

SUNLIGHT AND SHADOW

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*I came really close to naming the two recently-hatched bald eagles at the National Arboretum. **Sunlight and Shadow**, good names I thought appropriate for 2016. It's really a shame I didn't notice when the contest closed.*

The winning names were *Liberty and Freedom*. Now I think these are good words to describe the foundations of our democracy and they are important words that remind us of being good citizens of the United States of America. *Liberty and Freedom* are familiar words and values that remind me of what most of us were taught in school way back when we were children -- and civics was a larger part of the K-12 curriculum. I remember thinking when I was eight or nine that one of the most important responsibilities I would have in being grown up was to be a good citizen.

These days when I hear Liberty and Freedom linked together like *bacon and eggs* or *sugar and spice*, I regret that my mind has been conditioned to think of *Liberty and Freedom* -- September 11 -- and then to associate *Liberty and Freedom* with hyper-oxygenated patriotic extremism in political rallies and in King of the Hill speeches about America's dominating not only the world stage but also all the players on the stage.

Simple soul that I am, I like more modest, more nuanced words because we are living in uncertain times that invite thoughtful reflection about our wonderful, fragile, changing world with its unsettling feeling of us being in *in-between times*.

The eagle is a handsome bird I enjoy seeing as it soars and glides and swoops around the skies of Door County or above the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. I admit the eagle's dietary preference for dead and decaying flesh complicates my affection for a bird of prey as our national symbol. For me, my own patriotism overwhelms me in our driving back and forth to Colorado: spacious skies...amber waves of grain...purple mountains majesties...fruited plains...a thoroughfare for freedom...confirm thy soul in self-control...

I remain moved by all of us mortal human beings, most of us doing about the best we can do most of the time...aspiring and falling short...ying and yang... ..living and reliving the stories of our lives. **Sunlight and Shadows** reveal the truths of our lives.

I reside in ambiguity. I am a complicatedly happy person, which I think is probably a harder thing to be than an uncomplicatedly happy person. Hope. Despair. Contentment. Anxiety. Spring blooming all around us. Our planet is in trouble. Some relationships simpatico. Some relationships and allegiances tattered. Sunlight and Shadow. The light changes by the minute, by the hour, by the season. Frilly, shimmering maple seeds wait to be born to the wind one day soon.

Our lives have rhythms. Our relationship with others have rhythms, interludes of sunlight and shadow. Sunlight can illuminate or obscure. Sunlight can help or harm. Shadows can frighten or soothe. All is in flux. All is in process; not much is fixed. These things are what I think about, read about, worry about, converse about, care about. Sometimes it feels burdensome, other times it doesn't. It's always interesting!

Although we will sing Hymn 17 *Every Night and Every Morn* later this morning, I avoided choosing that hymn for several years in my ministry.

Every night and every morn
some to misery are born;
every morn and every night
some are born to sweet delight.

Joy and woe are woven fine,
clothing for the soul divine:
under every grief and pine
runs a joy with silken twine.

It is right it should be so:
we were made for joy and woe;
and when this we rightly know,
safely through the world we go.

I was pained by the lyrics because the sorting into paired polar opposites *misery and sweet delight* being destined at birth -- some shackled from birth unceasingly until death -- and others welcomed to a lifelong journey with sweet delight. I reject that fixed sense of destiny, but I do grant that the deck is stacked. I also know that every life has its own sunlight and shadows. Hymn 17 feels like a hymn of compassion and a lifelong call to action or, at least, paying attention. It probably feels different to people who feel that the deck is stacked in their favor – or the deck is stacked against them. Joy and woe are woven fine. Sunlight and shadows.

In a way that surprised me, SUNLIGHT AND SHADOWS took its own path into one subset of ministry: chaplaincy. People aren't as likely to be in the presence of a chaplain if everything is going well with their lives – unless they live in a retirement community. I'm familiar with several chaplains who provide thought-provoking classes and programs and inter-faith awareness and are a welcoming presence to people in transition. I really like and admire Joy Zakrzewski, the chaplain at Scand and now an occasional highly-valued speaker here. She has been very supportive of Bob Lindahl's and my presence and participation in the Northern Door ministerial group. I was moved by her asking a year or so ago if she could talk with me about how to be more effective at Scandia in talking with people whose primary language and images were not Christian. For decades, I have been intentional about seeking how to be more effective speaking to people who ARE Christians.

