

# “Joyful is the Dark”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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## Reading

Our reading this morning comes from the Cuban poet and political activist Mirta Aguirre. She lived from 1912 to 1980.

Her poem is called “All May Come.”

All may come by the roads  
we least suspect.

All may come from within, wordless  
or from without, burning  
and breaking itself in us, unexpectedly.

Or grow, as certain joys grow,  
with no one listening.

And everything may open one day  
in our hands

with wistful surprise  
or with bitter surprise

Unarmed, undressed,  
with the sadness of he  
who suddenly comes face to face  
with a mirror  
and doesn't see himself

And looks at his eyes and fingers  
and uselessly searches  
for his laughter.

And that's the way it is.

All may come  
in the most incredibly desired way  
so strangely far and coming

Not come nor leave  
when left behind and lost.

And, for that encounter,  
one must gather poppies,  
a sweet bit of skin, peaches or child  
clean for the greeting.

## Sermon:

“I am peace, and for the harvest,  
I have planted and will wait.”

That poignant line from Jim Scott’s somewhat challenging hymn  
echoes the image of peaches from Mirta Aguirre’s poem:

The harvest coming after a time of bitterness.

After a time when life has come not as we’d hoped...but simply  
come as it had.

When the search for laughter is “useless.”  
When all comes burning and breaking in us...

Even at such times, the poets tell us,  
all may come...

Even peace.

And indeed, even joy.

## §

It’s not accidental that the service called  
“Joyful is the Dark” comes late in our five-part series.

We had to work up to this one,  
because putting darkness and joy together  
can seem counter-intuitive to say the least.

We associate joy with bright sunshine,

exuberance, gladness.

We jump for joy, we exclaim in joy.  
In our culture, we praise the light.

We call insight “illumination.”  
We like to “see clearly now [and] see all obstacles  
in our way.”

We fear the dark and we avoid the dark...likely because our ancestors  
couldn't see predators lurking in the dark.

And so we found ways to create light.

It's been suggested, in fact, that many human problems began when  
we started to use artificial light, to gain control over the natural  
world.

That idea is explored more fully by a Zen Buddhist writer named  
Clark Strand, in a book called “Waking Up to the Dark.”<sup>1</sup>

Our use of the word “blindness” as a metaphor for lack of  
understanding has led us at times to disrespect and marginalize  
people who cannot see.

And the fear of the dark has likely contributed, as well,  
to generations of violent injustice  
against people with dark skin.

As for religion, in a book called “Learning to Walk in the Dark,”<sup>2</sup>  
Barbara Brown Taylor says that in the Western world, we've too  
often practiced “full-solar spirituality”—

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<sup>1</sup> Clark Strand, *Waking Up To the Dark: Ancient Wisdom for a Sleepless Age* (New York: Spiegel, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

That is, we've denied or pushed away the darkness of mystery, ambiguity, unknowing, fear and sadness...

...without recognizing the seeds of joy and wisdom they contain.

She writes "There's a light that shines in the darkness, which is only visible there..."

And that's the joy-in-darkness we're exploring today.

## §

Our modern, Western culture has tended to see life in a dualistic way that divides life into:

Good/bad,  
Right/wrong,  
Right/left,  
Joy/sorrow,  
Light and dark.

And yet, affirming the interdependent web of all existence, we know that light and dark are intertwined and indeed they are two balanced aspects of the whole.

Just think of the yin-yang symbol that brings light and dark together in beautiful balance.

Spiritual practice in all its forms, whether it be prayer, walking in nature, sitting in meditation or creating art....

Helps us break down our dividing mind.

We might even call it our “dividing and conquering” mind, because competitive and rejecting attitudes go along with dualistic thinking, too.

As we strive to grow  
in wisdom and maturity...

One of the things we hope to do  
is to integrate dark and light:  
to affirm the Wholeness that includes both.

