

**“Out of the Darkness of Our Sphere”**

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Our Office Administrator, Kathy Berger, came to me last week and said, “Sharon, I just want you to know that we are on Linton Street, not Linton Avenue. I have been meaning to tell you that for four years.” Every week I email Kathy a copy of the sermon I have just preached. Every week the top of my line says “First Unitarian Church, Linton Avenue.” Every week she patiently changes it to “Linton Street,” where we actually reside. I have been minister here for ten years and I don’t know where I am. We all live in some darkness. It is unavoidable. It requires humility and courage to face the truth. We are fortunate that there are friends and family members who will tell us the truth, “It’s ‘street,’ not ‘avenue.’ I have been meaning to tell you for four years.”

You have to understand the beauty of what Kathy told me. She didn’t tell me because she is petty or officious or looking for error or invested in my public humiliation – all useless exercises. She told me because she is a good employee who understands that the minister should know where she is and even though I supervise Kathy, Kathy understands it is her responsibility to tell me the truth on important matters so I don’t walk off into the darkness too far or too long. And you might think that four years was a long time to let this go, but she really is busy doing a lot of important things.

The poet William Stafford writes

If you don’t know the kind of person I am  
 And I don’t know the kind of person you are  
 A pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
 And following the wrong god home we may miss our star  
 For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,  
 A shrug that lets the fragile sequence break  
 Sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood  
 Storming out to play through the broken dyke.  
 And as elephants parade holding each elephant’s tail,  
 But if one wanders the circus won’t find the park,  
 I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty  
 To know what occurs but not recognize the fact.  
 And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,  
 A remote important region in all who talk:  
 Though we could fool each other, we should consider –  
 Lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.  
 For it is important that awake people be awake,  
 Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep,  
 The signals we give – yes or no, or maybe –  
 Should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Stafford, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other.”

I don't mind the shrugging on small things. The sequence can break on home decorating or holiday gifts, even work addresses, especially well-appointed and under-researched opinions. That's not a loss. It's a good reminder that we are limited and fallible. When we start to wander away on large issues like love or justice or honesty, as we all do, then we have a problem. Like Stafford writes it is a slippery slope. There isn't usually an earthquake. It's following one elephant and assuming this is fine, and then never finding ones way back to the circus and not even realizing we are gone. Then we miss our star.

I asked my son what I should write about for my sermon this week. Then I asked him if he knows what a sermon is. He said "No." Children are usually up for wintry fresh truth telling. It is humbling. While he played with his castle I explained that once a week I have to speak about something meaningful and I need to talk for about twenty minutes. I asked him what he thought I should say. Without looking up he said "You should talk about love being bigger than hate."

This is a line from a children's story about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. and my son has continued working through this thought, "that love is bigger than hate," since I read the story to him last year. He might be five but he got the particulars that a human being who chose to believe that love was bigger than hate (and that this choice made him great and feared) was murdered by another human being. It is an epic story of hope, love, limitation, truth, hate, violence, murder, choice, and legacy. It is a worthy story to ponder. It is awake with meaning and as long as my son talks about it I know he has not wandered away in the darkness.

My holiday wish is that more of us would ponder epic human stories so that we could leap right out of the complacency of our spheres and find our star. Unitarian Universalists are hostile about moderation and limitation and in this we are ignorant. I once preached a sermon on the merits of being average. Several people approached me after the sermon to discuss the importance of education and self improvement and effort. Yes, I agree on the importance of all these things but they can also lead to darkness. When we are certain in our education and or knowledge we can get lost in an enclave of ignorance that can prevent us from stretching ourselves with ambiguity, truth, new experiences and learning. "Will you stop for a while, stop trying to pull yourself together for some clear "meaning" – some momentary summary? No one can have poetry or dances, prayers or climaxes all day, the ordinary blankness of little dramatic consciousness is good for the health sometimes."<sup>2</sup>

I have a Masters of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School. My diploma, framed on the wall in my office, is in Latin. I don't know what it says because I don't read Latin. I am proud of my education and effort, but the Latin reminds me of humility and ignorance and the ultimate irrelevance of Harvard unless I put what I learned to good use. If I can't use my Harvard education to work on, struggle with, try new experiences and thoughts, stretch myself with ultimate meaning, Harvard too is useless, a clever mutual parade lost in the dark. The irony, when I say "Harvard" people perk up and think I have something to say. Having been there I can guarantee that you can both get an excellent education and have nothing to say.

So I did feel frustration when I asked a family member what I should preach about and she said "The lack of civility. Why aren't people civil anymore?" And I did despair when someone recently noted "I can't believe that anyone shops at Wal-Mart." Because I am human, and at times, weak, confused and bound to people in strange ways, I said nothing but considered the parade.

Civility. Are we more or less civil? I don't know. But I do know that I am polite to the best of my ability and that is what matters. I do know that I ask my son to say "Please and thank you" and that matters. I do know that people still hold the door open for me and ask "May I help you?" and this matters. I know that people sat at Sue Koehler's bedside this summer and are now sitting at Tommie Thompson's bedside and that this matters.

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<sup>2</sup> John Tagliabue, "Moderation is Not a Negation of Intensity, but Helps Avoid Monotony."

I don't believe civility is the problem. I think it might be the problem for people who don't want to think or do anything about the larger problems of love, justice, and honesty and their role in the problem. Belaboring the question of civility (and other such topics) is a diversion. I see plenty of civility and I know that Sylvia Birmingham made a conscious decision to see the good in everyone instead of asking herself "Why aren't people civil anymore?" She chose to leave the sphere of her own darkness. She found her star and we were the better for it (so was she).