During the preparation of this sermon, I've been flooded with memories of my three-month chaplaincy at Parkland Hospital in Dallas and some chaplaincy visits to a private mental health facility, also Dallas in 1985. And I've been thinking a lot about the next two Sunday afternoons when I'll be officiating at the worship service at Scandia Village in the chapel in the Care Center (though all residents of Scandia may come). As still happens from time to time, I feel unsettled about whether 65 years of speaking Unitarian (and later Unitarian- Universalist) – grounded in multilingual/multifaith religious language and images -- will be accessible when I am speaking to people whose entire lives have been lived with the language and images of Christianity.

When I am asked to officiate at a wedding, I am often told in Conversation#1: “We are not religious, but we are spiritual.” On the other hand, a recent inquiry about participating in a service of the celebration of a life that has ended wanted to be assured that I would not speak

Christian. Exploring religious language has been a subtext of my career in the ministry, which officially and ceremoniously began with my ordination at the First Unitarian Church of Dallas 25 years ago next month. (The next time I see Father Dave Ruby, I will compare dates with him because I saw in our local papers this week that he, too, is celebrating the 25th anniversary of his ordination.)

My Masters of Divinity was earned in a four-year Masters of Divinity program at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where we were living at the time. In my first year of seminary, in my first private meeting with my advisor, he mentioned my reluctance to speak in class. I admitted I felt like a visitor, a guest in the seminary whose mission was the preparation of United Methodist ministers. He said, “You have paid your money. This is your seminary, too. We welcome your full participation in your journey to become a Unitarian Universalist minister.” He was my Old Testament professor, too, and I think he may have heard me say, “Oh, I didn’t know THAT came from the Bible!” He said it was more fun to teach someone who was really interested in the subject than someone who arrived in seminary thinking they knew everything.

I value having been in a Christian seminary because I was quite ignorant about the Judeo-Christian origins of Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism. At Perkins I found friends, attended chapel services, sang in the Choir, and realized I had to figure out whether I would take communion or not. I decided to take communion, was not struck by a lightning bolt, and really liked the experience of a ritual that offered the opportunity to begin again, an invitation to feel momentarily unburdened of everything that I experience as a burden. I believe that UUs are frequently more heavily burdened by the cumulative woes of the world --past, present, and future-- than most people are on such issues as slavery, inexcusable behavior toward Native people who lived here long before we arrived, racial intolerance, and desecration of the Earth. I found communion a mentally sound practice of laying burdens down for awhile. I wrote my first Seminary-era poem about “Laying Things on the Altar”, knowing they would be there when I was ready to pick them up again. I think the closest Unitarian Universalism comes to offering a ceremony of starting anew is our occasional ceremony around January 1, the burning of small pieces of paper upon which we have written what we would like not to carry forward into the new year.

At Perkins I questioned what I didn't understand. "What is the stem of Jesse? "Why do you (?????) A professor I knew slightly said my questions made him realize how much he accepted with no idea of why they did what they did.

In the first semester of my second year I was enrolled in preaching class. I saw my first United Methodist lectionary...news to me... unprepossessing stapled sheets of paper, a five-year cycle of a calendar telling people what the topic and what the OT and NT passages were for each Sunday. Our preaching class sometimes required that our sermons were based on the lectionary, a very foreign concept to me.

I labored long and hard and delivered my first sermon to my classmates and professor. I recall there being a lengthy silence after my sermon, and finally an African American man said courteously, "That was interesting, but where was the sermon?" My professor said I came from a different tradition, that of the learned scholar who researches and prepares and revises a written sermon rather than counting on the Spirit to animate her in the moments of preaching. He said that's why her language is so carefully developed with beautiful phrases. She would lose that if she waited to have the Spirit put the words in her mouth as she came to the pulpit."

