

“Reflections on Dawn”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull

with initial reflections by Max Heath and Nate Kargher

Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden

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“First thing in the morning, I feel/think/wonder...”

Max Heath

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“If I see the sun rise, I feel/think/wonder...”

Nate Kargher

If I see the sun rise, I feel the Earth’s pulse. I feel the universe’s creatures waking up and stretching themselves out in their burrows and dens. I wonder at the rays of light, casting red rays and huge shadows. I think of what is and what could be. I think of the past and wonder about the future. I wonder at the comforts of today. I think of the suffering in the world. I feel hope, hope for a better tomorrow.

“Reflections on Dawn”

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Could be that the baby is crying. You rise slowly out of a sleep that wasn’t nearly deep enough. You procrastinate. That wasn’t really a cry...maybe a whimper. She’s not really ready to wake up. I’m not really ready to wake up, get up; but I must. And here I am, and here she is, standing up in her crib, ready, alert, beaming, with dawn’s early light finding its way into those big blue eyes that reflect mine.

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A ray of light, so sure of itself, finding its way into the starkness of his room in the ICU, as another technician walks into the room. But no, it didn’t happen. I dreamt it. That phone call I made to 911, the sirens, the EMT all but storming into our home. I stir. I rise, my hip sore from the stubborn contours of what in most hospitals would be an easy chair. He stirs, with a slight moan of complaint, emerging from a restless discomfoting night. He survived. One day at a time? Actually, one moment at a time. First light of the morning floods this space that is wholly jarringly awake, alert, and attentive.

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Up and out. I've barely slept, lumpy misnamed sleeping bag that it is. I roll over into the not-generous contours of this cave I'm sharing with friends from the university. Our leader is already awake, getting his hiking boots on, a big grin on his face as he stoops to take in the sunlight turning the ancient temple across the way into a rose-red spectacle. I'm not, never was, a morning person; but I dare not go back to sleep. Breathe it in, that deliciously mild shaft of air wafting in from the desert. Reaching for my hiking shoes aka sneakers, I'm ready, pre-breakfast even, for our morning trek to the amphitheater of this ancient city hewn from desert cliffs. "i thank you god for most this amazing day." Where have I heard that?

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All are experiences of dawn that I've known recently and long ago. All are memorable, embedded in my consciousness of daybreak.

Time is relative, ephemeral even. Some say it's illusory. Yet we seek to measure it—from nanoseconds to eons and eras; with anniversaries of heart and mind; with calendar markings of events celebratory and cataclysmic; and, most palpably, with day and night and the shades of light and darkness in between.

"Who gets up early to discover the moment light begins?" asked the 13th century Sufi poet, Rumi. Did you do so this morning? Have you ever done so?

[Weavings on Max's and Nate's reflections]

Consider the morning markers of your own life—dawns that found you brimming with anticipation, wonder, reassurance or perhaps rife with anxiety, grief, or denial of an episode jarring the ground of your being.

Dawn's early light holds deeply rooted vacillation for many of us. Night invites stillness, rest, serenity, and respite. Night also suggests letting go, closing down, venturing into the unknown, parting with light, and dallying with death. I wonder how many of us learned that "child's prayer" that began "Now I lay me down to sleep" and closed with the possibly terrifying "If I should die before I wake." It was my much-loved Granddad Edwards who taught it to me. For whatever reason, I didn't really think I would die before I woke up, but how many of you or the thousands of other children for whom this was their first prayer, entertained dread of not waking up?

Morning, on the other hand, brings reassurance that you made it through the night. Dawn signals light age-old and new as if the sun had never before risen. Dawn signals rebirth, resurrection, another chance, possibility. Daybreak is also pregnant with uncertainty. Without uncertainty, possibility would be a closed book. A new day and surely a new year recall that stanza from a carol of Christmas: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

I wonder if the hopes and fears of all our years are met in how we greet each new day—in some form and in varying portions. Daybreak is a time of vulnerability, wonder, and hope, with the portions changing from day to day, season to season, year to year.

A few drops of gloom in the eyelids of our soul suggest that we anticipate the worst. A few drops of contentment invite us to hope for the best. I wonder how our expectations of the day, of a new year, mesh with its unfolding reality in ways that catch us unaware, unprepared, and left with a residue of acute uncertainty. Surely we know about mornings and New Years that seem as if nothing could go wrong. We glow with euphoria. We're bold with hope. How compelling the promise of a blank slate.

Consider the wisdom of the late American poet Lucille Clifton:

i am running into a new year
and the old years blow back
like a wind
that i catch in my hair
like strong fingers like
all my old promises and
it will be hard to let go...

i am running into a new year
and i beg what i love and
i leave to forgive me

A blank slate? Perhaps not quite, but attunement to a second chance can restore our sense of self and hope reinforced by commitment to do what good we can in the crazy and brutal, hurting and hopeful world in which we woke up this morning.

With each dawn our senses are aroused for better or worse, compelled by light made visible by the turning of our earth-home. No matter how many sunrises we have known, we are taken by surprise spun in a golden orb that stretches ever so slowly as we lean toward the light. Carried by the earth itself, we are drawn toward the dawn, toward what feels new.

No matter what the day holds, no matter what the level of our anticipation or dread, the promise inherent in the birth of a day that has never been and will never be again calls us to be open to whatever. The sun rises and lights our way, however gnarled the way might be. The night passes and releases us to the morning, however dearly we cling to the night, however fiercely we claim our visions of yesterday. The sun rises and surprises us utterly, whatever surprises the day holds, however ready we are to leap headlong into that mystery.

[Weavings from Max's and Nate's comments...]

New beginnings, mornings, New Years we remember and anticipate as mixed blessings. God's in her heaven and all can seem right with the world, and then we ask where she's been hiding.

I wonder if blessings don't just ebb and flow to the tides of indifferent nature and the riptides of free will. And I wonder if in the midst of indifferent nature and endowed with free will—however relative that freedom—we aren't each handed the gift of the possible so that we need not turn away. How easy to be seduced by the illusion that there is really nothing we can do about it all. Poet Mary Oliver brings it home:

*“The spirit....enters us—
in the morning
shines from brute comfort
like a stitch of lightning...”*

Such is the case for her work.

“Morning, for me, is the time of best work,”

writes Oliver in an essay on “Winter Hours.”

“My conscious thought sings like a bird in a cage, but the rest of me is singing too, like a bird in the wind. Perhaps something is still strong in us in the morning, the part that is untamable, that dreams willfully and crazily, that knows reason is no more than an island within us.”

Dawn sings and shines and calls. So stay awake. Stay awake, bids Rumi.

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.*

*People are going back and forth across the doorsill
Where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.*

Dawn may be greeted as a mixed blessing, but a mixed blessing is a blessing too. No matter how nightmarish the night. No matter how nightmarish your yesterdays, no matter what the state of our hurting anguished hopeful world, we can rise and shine back at the sun. Epiphanies await us as a new day, a new year, calls to us; and we are co-creators of those epiphanies. We are.

So it is. So may it be. Amen.

Sources:

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