

# “Expecting the Unexpected”

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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.

## Reading

“Expecting” (Jorie Graham)

The bells are ringing grammar  
the falling snow will not cohere around.

Two codes each to the other mute  
though we must hear them both at one.

And isn't it simple, our work,  
To link, to law together, breed,  
Invent the listening, the proof of god?

Oh love. This is a small way we  
have gone together.

The path is filling in  
to make us richer, isn't it?

The flakes, dry and astringent  
with the high depths  
Keep building on your lips.

If I were you I'd whisper them away.

If you would let me I would touch them off,  
Fingers quicker than wings.

But I know you better now.  
I would not.

**Sermon:**

**“Expecting the Unexpected”**

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“Believe in miracles.”

That was the wisdom I found in my fortune cookie.

We were eating at a Chinese buffet restaurant in Bismarck.

Danielle, Shawn, Reverend Debra Faulk from the Calgary Unitarian Congregation, and me.

We were still thawing out from the six hours we’d spent outdoors, gathering with others at Standing Rock in peaceful resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

We were grateful for the meal, having subsisted for some time on trail mix, protein bars and provisions from gas station convenience store.

We were grateful, too, that the all-season radial tires on Shawn’s Prius had just enough bite in them to prevent us from getting stuck in the Standing Rock parking lot...

That is, the snow-covered hills of the North Dakota plains.

Yes, we were grateful for that.  
And glad that we were on the journey.

A journey that might not qualify as a full-fledged miracle,  
but was certainly an unexpected occurrence.

## §

It was unexpected, to say the least, that all three of us felt called to go.

Several weeks ago, Chief Arvol Looking Horse of the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota nations called religious leaders around the world to an Interfaith Day of Prayer at Standing Rock on Sunday, December 4<sup>th</sup>.

Ever since the protests began there last spring, prayer has been a central part of the action.

A Presbyterian minister who visited the camp several times, described the experience as being “engulfed in prayer.”

“Prayer is central to all they do,” John Creasy wrote.  
“Prayer at the camp never ceases, prayer is what keeps them going.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, a month before we arrived, about four hundred clergy—many of them Unitarian Universalists—had already gathered at Standing Rock.

But even after that powerful presence, the Interfaith Day of Prayer on December 4<sup>th</sup> was still called for.

It might not seem unexpected for Chief Looking Horse to put out such a call...nor for so many clergy to respond...

But for us to respond. Now that was unexpected.

To start with, it was terribly inconvenient.

We drove for four solid days...  
at a time of year when we all are very busy.

We did that not so much to participate in a protest,  
but to join with others in prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> John Creasy, “Prayer and Community at Standing Rock”  
<http://johncreasy.blogspot.ca/2016/11/our-chevy-suburban-turned-left-onto.html?sref=fb>

That might seem unexpected, coming as we do from a congregation that, historically, has not always been keen on praying!

Our Congregational Covenant reads:

“Love is our doctrine...the quest for truth is our sacrament... and service is our prayer.”

But last Sunday, prayer was our service.

## §

The call came at the beginning of Advent, a time of anticipation...

And at the beginning of December, when our congregation is reflecting on the theme of “Expectation.”

It seems to me that “expectation” is something we human beings know quite a bit about.

If something or someone disappoints us, we might ask: “What did I expect?” with a cynical shrug of our shoulders.

Conversely, it’s said that holding high expectations—perhaps in a sense of hope or optimism—can be the key to having those hopes fulfilled.

The quote at the top of your Order of Service today comes from a whimsical children’s book called *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

It’s a book that appears on the Huffington Post’s list of recommended reading for people who are “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>2</sup>

The quotation reads, “Expectations is the place you must always go, before you get to where you’re going.”

It goes on to say that “some people never go beyond Expectations”...but that we’d be wise to do so.

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<sup>2</sup> Huffington Post, “26 Books for the Spiritual But Not Religious”  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/26-books-spiritual-not-religious\\_us\\_55d20905e4b055a6dab0d6e2](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/26-books-spiritual-not-religious_us_55d20905e4b055a6dab0d6e2)

In fact, I would argue that going “beyond expectations” is exactly what we’re called to do, in our personal journeys of spiritual growth.

By that I don’t mean going beyond expectations toward a place of over-achieving...which I’d venture to say some of us are prone to do...

But instead to expect the unexpected, which goes beyond our own limited and personal frame of reference...

To extend into the unexpected territories of deep intercultural relationship...

Of radical interdependence with the Earth and all its creatures...

And of deeper engagement with the Cosmos in all its mystery.

Indeed, to venture beyond expectations in this way may lead us to some unexpected places.