I served a six-month internship at the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis in my third year of seminary. The minister, Earl Holt, said that some interns say, "What's a sermon to be ABOUT?" Only one answer: "About twenty minutes." It was a major adventure and I chose the right mentor – even if it was 800 miles away from my family in Dallas.

About a week after returning to my family in Dallas, I began a three-month internship at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, at that time a licensed 934-bed primary care center for Dallas County, built in 1954, a huge sprawling destination for post-graduate medical training, physically connected by walkways to three other hospitals, with a large permanent staff of chaplains and a large program for a limited number of chaplains-in-training. I wanted to go there because I thought it would be the most demanding program and teach me the most. On my first day, I asked the head of the chaplain department whether I was expected to carry a Bible. He said, "No. It is our intention that a chaplain should enter a patient's room prepared to be a listening presence responding to whatever the words and images of the person are." I was surprised. I never knew whether Dallas citizens knew that all chaplains at Parkland don't carry Bibles.

In my first private meeting with the supervisor of the chaplains she said, “Why are you here? You seem so, so suburban.” I said, “I am here because I am so, so suburban. In my life I have known people who have died of illness, old age, accidents, and cancer, but I have never known people who were hurt by other people on purpose. I feel this internship is a door into trying to understand things I need to know and understand as a minister.”

I remember my co-worker Doug’s gift of the small NT into which was tucked a very small, accurate map of Parkland’s floor plans, elevators, departments, corridors, etc. that he had made. It was very helpful. Later he told me that his scarred face and arms had resulted from his stepfather’s careless toss of gasoline onto a fire, burning Doug badly when he was a boy. He said that was why he tried to go through life being very careful, always knowing where he was.

At Parkland, the Chaplain’s office received news of deaths in the hospital and a chaplain hurried to the room to escort the body to the morgue, accompanied by a nurse and attendant who guided the sheet-covered body through the halls and elevators to the morgue. On my first day, I think I accompanied six or seven bodies to the morgue. The huge chilly room with a dozen or more carts and a corner of small containers for babies, full-term or pre-term. Chaplains were the only people with the responsibility of checking the body into and out of the morgue, rolling the cart into the morgue, checking toe tags, signing the charts we signed for the “ins” and, later, for the “outs” to the funeral home. I got used to the fact that the “outs” were often rather chatty times as the funeral home personnel did their work as I was doing mine. I’d imagined that I would have started my duties with patients recovering from broken legs, then maybe go on to post-op surgeries, maybe gall bladders. It was a shock to start with the newly dead. During my time at Parkland, I noticed who would or wouldn’t enter the elevator when it opened and they saw a couple people and a sheet-covered body on a gurney.

Chaplains were the only people in the hospital who didn’t always have specific tasks assigned to them and were encouraged to roam and move into and out of their generally-assigned areas but free to go anywhere, a minister without portfolio. I believe I had more adventures and more interesting conversations than most of the other chaplains in training. When I was asked to pray with people, I often took their hands as I asked them what they wanted to pray for and proceeded to hold up their hopes and their trust in a caring God. I was a good listener, interested in however the conversation evolved, trying always to be an unhurried caring presence.

I remember the post-op visit with an enthusiastic woman who told me that Jesus had operated on her last night, in the operating room guided the hands of her doctor – and this morning had given her a spectacular sunrise. I made several visits one night a pregnant woman waiting for her baby to be born dead, a woman who asked me if God had killed the baby because she wasn't married. Chaplains weren't supposed to insert their opinions and beliefs, but that night I assured her that was not why the baby had died.

Several times I visited a man who may have weighed a lot more than 400 pounds, a man who had come to the hospital for problems with his feet, which then had led to more surgeries, and now he was immobilized on his back because turning him took so many staff members that it didn't happen often enough. He didn't want to talk about himself or the fact that he knew he was going to die in the hospital but, instead, wanted to tell me some new joke or story when I visited. When I wasn't roaming the hospital, I often went to the nursery where the tiniest babies were in their incubators or walked around, profoundly moved by how tiny these humans were. I meditated about how my idea of what humans beings looked like was expanded by thinking about the three-ounce babies and the four hundred pound man.

