifts to direct address as the images shift quite dramatically from "green pastures" and "still waters" – just as our lives sometimes shift quite dramatically, even suddenly, from light to dark:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for *thou* art with me;
thy rod and *thy* staff they comfort me.

Now, I know that for many of us, and perhaps for all of us sometimes, the faith in some divine person or some larger embracing reality we could call "thou" may be doubtful at best. But let me offer a way in to that language, by suggesting that the "thou" can represent our experience of the love of neighbor or friend, the love which is there when we are able to *let go* into that love; and the "thou" can represent our own inner

resources, resources of patience and resilience and strength we did not know we had, but which we just might discover when we are open to the possibility.

In this regard I have had many a conversation with someone who has observed a friend or another parishioner live through a grief or a life-threatening illness with grace and strength, and who does not believe they would have similar grace or strength in similar circumstances.

And then, months or years later... they discover that they do.

Because when the test comes we more often than not do discover that we have more grace and strength than we realized. For if “in a dark time the eye begins to see,” it is also often true that in a hard time, the spirit begins to rise, maybe not right away, maybe imperceptibly at first, but rise.

So... Call that spirit “thou”. Call your friends and loved ones “thou”. Or call “thou” God.

In any case, just as our eyes quite naturally adjust to the dark, pupils opening more widely, thereby helping us begin to see more clearly... so in hard times do our spirits naturally open to greater inner resilience and love by whatever name, to help us live through whatever may come... which help includes in our weakness being willing to accept the hand offered whether by friend or stranger... that hand which is the only actual hand the mystery we call God actually has.

The hand that is ours for another, and another’s for us – in whatever dark time may come.

For in a dark time, the eye does begin to see.

So may it be.