Places that may challenge our current expectations of what our lives really mean, and what our purpose may be.

## §

In the reading I shared before the hymn, called “Expecting,” the poet Jorie Graham writes:

“The bells are ringing grammar  
The falling snow will not cohere around.

Isn’t it simple, our work, to link, to law together. [...]

Oh love. This is a small way we have gone together.  
The path is filling in, to make us richer, isn’t it?”

In this poem, which I admit I found challenging at first, the writer lifts up a paradox of human life.

She points out that expectations are our human currency...

That it is our work to create expectations,

To define and fulfill expectations...

And yet, “the snow will not cohere.”

The falling snow from here to Standing Rock,  
that came in a blizzard this week...

The snow of the unexpected  
falls in chaotic and often mystifying ways...

And it fills in in our path of our days.

Sometimes it does so in ways that delight us  
in wonder and amazement.

Other times, it freezes us in our tracks.

## §

To expect the unexpected seems to me to “believe in miracles,”  
as my fortune cookie advised.

The writer Charles Eisenstein had something to say about miracles in light of  
Standing Rock.

In an article entitled “A Change of Heart,” he noted that the Water Protectors  
were counseled by the elders to “stay off the warpath” and to undertake every  
action prayerfully.

He said that this advice might lead to the kind of miracles our planet needs. He  
writes:

“A miracle is a kind of a gift, an occurrence that is beyond our capacity to *make*  
happen.

It is something beyond the normal rules of cause and effect, as we have  
understood them.

These include the rules of political and economic power, that determine what is practical and “realistic.”<sup>3</sup>

## §

Here in Canada, we’re grappling now with what is “realistic” in terms of our dependence on fossil fuels for the well-being of our economy.

As a culture, we have certain expectations of the kind of lifestyle we’d like to continue to lead—lifestyles that include extraordinary comfort and personal choice by global standards.

It goes without saying, unfortunately, that such a lifestyle of comfort and choice is not currently enjoyed by thousands of indigenous people in Canada’s First Nations communities...

Nor by the legions of the poor and disadvantaged in every corner of the world.

Meanwhile, climate scientists at NASA and elsewhere confirm that our planet is undergoing a “dramatic and ongoing surge in temperature.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s now known that the majority of the world’s oil and gas reserves must be kept in the ground in order to avoid global catastrophe.

The noted environmentalist Bill McKibben of 350.org writes:

“We have to keep 80 percent of the fossil-fuel reserves that we know about underground.

If we don’t—if we dig up the coal and oil and gas and burn them—we will overwhelm the planet’s physical systems, heating the Earth far past the red lines drawn by scientists and governments.

It’s not “we should do this,” or “we’d be wise to do this.”

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Eisenstein, “Standing Rock: A Change of Heart,”  
<http://charleseisenstein.net/standing-rock-a-change-of-heart/>

<sup>4</sup> “Our Planet’s Temperature Just Reached a Terrifying New Milestone,” Slate,  
March 12, 2016.  
[http://www.slate.com/blogs/future\\_tense/2016/03/01/february\\_2016\\_s\\_shocking\\_global\\_warming\\_temperature\\_record.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2016/03/01/february_2016_s_shocking_global_warming_temperature_record.html)

Instead it's simpler: "We have to do this."<sup>5</sup>

At Standing Rock, the Water Protectors stood up against the developers of the Dakota Access Pipeline specifically to protect *Mni Wichoni*, the Water of Life.

The concern was very real that the proposed pipeline would rupture, contaminating the water supply of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation.

And yet the call that went out, and the powerful prayers we witnessed around the sacred fire, were about so much more.

In August of this year, Chief Looking Horse wrote:

"Look around you. Our Mother Earth is very ill...and we are on the brink of destroying the possibility of a healthy and nurturing survival for generations to come.

In our prophecies it is told that we are now at the crossroads:

Either unite spiritually as a global nation, or be faced with chaos, disasters, diseases, and tears from our relatives' eyes.

I ask you to join me on this endeavor."<sup>6</sup>

## §

As I can attest, as someone who is seldom motivated to travel to faraway sacred sites...the call of Chief Looking Horse was remarkably powerful.

It led not only hundreds of interfaith leaders to join the thousands of Water Protectors already on the site...

But also thousands of veterans, who joined in an unprecedented act of peaceful solidarity,

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<sup>5</sup> Bill McKibben, "Why We Need to Keep 80 Percent of Fossil Fuels in the Ground." <https://350.org/why-we-need-to-keep-80-percent-of-fossil-fuels-in-the-ground/>

<sup>6</sup> Chief Arvol Looking Horse, "Important Message from Keeper of Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe," Indian Country Today Media Network 8/26/16

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2016/08/26/important-message-keeper-sacred-white-buffalo-calf-pipe>

Even offering a collective apology to the Sioux spiritual leaders for the many injustices that had been inflicted upon their people, by the U.S. military.<sup>7</sup>

It's been said that the fight against climate change is about power...not only the type of fuels we use, but the kind of leadership that holds power.