I was present when the life support of a too-tiny baby was turned off, in the presence of two parents and one grandparent, and I inked the baby's foot after he died for the certificate that honored the fact that he had been born. I was present for another situation where the decision had been made to remove all life support from a child, and I watched from a little distance away something related to the well-publicized crime drama. A young African American mother, shackled, dressed in the orange jail uniform, escorted down the long hall with guards on both sides of her, all of us to be present when her daughter was taken off life support, the second of her child to die because she had left all four children alone one evening and a fire killed some (or all??) of them. She was very young, and I sensed that she had never been the singular focus of eight or ten people assembled to proceed in the conclusion of a front page news story of a drama that involved her. At that moment she was treated respectfully as the mother. An emotionally-complex event.

I had several conversations with a nude woman who had shed all her clothes because she was too hot in the rooms, most of which were not air conditioned back in 1990. She was in the hospital for a long time to recover medically after jumping out of a tower in a parking garage in advanced pregnancy. What made these visits especially difficult was the fact that the nursing staff seemed deeply angry with the woman and didn't seem as committed to her medical well-

being as most nurses were about patients. I realized later it would have been a good thing if I had spent more time talking with the nurses, a caring listening presence, since it was not only patients to whom we tried to be available.

Mid-program I checked out a book about body language and ethnic preferences for personal space and things like that. I noticed that African American men backed several inches away from me while we were conversing. I regret the time I approached an Asian man who was moaning loudly and I held out my hands to him intending to communicate compassion and, instead, caused him to leap back in alarm in danger of yanking out the needles and tubes.

Here, I refer to my family home during those months I was at Parkland because our son Bruce likes to act out my terrifying approach to the Asian man. I took Al and all three of our children, one at a time, for a tour of Parkland, some parts of the tour planned and other surprises in the Emergency Room, including walking past a man who was leaving the Emergency Room because they hadn't yet gotten to him to remove the bullet. I wondered where he would go. That I knew where I was going as I walked each of them comfortably in and around that huge public hospital was pretty interesting to them.

One night I was called to the emergency room because a man had come there asking for someone to anoint him with oil to forgive his sins. I remember trying to figure out how to proceed. The ER nurse gave me a small sealed cup of baby oil and I quietly asked him some questions and did my best to help a troubled man have some respite from his demons.

The emergency room pace was frantic and efficient, and I understood the deliberate pace because the staff couldn't work at a fast pace for eight hours. While I sometimes spent time with men under the influence of drugs or alcohol, lined up on gurneys along the walls of the ER, it appeared to me as if those patients seemed to them like a low priority, a group they didn't hasten to serve.

I was the only chaplain on overnight duty for the whole hospital one night, a night when a young man arrived having shot himself in the head and wasn't expected to arrive and was a potential organ donor. I sat in on the surgeons' conversations with the family and on the next day received permission to be present for the harvesting of his organs, the only chaplain who had ever requested that.

The chaplains sometimes "debated" how and whether the chaplain that was on solo duty directly affected the entire hospital during their shift. Some chaplains on their solo had gangs fighting in the waiting room, many automobile accidents, multiple ambulances bringing the

wounded and numerous helicopters arriving on the hospital roof. I think I would have been considered to “cause” a pretty peaceful environment on my watch, well, maybe except for the Gunshot Wound to Head.

Parkland Hospital was an intense microcosm of life and death, suffering and healing and enduring, far, far, far more interesting than hospital shows on television, a real world where each one of the hundreds and hundreds of patients were treated each day, 24 hours every day. It was challenging and exhilarating. I am not an addict, but the closest thing would be the thrill and intense high of crisis, my experience being that about three times every day I experienced the feeling of having been pushed off a cliff and had no idea what to say or do next but I had to say or do something within the next 15 seconds. Sunlight and shadows.

Revisiting that time and those incredible challenges. It’s been a good week to think upon these things. Sunlight and shadows.

Let me close with two quotations attributed to William Blake:

- 1) “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.”
- 2) “In the universe, there are things that are known, and things that are unknown, and in between, there are doors.”