As Carl Jung said: “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”<sup>3</sup>

## §

Of course, in this world, there’s more than enough darkness to command our attention.

I need not list for you the horrors confronting so many people in the world today...

We lift them up in our time of community sharing.  
We light candles of joy and sorrow.

There’s no way of knowing...  
but I suspect that many Sundays,  
when we light our candles in silence,  
there are more candles of sorrow among us than of joy.

We live with personal darkneses of  
anger, sadness, grief, regret.

Some struggle with depression.

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Many are coping with physical illness.

And through it all we seek some spark of hope...  
some spark of divinity we may call joy.

It may not come. At least, not right away, or in the way we hope for.

In fact in some situations the dark may become even darker...to the point that we wonder what will become of us...and we fear we may succumb to our anger, fear or grief.

We are like Jonah in the belly of the whale from the famous story in the Hebrew Bible.

It's a story also popular among Christians and included in the Qu'ran as well.

The man who does everything in his power to stay in the well-lit place of dry land and personal choice.

But instead, he's cast upon the waves of life and gobbled up by powerlessness, darkness and fear.

The good news is, Jonah's ordeal ends.

But not because of anything he does, mind you.  
The whale just spits him out!

He comes out transformed.

And he's able, now, unlike before,  
to truly serve the world, as he is deeply called.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Jonah 1 – 4

In so many “darkness stories,”  
whether mythological or historical...

The light at the end of the tunnel is one of service  
to others, after a difficult journey.

The majority of great wisdom teachers have gone through some great  
trial or loss...

Depression, professional failure,  
the tragic loss of loved ones, imprisonment and exile...these times of  
darkness are woven through the teachings of people we most  
admire...

A couple of people who’ve inspired me  
are Parker Palmer, who speaks openly of his  
history of depression...

...and Pema Chodron, whose life changed course entirely due to a  
painful and unexpected divorce.

It’s important to note here, that during the most difficult times of  
their life, they weren’t acting like inspiring spiritual leaders who have  
it all together  
(as if anyone ever does)!

No. They were just as overcome by  
sadness and fear as the rest of us are, at times.

They are people who endured great suffering,  
yet who somehow nurtured the spark within  
that allowed them not only to survive,  
but to serve, and with love.



I'd say we saw a glimpse of that on Thursday morning in the powerful and dignified testimony of Christine Blasey Ford, who publicly re-lived one of the darkest times of her life...

So that the rights of all women might be affirmed and upheld.

No matter what comes next, nothing can dim her honesty, strength and grace.

I find joy in that...and inspiration for the journey.

## §

When we are in desperate need of joy, sometimes we need to get closer to the dark.

One way to do that is to go to places either far away or close to home, where people's circumstances are not as comfortable as ours.

Where systematic and political injustice have led to poverty and suffering for so many.

Places like India, Haiti, Africa, downtown Toronto, and Canada's far north.

Like me, you may know people who have volunteered in each of these places and you may have done so yourself...

Doing simple work that can provide shelter,

food and education.

Today we celebrate 22 years of work in Central America by members of this congregation...

Including people like Alix Stones, whose moving testimony we heard earlier.

Speaking of the darkness he's witnessed over the years of his Guatemala and Honduras, Richard Kirsh told me that he saw up close the imbalance of power between landowners and labourers...

And the exploitation the labourers experienced, including the monetary exploitation of low wages, as well as sexual exploitation.

He spoke of a woman who was assaulted by the manager of the coffee estate the family lived and worked on...

...and of people who live on the city dump...

...saying that, "in a hot country, that's about as dark as it gets."

In Honduras, Richard told me, many people lack a safe water supply, drawing water from trickling stream that animals also use.

Some villagers didn't know to boil water.

Another source of heartbreak is the traditional way of managing the corn harvest: open storage...

...which means the weevils and rats get in and destroy value and sanitation of the crops that the villagers grow.