And as for Wal-Mart which has been accused of unfair hiring practices and discrimination and eating up small businesses, people wake up. Target, Meijer, and Home Depot are also eating up small businesses. People shop at Wal-Mart because it offers good prices and before riding off too far in the darkness remember that there are plenty of poor and struggling people, or families with expenses in this society who need affordable dishes and towels and toilet paper. Adam Gerhardtstein spoke here three weeks ago about invisible privilege. It is an invisible privilege to not have to shop at Wal-Mart. Do you understand this? If you live in Cincinnati and don't shop at Wal-Mart it is most likely because you can afford not to.

I don't have an answer for unfair hiring practices, discrimination, the end of small businesses, or poverty. Let me just be a dumb bell for a minute and live with the reality of both injustice and that privilege can be a darkness, and let me rest very uncomfortably with them side by side. Do you understand that with money you/we have better health care coverage, better public education, better financial advice, and better access to legal representation on a daily and hourly basis?

I have a cousin who was caught drunk driving several years ago. In his embarrassment he told no one in his family. When he went to court, without legal representation (since he had told no one and was young and did not know what to do), the judge was ready to sentence him to time in jail. Shocked and wandering the halls of the courthouse, and finally realizing he was in trouble, my cousin ran into a lawyer who immediately offered to represent him for a price. My cousin was smart and said "yes" and he was privileged and could pay the price. And so for the cost of legal and court fees he did not go to jail. What if my cousin had no money like half of our society? He would have had a conviction and jail time. Invisible privilege.

My holiday wish is that before pontificating on any person or situation we would choose instead to walk a mile in another person's shoes. You hate Wal-Mart. Go inside and respectfully ask people why they are there. Someone yells at you; ask him or her if he/she is OK. You think kids nowadays are awful, try respectfully forming a relationship with a teenager so that you can earn trust and try to walk a mile in that child's shoes. None of this will happen in a day. It will take humility, courage and work and it will be time much better spent than wandering farther into darkness. But here is the price, one that our invisible privilege buttresses us from, it will hurt. It will hurt. I promise you that you will be awake and it will hurt.

Today many of you made cookies for prisoners and I know that some of you asked why. I am glad you had the courage to ask why. If we can't talk and question we will surely remain in the darkness of our spheres, so thank you for your honesty. Let me begin by asking how many people here have been in jail, have had a loved one in jail, or are close to someone who has had a loved one in jail?

I have and here is what I have learned. Inmates are people and they love and hurt and hope. Every prisoner is someone's child, brother, partner, mother, grandparent or granddaughter and family members live in great pain and silence and discrimination when their loved ones are in prison. Prison is the punishment and prison is hard, hard, hard and lonely. I think we want prisoners to not be human, but they are always human and that is a pain. A prisoner can be honestly convicted for a terrible crime like murder, and that prisoner can have a daughter who cries every night because Daddy is not there. It hurts to be awake. We make cookies for the prisoner. They are also for the daughter. They are also for reconciliation and hope.

I would never expect a victim to make cookies unless they wanted to because victims are already awake in so much pain. It is for the rest of us to struggle with humanity, good, evil, love and hate. It is for us to come closer to prison and prisoners and wonder about crime, sentencing standards, rehabilitation, atonement, invisible privilege, prejudice, and the cost to society and family. It is for us to leave our spheres and awake. So thank you for asking the question. Thank you for your humility. The easy thing is to say “Prisoners don’t deserve anything.” The harder thing is to entertain the idea that prisoners still have and will have a relationship with society and for us to take responsibility for wondering what our role is in that relationship.

Several years ago I preached a sermon on the film *American Beauty*. My sermon (and the film) challenged some of you because the definition of beauty in *American Beauty* is not the average definition where beauty is assumed to be perfect, clean, and pleasing. The beauty of *American Beauty* is the hard, poignant, vulnerable dignity and truth of human life.

The main character of the film, defeated Lester, is trying to wake up. Lester does wake up, in a series of bizarre and embarrassing ways, but he was dying in the blind darkness of his fake, well-appointed life. One by one the characters in the film become beautiful only as they wake up, experience vulnerability, take responsibility, and feel pain. Even the focus of beauty, sexually precious, Angela only truly becomes beautiful at the end of the film when she stops acting, admits to her vulnerability, and manages to be generous about her friend, Jane. Her beauty only shines in sincere, compassionate relationship with another. Same with Lester. And Lester only manages to be in sincere, compassionate relationship with another when he is in sincere, compassionate relationship with himself. That’s his star back home.

“Be a dumb bell for a few minutes at least; we don’t want Sunday church bells ringing constantly.”<sup>3</sup> Lounge and invite the soul. Leave platitudes and move in an unknown direction. Wander back in from the dark. Struggle with love, honesty, and justice. Or if that is too much, just sit in blessed silence. Sit and rest, gratefully be a dumb bell and see what happens. Parker Palmer tells the story of a disciple who asks his rebbe

“Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these words upon your heart? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our heart?’” The rebbe answers “It is because, as we are, our hearts are closed, and we can not place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay, until one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in.”<sup>4</sup>

In this season of winter, may you have the courage to sit in unknown silence and feel the blessings and truth of humble ignorance. I wish for all of you a broken heart so that words of truth, courage, and humility fall inside and you awaken to the strange beauty within yourself and the world, and then choose follow your star back home.




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<sup>3</sup> Tagliabue.

<sup>4</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Politics of the Brokenhearted*.