



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Faith In Nights

Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach, Senior Minister

December 4, 2016

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

These days, the darkness falls earlier and earlier. While the shortest day of the winter solstice falls on the 21st, today is the earliest sunset: 4:43 pm! So early! I'm not sure about you, but I find myself rushing to try to savor the daylight as much as I can as I move about my daily business of ministry and life, in between appointments and errands. I wake early and rush home to catch an early walk with my dog in my neighborhood, my familiar routine. As hard as I try, each day the light seems to slip through my fingers, elusive, cool and thin, not warm and robust as it was. The pastels of dusk soon give way to the thickest midnight dark I've yet experienced.

Confession: I had a legitimate childhood fear of the dark. As a child I would lie in bed and with a sense of dread, feeling that my own and my family's safety was somehow at risk, even though I had already checked under the bed and made sure the night light was on. In my suburban neighborhood in Massachusetts, there was really very little reason why I should actually have been afraid. I lived in a sequestered neighborhood with more trees than people. And yet I was a sensitive kid who knew already that much of the world lived in fear. I watched the news and learned of war. At 9 I asked my parents what rape meant and understood that people could cause one another so much suffering. What protected me from such harm? Why would my family be any different? I didn't yet understand how the world worked, how I was sheltered by privilege, but my empathy was already attuned to suffering. It seemed crystal clear to my young self that to be able to sleep in peace, to make yourself vulnerable for hours on end without fear was an absolute luxury. So I would anxiously toss and turn, awakening to the slightest noise.

Going outside alone into the dark of night similarly terrified me, even for simple things like taking out the trash. I would dash out into the dark and dash back inside as fast as I could. Outside, my fear became more acute and clarified-- it was not a fear of dangerous people that the cover of darkness might conceal but a fear of the dark itself. I feared that somehow I would be swallowed up by the shadows of the deep forests or the dusky unlit streets. And no one would know that I was gone.

It wasn't until I moved to New York City in my early 20s that this fear truly dissipated. In the hustle and bustle of the city, I was always surrounded by people, and this comforted me immensely. I loved living in apartment building with people above and below me, hearing footsteps, laughter and kids playing. I loved knowing that people were going about their business side by side. For a long period of time I became fearless on the streets, willing to walk home at any hour of the night in almost any neighborhood, trusting that I would be surrounded by ordinary people who would be willing to come to my aid if needed. It helped, of course, that the streets remained artificially lit at night, an orange purple haze that hid nothing. Finally, I had found a place where it never truly got dark. And I loved it.

But even with my newfound comfort in darkness, a new nighttime fright appeared: nightmares. My nightmares usually went like this: I am helping to save the world from some great disaster. All seemed to be calm and peaceful, and that the good has triumphed in the world. I can finally exhale and know that the future is secure. And then, suddenly, like a video game, it is game over-- lights out-- everything goes black. In an instant, the world seems to end and return to the nothingness of space. I have not saved the world, in fact, I've been fooled into thinking I did by some power greater than me. I awake feeling terrified, but also humiliated, humbled and small. I am still alive, as is the world, but I am left with a lingering feeling that somehow I have failed greatly. I am left feeling powerless.

The nightmare comes back to me when I'm feeling a lot of stress, as nightmares tend to do. Since the election, it's been back a few times. From my conversations with a lot of folks here at church and in the interfaith community, I know that a lot of us are struggling with fears and difficult feelings, some of which have manifested into nightmares too.

Miriam Greenspan is a Buddhist psychotherapist who has dedicated her practice to what she calls "the dark emotions," grief, fear and despair. In her book *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*, she explains how she understands these difficult feelings:

These are our worst feelings, and they are part of every life. Sooner or later, we all get slammed. Your wife dies of cancer. Your husband at midlife runs off with a younger woman. You lose your job. Your child becomes ill. You are assaulted. You are diagnosed with a serious disease. Your mother dies. Your father dies. Your cat dies. Or perhaps it's none of these.

Perhaps, like many people today, you are deeply aware of living in a world that is both dangerous and endangered—an environment that triggers the dark emotions on a daily basis. Perhaps not personal adversity but awareness of the enormity of pain in the world, and of danger to our planet itself, is the source of your grief, fear, or despair. Or perhaps you feel these emotions and don't know what to connect them to or how to cope with them. When I call them dark, I mean that as a culture we have kept these emotions in the dark—shameful, secret, and unseen. As a result, we tend, for the most part, to shun them. But the emotions that we reject and suppress can become dark in an altogether different sense: like a rich, fertile soil from which unexpected flowers can bloom.

This church is a place for you to take your difficult and dark emotions, your nightmares, your fears, and to know you are not alone. It is a dark time for the United States. The shadow side of our country—the ugliness of bigotry, racism, and xenophobia now has a national platform. Even as we fiercely resist, making phone calls, sending letters, showing up to protest, it feels as if we can't do much to stop the advancing dark of a new administration with the potential for serious damage to the common good. Sometimes it feels strangely like my nightmare-- like someone pulled the plug on our world and the power is suddenly out. We might feel like we are left sitting in the dark, feeling powerless.

