



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Walking Dead

AJ Blackwood, Ministerial Intern

October 30, 2016

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

In the spirit of Halloween, welcome to “The Walking Dead.” Is anyone familiar with the TV show or the graphic novel? I am a faithful viewer and I have skimmed the graphic novels for the basic content to compare and contrast the differences in storyline. I am by no way an expert on the story but I will do my best to fill you on just a few facts about the story line for basic reference and not give away too many spoilers.

The story takes place in a dystopian society. A plague has taken over society bringing on the zombie apocalypse. The undead are walking the earth and attacking any living human being. They are motivated by the basic need for food which is comprised of one and only one thing - living tissue. The story is not for the faint of heart. It is filled with blood, gore, and lots of violent attacks. After all, the only way to kill a zombie is destroy its brain. I promise not to get too much into that.

I am pretty much a sci-fi and horror story geek. So just the idea of a well done zombie apocalypse series; anything close the 1968 “Night of the Living Dead” was just about more than I could handle when the show was announced but all of this was just the foundation. This series is more than just a blood and guts story about zombies. It is a story of a group of people that come together to build a community of survivors in a world that is literally dying and coming back to life and tearing itself apart.

The lead character is a police officer, Sheriff Rick Grimes. He is injured in a car accident and wakes up a few months later in a hospital that is overtaken by zombies. He ventures home to find that his wife, Laurie, and son, Carl, are missing. Not knowing if they are dead, alive, or undead he leaves on a trek to find them. Given the direction of another survivor, he heads to a refugee center in Atlanta, Georgia to find his family. He soon finds out the refugee center is nonexistent. When he finds Laurie and Carl, they are traveling with his ex-partner and a group of other survivors.

Along the way, he comes upon Carol, a battered wife who is surviving with her young daughter, Sophia in tow. Glenn, a former pizza delivery boy who knows his way around Atlanta and has pretty much fearlessly taken on moving among the undead gathering supplies, food and other resources not only for himself but those he has met along his way. And then we have Merle and Darryl, a pair of racist, violent brothers who cause more havoc than anything else, well at least at first. Let’s just say Merle gets what he deserves while Darryl turns his life around and becomes one of the most inspirational characters of the series.

One would assume, given that the zombies are affectionately called “walkers” that the title of the series is solely reflective of the zombie undead. I am going to challenge this with you now. It is my suggestion the title is not simply about the zombie undead but instead also about the living. In the last two seasons of the show and throughout the graphic novel, the survivors, who are doing everything in their power to live and re-establish a civilized community, have

come across not only zombies but also more their share of living villains the latest of which is Negan. He is a sadistic, power hungry, narcissist, who will rape, rob, and murder anyone who will get in his way. He has given up on society and any hope of civilization. Negan is a member of "the walking dead." He is spiritually dead as well as morally bankrupt.

This brings me to where we are in the real world today. I am concerned as I look into the world around us and this nation that we are seeing more and more walking dead. People who are simply going through the motions. They have given up and become spiritually and sometimes morally dead. We see this in our national political arena and locally with people in our own home town of Pasadena. There is a desire to dehumanize, denigrate, and belittle the minority, the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised and the under or non-represented in our communities.

Many feel that all of our problems will be solved not through the hard work of learning and stretching ourselves to be more inclusive and compassionate but instead by building walls and fences to shield themselves from the unknown.

Now I am in no way suggesting that any of us in our beloved community here at Neighborhood are morally bankrupt but I am concerned as I look out into our UU world about spiritual aliveness. I am concerned that I am seeing some walking dead in our communities. I am seeing this not only in others but also in me. At times over this past summer, I felt like I was a member of the walking dead. After the attack at the Pulse night club, in Orlando this summer. I heard it too many times, and I heard the words from my own mouth at vigils and other events. "I'm tired." I'm tired of doing this. I'm tired of reading names of the dead. I'm tired of moments of silence. I'm tired of crying, feeling alone and being scared.