Listening to Richard, it occurred to me that in order to bring any new joy into this situation, one would have to see the darkness of the specific problems up close.

Fortunately, he tells me, even in the face of these large problems, little joys and small victories can be achieved relatively cheaply.

For example a micro-credit loan of \$75 can ensure that farmers do not lose the value of their crops.

Today, much good work is being done by non-government organizations in Central America, in partnership with indigenous organizations...to ensure the income, food, shelter and education needed for people's lives to improve.

You'll hear more about it, from Richard, later in the service.

Joys take root even in darkness...perhaps even especially in darkness.

And when we witness the resilience of the human spirit even in dark and discouraging times...

...that in itself may strengthen us to offer whatever we can, however small our offering, in the service of love.

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A few weeks ago on the CBC Radio program "Tapestry," Sister Helen Prejean spoke about how she stays connected to joy and meaning.

She's a Catholic nun who works with prisoners on death row, including those who have been wrongfully accused.

She's well-known for her book "Dead Man Walking."

You'd think that getting up so close to violence and death would take the joy out of Sister Helen.

But it seems the opposite is true.

She writes, “There’s a lot of pain out there.  
But staying strong requires reaching out to others.

You draw on that deep, deep part of your soul, which everybody has.

Some call it religion, some call it God,  
some call it deep soul strength,” Prejean says.

“We have different languages, but what makes it possible for that to happen is when we connect in community, not when we’re alone and isolated.”

“When all else fails,” she says,  
“Investing in something meaningful—beyond yourself—can help lift the darkness.

To wake up to something really big and then to devote yourself to it and keep learning about it, that’s light.

Something in us expands, and opens...”<sup>5</sup>

## §

Maybe that expansion in ourselves  
that Helen Prejean speaks of...

Is that part of ourselves that can hold joy and darkness  
together...that can see they were never separate from one another  
and that they never can be.

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<sup>5</sup> CBC Radio “Tapestry,” 9/10/2018 – “I’ve never felt more alive: Dead Man Walking author on how to thrive in dark times” <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/how-are-you-doing-really-1.4811963/i-ve-never-felt-more-alive-dead-man-walking-author-on-how-to-thrive-in-dark-times-1.4812017>

Maybe that “something in us that expands and opens”  
is the source of strength

that can allow us to get close  
to suffering and despair...

Whether it be that of others,  
or our own—

And stay present...

Moment by moment,  
Action by action,  
Breath by breath.

As the writer Wayne Muller tells us,  
“We are all painfully aware of how little we have to offer, given the  
weight and magnitude of the sorrow, injustice or pain we are [called  
to] witness [or] to heal.”

“After two life-threatening illnesses,” he writes,  
“I have learned to move slowly, to need and accept care, to  
remember the miraculous nourishment of the kind word, the hand  
upon hand, the simple company of two hearts breaking together.”<sup>6</sup>

This, it strikes me, is the essence of the  
joy-within-the-dark...

The potential it offers for love and compassion...  
The seeds of a new way of life...

Not built on shining accomplishments  
and blazes of light...

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne Muller, in *Leading From Within: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Lead*, Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, eds. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2007), 74.

But of quiet moments  
of loving attention...  
shadowed and uncertain...  
like so much of life itself.

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At the end of today's service we'll sing together the Spanish translation of a beloved hymn by Carolyn McDade.

Along with many other Unitarian Universalist songs, it's contained in a hymnbook called *Las Voces del Camino*—a publication that allows our faith tradition to be more inclusive, especially in the U.S. where UU congregations are much more numerous than they are in Canada.

Underlining this key idea: that the seeds of joy are deeply embedded within the most difficult of experiences...

We remember that this hymn was written not in a time of sunny optimism, but rather in a dark moment of fatigue, discouragement and despair.

It was from a place of vulnerability and surrender that this powerful piece of music arose...

Bringing solace, strength and joy to so many.

Please join me in singing Hymn #123, "Spirit of Life."

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