“The future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be, I think,” Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal on January 18, 1915, when she was almost thirty-three years old and the First World War was beginning to turn catastrophic. Author Rebecca Solnit quotes Virginia Woolf in an essay from her collection *Men Explain Things to Me*. Solnit writes about history and hope for uncertain times with the intention that more people would come to see the future the way she does-- as an ongoing series of dark times— war, genocide, tragedy, and the failures of capitalism-- are paralleled by the light of organized resistance and movements for change. In her essay on Virginia Woolf, she writes:

Most people are afraid of the dark. Literally when it comes to children, while many adults fear, above all, the darkness that is the unknown, the unseeable, the obscure. And yet the night in which distinctions and definitions cannot be readily made is the same night in which love is made, in which things merge, change, become enchanted, aroused, impregnated, possessed, released, renewed.

These dark days of winter, many are wondering where to turn, what to DO, who to turn to in this dark times. But I wonder, can you think back into times in your life when you have been forced to sit in darkness – a time when the power has literally been out? Do you remember a time when the will of nature knocked out the electricity and you were forced to sit in the dark, no television or computer, no music, no refrigerator?

At first, there’s a feeling of panic, right? A crazy feeling of how we could possibly survive in the dark? Will we have enough food and water? I remember the grocery stores were always crazy just before a storm – people wandering the aisles aimlessly with three essential supplies – candles, beer, and water. And then, you batten down the hatches and stay put. When darkness falls, you start to light candles and lanterns. With no other choice, you start to actually talk to your family, maybe playing games and eating simple, non-perishable foods. You tell stories, laugh, and remember what it’s like to live without the constant input of media and technology. You go to bed early and enjoy reading by candlelight. You try to get a good night’s sleep.

And then the next morning, when things are light again and the storm has cleared, you leave the safety of your own home and talk to your neighbors, seeing if they are ok and if they need anything. You remember the most vulnerable people in your neighborhood, the oldest, the youngest, and those with the least resources. You share what you have with them and try to help, and if you can’t help, you look for others who can.

That’s what happened a few years back in November of 2012 when ferocious Hurricane Sandy flooded New York City with 14 foot tides of water, closing the subways and shutting down the city. Because much of New York City’s power lines were buried, electricity was out for many days. The photographer Iwan Baan famously captured an image of the city from above, with much of Manhattan completely dark. The hardest hit areas of the city were the far Rockaways, Staten Island, and a neighborhood called Red Hook in Brooklyn.

These areas were all isolated from the rest of the city in some way, separated by freeways and poverty. While most of the city's power had gone back on, the power was still out for over 6000 Red Hook residents, mostly living in housing projects. The power stayed out for over two weeks, with no heat, electricity or water. And the support began to pour in—clothing, supplies, and bodies interested in helping. A community group organized three meals a day to be served for the residents, many of which were delivered to those who were home bound and ill. I'll never forget clutching a long list of names and going back and forth from the kitchen to the housing projects, running up and down the stairs, knocking on doors or placing meals in front of doors as people were not comfortable being seen so in need. This operation went on for weeks, until the power was restored. What remained was a devastated, yet strengthened community, more willing to organize to serve its own needs and to help one another.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

You darkness, that I come from,
I love you more than all the fires
that fence in the world,
for the fire makes
a circle of light for everyone,
and then no one outside learns of you.
But the darkness pulls in everything:
shapes and fire, animals and myself,
how easily it gathers them,
power and people,
and it is possible a great energy
is moving near me.
I have faith in nights.

It's the time of storms, of the Santa Ana winds and heavy rains. If the power is not out now, we know it might be out tomorrow. Today, let us not miss the opportunity to sit with the emptiness of the dark and to share our fears in earnest, without shame or judgment. It is by giving these challenging feelings space to be heard and understood that we learn that we are not alone. Sometimes the power going out distills what's important, helps you to reach out to others and rediscover the power you do have. When fear threatens to strip us of our power, turning to one another in our vulnerability helps to restore our faith in one another. Faith is the foundation for hope, without it, hope is hollow.

I spent Thursday morning at the Islamic Center of Southern California with over 100 faith leaders strategizing about the future. Our focus was on revitalizing our congregational and denominational commitment to sanctuary for immigrants and refugees. After nearly three hours together, it became clear that the most important results were the relationships made and the conversations started. We are all looking for something to "do" and yet so much of our work was to listen to one another's fears and to name the incredible skill and knowledge that was present, to rebuild our damaged but not destroyed powerbase.

As people of faith, our faith does not rest in our belief in the same God but in one another and our shared value that all people have inherent worth and dignity, regardless of their race, religion or immigration status.

I close with an excerpt from Unitarian poet T.S. Eliot, from the second poem of his 4 Quartets:

I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope,
for hope would be hope for the wrong thing;
wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing;
there is yet faith, but the faith and the love are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

Let us kindle our faith in nights, knowing that the morning will come once again.

And tomorrow, in the clear light of day, let us gather our candles and our courage and welcome the light.

Amen and blessed be.