

“Turning Points”

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Winter Solstice
20 December 2020

UNEDITED COPY

Meditation Reading

“A solstice blessing” – Sheila Schuh

Your breath began long ago
before there were lungs and before there were trees,
your breath began in the darkness of gases
that hung a long long sky from your song.

Your bones are the bones of your ancestors
and before them, calcium in the seas.
Your bones have been shaped in the darkness of wombs
and long before, in matter flung far from your fingertips.

Your blood began in the flow of seas, dark and rough.

Before your tears, there was rain. And before your blood,
veins and springs and storms and the primordial deep.
Way deeper than your pulse.

Your curiosity began as lightening across the sky,
[and] your very nerves and every thought, every signal,
the descendants of explosions and cosmic firings.
Your insight and movement,
ancient energies that acted long before your smiling.

You are the very stuff of stars.
You are the dust left behind.
You are a solar event.
You are the keepers of time.
Your [siblings] hold their place and shine the sky above you,
and you no less, have such light inside you to offer the world.

Can you see that you are a child of the universe?

And that is why you know the earth is turning
and dawn is coming [as it always has].

Sermon

Well, by this time tomorrow, at 5:02 a.m., in fact,
the precise moment of the solstice will have come and gone.

From that moment on—at least until next June—
the days will grow longer.

The sun, now at its lowest point of the horizon,
will begin its slow but steady rise,
gifting to us more light with each passing day.

It is a turning point.

The small but significant shift
in the ever-ongoing “turning of the wheel”
that causes this spinning world of ours
to cycle through the seasons
that give shape to life on Earth.

So, we arrive here at the great gate of winter,
as the earth dances with the sun,
the star that gave us birth
and still gives life to us all.

*

You may have heard that the Winter Solstice
isn't the only big moment taking place tomorrow
in the sky above.

Just after sunset tomorrow night,
Saturn and Jupiter will come so close to one another—
at least from our perspective here on earth—

that they almost appear,
especially without a telescope or one's eyeglasses,
to be a large, super star, of sorts.

It saddens me that the forecast predicts clouds
for us here in Toronto.

And it's sad because this event
hasn't happened since 1623.
And before that the year 1226.

Which is to say that this isn't exactly something
that happens every day.

The rarity of the event is why it's called a Great Conjunction.

This will actually be the first time humans will be able
to see the coming together of these two planets
through a telescope, since the last time around,
397 years ago, telescopes weren't very advanced,
and the Great Conjunction of 1623
wasn't visible from the parts of the planet
where these new-fangled inventions existed at the time.

Down through the ages,
people have assigned meaning to such celestial events.

Some taking them to be omens.
Some trying to divine a message from the heavens.

Even today, some are calling this conjunction the "Christmas Star"
and suggesting it was a similar alignment of the planets
that was supposedly seen by the three "wise men"
in the traditional telling of the story of Jesus' birth.

Since I tend to take a more poetic than historical interpretation
of most anything found in the scriptures of any religion,
this feels to me like astronomical hair-splitting
to try to prove a theological point.

While this is a bridge too far for my own beliefs,
I do very much appreciate the human impulse
to look to the heavens to find guidance, or meaning,
or, like those wise men of old
trying to find their way to Bethlehem, reliable directions.

Of course, the stars overhead have long functioned
as a universal GPS system,
helping people to navigate the surface of our planet
by looking up above to the guidance provided by the stars.

This is a point Wade Davis,
the anthropologist who teaches at UBC,
made many years ago in his Massey Lectures,
which were titled *Wayfinders:*
Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World.

Davis's study of Indigenous cultures has led him to believe
that we are at grave risk of losing vital parts
of the vast archive of human cultural knowledge
that's been passed down through the generations.

He describes a far-reaching Polynesian civilization
that was in place some 3,000 years ago,
scattered across many of the more than 1,000 islands
in the central and southern Pacific Ocean.

The people of that time traveled between the islands,
crossing enormous distances of hundreds of kilometres,
in great seafaring canoes that could be
up to twenty metres long and seven metres wide.

Instead of a GPS or a detailed map,
they depended on the wisdom
of those who went before them
in order to find their way.

Lessons passed down from the elders
taught them how to navigate the open seas.

Lessons such as these that Davis describes¹:

[That] clouds... provide clues to the wayfinder—
their shape, colour, character, and place in the sky.

[That] light can be [studied],
the rainbow colours at the edge of stars,
the way they twinkle and dim with an impending storm,
the tone of the sky over an island,
always darker than that over open sea.

[That] a halo around the moon foreshadows rain,
for it is caused by light shining through ice crystals
of clouds laden with moisture.

[That] the number of stars within the halo
anticipates the intensity of the storm;
if there are fewer than 10, expect trouble,
high winds and torrential rain.

If a double halo surrounds the moon,
the weather will move in on the wings of a gale.

He goes on to say that such signs aren't only to be found by looking to the heavens,
but can be found here below, too:

Other signs are found in wildlife and seamounts,
as opposed to landmarks.

Dolphins and porpoises swimming toward sheltered waters
herald a storm, while the flight of a frigate bird
heading out to sea anticipates calm.

Pelagic birds like the albatross lead nowhere,
but others such as petrels and terns
travel fixed distances from their nests,
returning every night to land,
rising out of the waves at sunset,
their flight paths home as precise as compass bearings.

¹ Wade David, "Modern navigators, ancient Polynesian wisdom," *The Globe and Mail*, 9 October 2009.