My questions to myself during this time were: But what am really tired of? I'm a minister right? Isn't this what I do? Am I not supposed to be here to hold people in pain, lift them up and support them? How am I supposed to be spiritual leader of my community when I feel like I'm spiritually dying, scared and alone?

What I found was, I wasn't tired of any of these things. These were things that were keeping me spiritually alive. Being in community as hard as it was, was where my spirit was strengthened.

What I was and I am tired of was the violence and the hate. I was tired of shootings and bombings around the world. I was tired of the deaths, nah, I say murders of black men in police custody. I was tired of the rhetoric that all Muslims are terrorists and that Mexicans are rapists and murders. I was tired of watching You Tube videos of young women being pulled out and harassed by police for using a public restroom because they were thought to possibly have biological male genitalia. I was tired of religious leaders calling for the continued death of queer people and praising the Orlando attack. I was tired of watching the news and listening to morally bankrupt people being national platforms to denigrate women and anyone else who disagrees with them. I was simply tired.

Had this exhaustion made me member of the walking dead? Had this exhaustion encouraged me to be spiritually numb and dead? Yes, it had.

My challenge and struggle is one that I believe I share with many of you. I see you doing the good work. I see you struggling for justice. I see you writing petitions, educating government officials and standing in solidarity on street corners calling for love and compassion in our world. I see that many of you are tired.

My goal today is not just simply bring you down, which is where you may be at this point, but rather to inspire you to explore this “sometime” feeling of exhaustion and numbness. To look at the underlying roots and remind yourself that you are not alone both in the numbness and in the struggle but also in the hope to grow and maintain or become even more spiritually alive.

As we go into these next few months, the days will get shorter and the nights will get longer. It is proven statistically that psychologically this is a difficult time of year for many and a medical fact that the Vitamin D that we receive from the sunlight helps combat the blues and depression. Therefore shorter days mean less time or no time in the sun if you work a long enough day that you wake when it’s dark and get home when it’s dark.

I know that this is a tough season for me. As you may know, I thoroughly enjoy bike riding. I will ride up to 50 miles in a day. This type of trip is about a five maybe six hour round trip and since I don’t like riding in the dark before or after work, it’s much more difficult to do.

I enjoy bike riding for the physical benefits, but more importantly for the spiritual ones. When I am on my bike, I generally ride along the beach and river trails. I love to feel the cool breeze in my face. The sounds of dogs barking, birds crowing, and there is nothing more wondrous on the San Gabriel River trail then watching a pod of sea turtles play and romp in the water and sand in Seal Beach. It is during these rides that I am able to leave the stresses of the world behind, meditate, and connect with nature. I never thought 10 years ago when I bought my first bike that it would become one of my deepest spiritual practices.

But now that the days are shorter and I’m working longer hours, I am riding less and I need to develop other means of spiritual practice. I am encouraging each of you to join me in engaging in a new spiritual practice as we enter these next few darker months of the year. I encourage you to find a new spiritual practice or re-engage something you once did and have stopped doing. Your way of breathing life into yourself when you are down.

I know this may be a challenge for some of you. There are lots of reasons not to. There is an election to attend to, black lives to fight for, Muslims to welcome, and more.

So I will offer you the message attributed to Francis of Assisi. Francis stated that he prayed an hour every morning and every night. When he was asked how he accomplished this when he was too busy and didn't have that kind of time in the day. His response was to the effect of: I

pray twice as much: two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening. Now as counter intuitive as this may sound. I really think it's a good idea and mode of operation.

Whether it be praying, meditating, biking, walking the labyrinth out on the patio, reading or writing a good book, sitting on your balcony having a cup of tea or coffee, dancing, singing, playing an instrument, or sitting in the solitude of this sanctuary on weekday afternoon.

I encourage you to find space for you to leave the ordinary and enter the extraordinary. Resist becoming a member of the walking dead.