At Standing Rock, power came from sources that may have been unexpected...

Sources that can only be named as spiritual.

Writing in *The Guardian*, environmental activist Bill McKibben said that “at its heart, in the great camp that grew up along the rivers, [Standing Rock] was a largely spiritual resistance.”<sup>8</sup>

How unexpected it may seem that a “largely spiritual resistance” would have such a profound impact...

To halt the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, at least temporarily...

And to capture the attention of the world, and motivate people like us at First Unitarian Toronto to act.

To travel there.

To pray here.

And to give so very generously.

We hand-delivered about \$1,500 in cash to the people at the site.

## §

Perhaps it is not unexpected that indigenous leaders would be leading the environmental justice work needed now.

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<sup>7</sup> “The Story of the U.S. Veterans who apologized to for the U.S. Military at Standing Rock,” <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-veterans-north-dakota-ceremony-20161210-story.html>

<sup>8</sup> Bill McKibben, “The Victory at Standing Rock Could Mark a Turning Point,” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/04/standing-rock-victory-turning-point>

Indeed, Bill McKibben notes that:

“Indigenous organizers are some of the finest organizers around the globe – they’ve been key to everything from the Keystone fight to battling plans for the world’s largest coal mine in Australia.”<sup>9</sup>

At Standing Rock, we saw them do this through prayerful action. But exactly is meant by that?

“To be prayerful is to be in awareness of the sacred,” writes Charles Eisenstein.

We too easily forget the sacred, whether in relationship to human beings or to other-than-human beings like trees, soil, and rivers.

If prayer is sacred speech, then to act prayerfully is to be reverent in action as well as speech. The dehumanization that leads us onto the warpath is the opposite of reverence.”<sup>10</sup>

The elders guide us, therefore, to be unexpectedly open to love, humility and forgiveness...instead of acting in our expected ways of dividing, judging and conquering.

That is, to stand in more peaceful relationship within the “interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part,” to quote the Unitarian 7<sup>th</sup> Principle.

These are core messages, I believe, of all religious wisdom—which is why people praying around that sacred fire spoke in effectively one voice,

Whether they were UU, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Lakota, Chippewa...and the list went on.

Each in our own ways, we appealed to the Creator and the Creation...to the Ancestors...to Mother Earth and Father Sky...

To an embracing Love that extends beyond expectation and which has the power to heal and renew...

...much like the Water of Life, *nni wichoni*, itself.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Eisenstein, “Standing Rock: A Change of Heart”

Interestingly, right in the middle of the three-hour long outdoor prayer service, a flock of Canada geese flew directly overhead the sacred fire.

The helicopters and drones from the pipeline developers were buzzing around us...and still the geese flew.

Not 50 meters this way, nor 100 meters that way, but directly overhead.

As if they were expecting them, Chief Looking Horse and the other elders naturally looked up and saluted the geese, as did we all.

I cannot imagine a more powerful prayer.

## §

This stole still smells of the sacred fire at Standing Rock.  
I wish it always would.

But I know that it will be up to me to renew the sense of the miraculous that I glimpsed so briefly there.

It will be up to me to expect that unexpected change is possible...

And that my presence, my sense of call (as conflicted and intermittent as it often seems) may contribute to the transformation and healing of this world.

Charles Eisenstein writes: “With each choice we face, we are being asked what kind of world we want to live in.

The more courage required to make that choice, the more powerful the prayer.”<sup>11</sup>

## §

May we, then, dare to expect the unexpected.

To make choices that surprise even us...

To take the courageous steps that add up to the most powerful of prayers.

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<sup>11</sup> Eisenstein, “ Standing Rock: A Change of Heart”

May we believe in the miraculous nature of Love  
that unites all beings...

And may we offer ourselves in the service of justice  
for the Earth and all her peoples...

Now and for all generations to come.

Amen.

### **Closing Words**

Our closing words were written by  
Chief Arvol Looking Horse of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation:

“Know that you yourself are essential to this world.  
Understand both the blessing and the burden of that.

You yourself are desperately needed to save the soul of this world.  
Did you think you were put here for something less?

In a Sacred Hoop of Life, there is no beginning and no ending.”<sup>12</sup>

Go in peace.

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<sup>12</sup> Chief Arvol Looking Horse, “Important Message from Keeper of Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe,” Indian Country Today Media Network 8/26/16