

# “String of Lights”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

This short item ran in the UK’s “Metro” commuter news.

“Spare a thought for maintenance worker Peter Parsons.

He had to check 91,000 bulbs when the lights failed on the giant Christmas tree at the Cheshire Oaks shopping centre in Chester.

It took the 47-year old Mr. Parsons six hours to find the dud bulb.”

Now, it seems to me that Peter Parsons did a pretty good job, considering that it only took him six hours.

At an efficient clip of three bulbs per minute, it could have taken him about five hundred hours or twenty-one days.

I’m told that there are efficient ways to locate a faulty bulb. Peter Parsons must have known just the right technique.

And yet, the story implies that six hours would have been a terrible inconvenience for this 47-year old, who surely would have had much better things to do at Christmas.

That terrible inconvenience, which many of us have experienced, has led to the creation of new and improved strings of lights, where one bulb can break without affecting the entire strand.

The other night, my husband and I wondered whether we should have bought that kind, when we unraveled a strand of twinkle lights that simply would not twinkle.

We needed the patience of a Peter Parsons...and at this time of year, sometimes we just don't have it.

The string of lights got me to thinking, though.

What would a city be like, if it completely stopped functioning when any one citizen couldn't keep going?

Just imagine. If one passenger on the subway car was hungry, everyone's stomach would start grumbling in unison, the car would grind to a halt, and everyone would hand out granola bars and apples so the car could get moving again.

I could continue with this metaphor, but pretty soon it would stop feeling just silly and start feeling very sad.

Because we know how much pain and suffering we cannot attend to, in our busy and well-lit lives.

We strive to be attentive and caring... and in the Toronto First community we are fortunate to have the time, the energy and the resources to help others.

At the same time, we are all too aware of the problems we can't fix.

As Jane Jacobs once wrote, "Being human is itself difficult, and therefore all kinds of settlements (except dream cities) have problems.

Big cities have difficulties in abundance, because they have people in abundance."

Indeed, the challenge of checking 91 thousand light bulbs pales in comparison to virtually any major social issue of our time.

Meeting the needs of the urban poor, isolated seniors, the mentally ill, victims of abuse or racial injustice...the strings of suffering seem to extend to infinity.

Peter Parsons probably knew to check one section of lights at a time, to find out where the problem was.

For us, social services and communities can structure as those “sub-strings” of lights.

Indeed, the nurturing of small communities such as this one, here at Toronto First, has been identified as a key factor in the building of “social capital”—the ability of communities to look after each other.

In the 2000 edition of his book “Bowling Alone,” Robert Putnam wrote:

“Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals,

...social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”<sup>1</sup>

That is to say: even in the face of problems that seem insurmountable, that involve the loss of “capital” in other forms, physical or financial...

The connections made between ordinary people can allow something to arise that may be even more valuable.

Putnam calls it “reciprocity and trustworthiness.”

I wonder if it might be called “friendship” or even “love.”

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000), 18.

You're probably familiar with the song,

“The toe bone connected to the foot bone  
Foot bone connected to the heel bone  
Heel bone connected to the ankle bone”...and so on.

You may not know, as I didn't, that the traditional last line of that song is “now hear the word of the Lord,” because it was an African American spiritual.

The lyrics were inspired by the Old Testament scriptures of Ezekiel, when the prophet finds himself in a valley of dry bones, and wonders how they may live again.

Following divine instructions, he speaks directly to the bones, telling them that God can breathe life into them.

After he speaks his prophesy, sure enough, the bones take on muscle and sinew and are rejoined again in new purpose.

The metaphor refers to the exiled people of Israel, who longed for a healing of the whole and a re-lighting of the way forward.

We hear echoes of that ancient scripture in many modern writers, including Wendell Berry, who writes in the preface to his novel “Remembering”...

“...keep my mind within that Mind of which it is a part, whose wholeness is the hope of sense in what I tell.

And though I go among the scatterings of that sense, the members of its worldly body broken,

Rule my sight by vision of the parts rejoined.

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We all long for that return to wholeness.

We struggle with our “strings of lights,”  
whether they be families in conflict  
where one broken circuit of communication affects the whole system...

Or our personal emotional universe,  
where one fear or wounded place casts a shadow over an  
entire day, or month, or year.

As we attend to those dark places,  
we hope to stay connected to a vision of the lights blazing again...

To give us the patience to hang in...  
through the times when little illumination is found.

