

## “A Silent Loveliness”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden  
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Snow, frost, ice, wind, chill. Tell me, what exactly is lovely or silent about the snow that covers these expanses just beyond the foundation of this Meeting House? Or a parking lot, snow covered and plowed, with icy remnants that our attempted sprays of salt could not possibly reach? Or steps down which you managed to tread ever so cautiously to make it to the vehicle whose windows demanded a labored scraping before you could rev up the engine that suggested you would make it here this morning? Then crunch, grind, swerve, and a surge or two of adrenaline as you made your way from your there to this here in wintry bliss.

One must have a mind of winter,

writes Wallace Stevens,

To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

A silent loveliness? No and yes. As Stevens concludes in his final verses:

“For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”

Snow cannot be molded into whitewashed sentimentalism. Wallace Stevens was, after all, a Hartford insurance executive, pragmatic, strategic, yet penning the poetry of “misery in the sound of the wind,” snow as a substance holding the nuances of the nothing “that is and isn’t.”

Years ago I went back to Iowa, where I more or less grew up, for a visit whose surface purpose was to do what I could to advance the presidential campaign of then Senator Bill Bradley. Iowa is still the homeland of friends and family, and I dipped into some of that time to visit them—most especially to head to northwestern Iowa to the field surrounding the tiny hamlet of Armstrong, where the remains of my father and now my mother are buried in a cemetery bounded by soaring pines that distinguish this intimate space from the far-as-the-eye-can-see

expanse over which snow, sleet, and wind blow without mercy winter after winter. My Uncle Ray hosted me at his nearby home, once a farmhouse when farms were family run and even owned. In silence broken only by the howling residue of a recent storm, we headed from his car to the plot. I could barely find my father's stone, flat and congruent with the hardened earth as it was. Ray pointed it out, caked with hardened white and ice. A silent loveliness not quite. I lifted my fur-booted foot to kick aside the barrier between my memories and the stone, between Dad who was no longer Dad and my salty tears.

Briefest of joys, our life together,  
 this brittle flower twisting toward the light  
 even as it dies, no more permanent  
 for being perfect...

writes Dana Goia

...Time will melt away  
 triumphant winter, and even your touch  
 prove the unpossessable jewel of ice.

Morning would come to this space also and melt with light the chill darkness of a lonely stone, newly scraped of snow through love and yearning.

I wonder. I wonder now not just about the 36 years since I last saw my Dad, but a hundred years ago, 1914. My father was three years old; my mother, a tad more mature, at 5. I'm an adamant non-believer in predestination and would question what exactly we mean by fate. Direction and convoluted contingencies are another matter. DNA, yet another. "If only's" and "what if's," yet another and eternal fodder for speculation that tangles hearts and minds. Yet...it's tempting to speculate, and historic hindsight helps us along. Adam Gopnik's erudition in *The New Yorker* fuels us. His commentary appears in "The Talk of the Town," that opening segment of *The New Yorker* that commonly holds far lighter fare.

Most of us know from our history books that 1914 marked the outbreak of World War I, the Great War. The match that kindled that four-year nightmare of death and destruction was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Sarajevo. As heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne, he was felled by a cadre of Serbian conspirators, upsetting the balance of power in which larger powers like Britain, Germany, and the United States had become embroiled. It was a classic and horrific dance of hubris, commonly cloaked under the notion of honor. Gopnik opines that "the prospect of being discredited, 'reduced to a second-rate power,' was what drove the war forward." No, I don't quite understand how all those threads of hubris and plot connected, and perhaps one day I'll sit down and read *The Guns of August* in its daunting entirety, mapping out as author Barbara Tuchman did 50 years ago the outbreak of the Great War. In the meantime, I'm taking the lazy way out through "The Talk of the Town."

Where am I going with this? You're probably wondering. Well, Gopnik drops back a few years before a century ago to 1912, the year marking the sinking of the invincible Titanic. I hadn't known that this ill-fated ship—whoops, misguided ship—had a twin sister, the Olympic.