To travel at night, these ancient wayfinders
would depend on their knowledge
of the predictable but changing placement
of the stars in the firmament.

Knowing where a particular star rose in the east
and where it set in the west gave sailors
a set of compass points—
points that helped them to get their bearings,
to know where they were at,
and where they were going.

Sadly, such deep-seated knowledge is largely lost
to so many of us in the modern world.

Sure, our scientists have helped us
to map out our corner of the universe,
but our technical knowledge is somewhat different
from having an understanding gained
through a deeply-felt dependence
on the stars to make it home.

What Wade Davis argues
is that for all of our technological advances,
we are impoverished without this deeper way of knowing.

I take in a similar truth from David Wagoner's story of a poem
titled "The Silence of the Stars,"
in which he tells the story of Laurens van der Post,
the South African Afrikaner writer and farmer,
and his experience in southwestern Africa.

Here's how Wagoner's poem describes the situation²:

When Laurens van der Post one night
In the Kalahari Desert told the Bushmen
He couldn't hear the stars
Singing, they didn't believe him. They looked at him,

² David Wagoner, from *Traveling Light*.

half-smiling. They examined his face
To see whether he was joking
Or deceiving them. Then two of those small men
Who plant nothing, who have almost
Nothing to hunt, who live
On almost nothing, and with no one
But themselves, led him away
From the crackling thorn-scrub fire
And stood with him under the night sky
And listened. One of them whispered,
Do you not hear them now?
And van der Post listened, not wanting
To disbelieve, but had to answer,
No. They walked him slowly
Like a sick man to the small dim
Circle of firelight and told him
They were terribly sorry,
And he felt even sorrier
For himself and blamed his ancestors
For their strange loss of hearing,
Which was his loss now. On some clear night
When nearby houses have turned off their visions,
When the traffic dwindles, when through streets
Are between sirens and the jets overhead
Are between crossings, when the wind
Is hanging fire in the fir trees,
And the long-eared owl in the neighboring grove
Between calls is regarding his own darkness,
I look at the stars again as I first did
To school myself in the names of constellations
And remember my first sense of their terrible distance,
I can still hear what I thought
At the edge of silence where the inside jokes
Of my heartbeat, my arterial traffic,
The C above high C of my inner ear, myself
Tunelessly humming, but now I know what they are:
My fair share of the music of the spheres
And clusters of ripening stars,
Of the songs from the throats of the old gods
Still tending ever tone-deaf creatures
Through their exiles in the desert.

Dare I ask, my fellow travellers,
whether you yourself know anything of this song?

Whether you can hear the singing of the stars?

What signs and wonders do you behold in the night sky?

And just where do you turn to get your bearings,
when you're not sure of which way to go?

These are, I believe, deeply spiritual questions.

For they seek to know whether we are truly connected
to the earth, to the universe, to the force of life itself
that across billions of years has brought each one of us into being.

We moderns pay a great price,
to ourselves and the planet,
to live as we do.

The Bushman of the Kalihari would surely pity our poverty, too.

*

That's why, the older I get,
the more important Solstice becomes for me.

It is a sacred time that invites me
to renew my relationship with the universe,
that calls me to ever-deepening connection with the web of life
as understood in its widest possible frame.

That's the gift I took from the meditation words I shared earlier from Sheila Schuh—
an invitation for us to understand who we really are.

To know ourselves as children of the universe.

Sure, this may be a lesson we likely learned
in a technical way in a high school science class.

But our task in this season, and I would suggest in this lie,
is to learn this lesson on a deeper level,
and on the vastest possible scale.

Your breath began long ago
before there were lungs and before there were trees,
your breath began in the darkness of gases
that hung a long long sky from your song.

Your bones are the bones of your ancestors
and before them, calcium in the seas.

Your bones have been shaped in the darkness of wombs
and long before, in matter flung far from your fingertips.

Your blood began in the flow of seas, dark and rough.

Before your tears, there was rain. And before your blood,
veins and springs and storms and the primordial deep.
Way deeper than your pulse.

Your curiosity began as lightening across the sky,
[and] your very nerves and every thought, every signal,
the descendants of explosions and cosmic firings.

Your insight and movement,
ancient energies that acted long before your smiling.

Which is to say that the stars that fill the sky are our ancestors.

We are descended from the heavens.

We are of stardust made.

This is, of course, true of everyone and everything we know.
Every last speck of the universe that surrounds us.

But there's something about taking in this truth
that can change the way we understand ourselves,
one another, and the delicate gift of life
bestowed to us at birth,

that we are blessed and burdened
to serve and sustain with all of our being.

So, may we learn to study the skies,
that we may find our bearings in this wide universe
and come to more deeply honour life on this,
our “blue boat home.”

The hymn we’ll sing to close this morning’s service
was inspired by a scene from Robert Heinlein’s
science-fiction classic *The Green Hills of Earth*,
in which a blind poet on a spaceship
composes a ballad of yearning for:
“one more landing on the globe that gave us birth.”

His song ends:
“May we rest our eyes on the fleecy skies
and the cool green hills of earth.”

That poignant image was set to music
and lives now in our hymnal
as an affirmation of our Seventh Principal,
that calls us to respect “the interdependent web of life,
of which we are a part.”

Whether we find ourselves looking up at the stars,
or somehow looking from a spaceship back down on the earth,
may we not fail to grasp the message,
to see the signs, to take in the one and only omen
that there’s really ever been:
that as children of the universe,
we are all in this together,
and we always have been.

Let us, then, endeavour always to dwell together in peace.

Blessed Be.