Earlier this year, I was watching CP24 when a very interesting juxtaposition  
appeared on the screen.

The top story was something going on at City Hall.  
A prominent civic leader was behaving in a way that was less than brilliant.

Most of the screen was taken up with that story.

But in crawling text underneath, almost as a footnote, viewers could read the  
following:

“Scientists discover 8.8 billion suns in the Milky Way with planets the right  
temperature to sustain life.”

8.8 billion suns in our galaxy alone. Orbits by planets much like ours.

To say that puts things in perspective  
is not meant to minimize earthly suffering.

But it does suggest that we’re part of a string of lights  
more vast and complex than we ever imagined.

We glimpse it—and our own place in it—  
whenever we’re able to gaze at the night sky,

away from the overpowering artificial light we live with every day.

As many spiritual teachers and ordinary people have noticed, gazing up at those stars often doesn't make us feel unimportant...

...rather, it makes us feel integral to the Whole. In ways we can scarcely understand...but in ways that perhaps we can trust.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an American Episcopalian priest.

She wrote about the connection between religion and quantum physics in a book called "The Luminous Web."

She writes: "When I am dreaming quantum dreams, what I see is an infinite web of relationship, flung across the vastness of space like a luminous net.

What I see 'out there' is no different from what I feel inside.

There is a living hum that might just as well be coming from the furnace of the stars.

When I look up at them there is a small commotion in my bones, as the ashes of dead stars that house my marrow rise up like metal filings toward the magnet of their living kin."<sup>2</sup>

A small commotion in her "dry bones"...

Rising up in response to the prophetic voice of Interconnection itself.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are privileged to link the chain of wisdom that began at the dawn of time, and that will continue long after we as individuals leave this earth.

We are able to see how Jesus's teaching "As you do for the least of these, so you do for me" connects to the Buddha's "He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings"...

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2000), 54.

and the Prophet Muhammad's  
"Do you love your Creator? Love your fellow beings first."

All of these ancient teachings are in turn connected to a host of modern teachers, all of whom link arms in an ever-expanding circle of understanding.

I would suggest that just as the string of Christmas lights does not light up when one bulb is silent...

So the world does not light up when it is denied a voice of insight.

"Here in the cathedral of the world," to use the metaphor put forward by the late Unitarian minister Forrest Church, "truth is shining out from every window."

Not coincidentally, the greatest wisdom teachers all tend to emphasize both the importance of each individual...

...and the surrender or transcending of our own personal agendas, in service to the Whole of inter-being.

This "both/and" perspective affirms both the individual and the totality.

Each single shining light and the entire strand...

Which includes every light that is faulty, broken, troublesome...or absent.

As we wrestle with our tangled relationships and criss-crossed emotions, trying to create a life of meaning and purpose, we might find ourselves caught in the trap of looking for something to blame.

Where is that particular burned-out bulb?  
What problem can I fix, once and for all, so that everything goes smoothly?

As necessary as it is to attend to the challenges of life, to attend to the never-ending list of needs, both trivial and substantial...

Spiritual growth also calls us to look for that deeper current that connects everything, transforming our experience, whether it is going “well” or “poorly” by whatever measure we may use.

If the entire world is indeed a “cathedral” of wisdom, we can learn to draw nourishment from any experience and from all the people we encounter.

If this seems counter-intuitive, and it often does to me, I take comfort in the fact that very wise teachers have also found it difficult.

Ram Dass is an American spiritual teacher primarily influenced by the Hindu tradition.

In his book “Be Love Now,” he tells the story of being told by his teacher Maharaji to “love everyone and tell the truth.”

He responded, “I can’t. I don’t love everyone, so if I say so, it wouldn’t be the truth.”

His teacher simply looked at him kindly and repeated, “Love everyone, and tell the truth.”<sup>3</sup>

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These, then, are the holidays.

The holy days...

The days of wholeness.

Wholeness that includes both the beautiful and the broken,

The functioning and the dysfunctional,

The harmony and the discord,

The light and the dark.

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<sup>3</sup> Mirabai Bush, “Being Here,” review of Ram Dass *Grist for the Mill: Awakening to Oneness*, Shambhala Sun January 2014, 72.

These images, these metaphors, these stories we tell...

All serve to remind us that we belong,

And that we are all connected, one to another...

In the ongoing love story that is the human journey.

Amen.