The Olympic had set forth from Southampton on a maiden voyage that took it also through the treacherous ice patches of the North Atlantic and on into New York Harbor, safe and sound. The Olympic lived on as a troop carrier in the war that was to break out just two years hence.

“The story of the two ships,” suggests Gopnik, “is one to keep in mind as we peer ahead into the new year” reminding us “that our imagination of disaster is dangerously more fertile than our imagination of the ordinary.” The tale of the Titanic has been romanticized into Oscar-winning proportions. The story of the Olympic will never achieve such status. Our own dance of reflections a century after the outbreak of the Great War can lure us into an equally fertile foyer of impending disaster. “We search for parallels of disaster,” writes Gopnik, “and miss parallels of hope.”

Is it a flip of the coin which ship you’re on? Is it a flip of the coin which direction history takes in matters of war and diplomacy? “Sanity lurks in sailing around the ice,” notes Gopnik, but it “doesn’t necessarily guarantee safe passage.”

Sailing around the ice serves as a ready metaphor for diplomacy and humility. I would rather not argue with ice or the temptation to hubris so easily provided by incidents that call us to stop, listen, and confer. “Appearances are deceiving” is a cliché rich with the truth of history. Ships have twins. Political power brokers have alter egos. Snow is fanciful. Ice is deceptive. January of 2014 holds possibilities, probabilities even, but few certainties. Among those few are that we are here and now, and one day we will not be.

My mind returns to the raw and fragile space of northern Iowa on a wintry night.

“You must gather yourself into the basket  
of your skin,”

writes Fredrick Zydek, poet from neighboring Nebraska,

“...Listen to the wind moving  
its divine puzzle in and around you.

Become aware that you are an observer  
to these events, a sojourner daring to enter  
the quiet slopes that lead to silence.”

There is beauty to witness, pathos on which to reflect, and silence to enter in this wintry embrace.

This is the second winter that my husband Dan and I have been in your midst and at home in nearby Middletown. It was last year just before Christmas that I bundled up, camera in hand, and made my way around our house through the deep and deeper snow to capture the images of the candles we place in our windows. A gentle snow was falling. I was an observer on the outside looking in, backing up into my own tiny slice of history personal and precious. Inside were the light, the warmth, the familiar aromas, Dan moving across an expanse of window, my life moving across an expanse of space and time.

How could I not recall the concluding passage from James Joyce's "The Dead," the final story in *Dubliners*, a collection of stories about the inhabitants of that city that Joyce had known from birth? It's a winter evening; and Gabriel Conroy and his wife Gretta have walked in the snow back to their hotel after a dinner party at which Gretta was visibly moved by a song. The couple walked in silence until they came to their room. Gabriel was filled with love and longing and yes, lust, for his wife, but was awkward in expressing his feelings. Gretta was ponderous. At last she revealed to her husband the poignancy of the song, its connection with a young and frail boy named Michael Furey, who had once loved her and for whom she had felt equal affection. In a fit of sobbing, she tells her husband of young Michael's death at the age of 17, in the aftermath of a chill caught when he had visited her home amid a drenching rain before she went away to school. Her husband is bewildered, jealous, and clumsily sympathetic. Gretta sobs herself to sleep.

He watches her sleeping, reflecting on their life together, reflecting on his jovial perhaps tasteless behavior at his Aunt Julia's dinner party, reflecting on the transience of Aunt Julia. He climbs into bed next to his wife and mulls further the image of the young lad of so many years ago just outside young Gretta's window, joined now in Gabriel's imagination by others long dead, blurring with an image of his own fading self.

In Joyce's words, written exactly a century ago:

"A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. ... snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked roses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

Few are the certainties of life, but what is true and sure is the preciousness of life and love, the poignancy and power of remembrance, the hope of who and how we can still be, and the mesmerizing loveliness of falling fallen snow in this winter of now.

Amen.

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**Sources:**

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