

Light in Darkness

a sermon by

The Rev. Bryan Jessup

The Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Bayside, California

Sunday December 22, 2013

I have been one acquainted with the night. I have walked out in rain -- and back in rain. I have out-walked the furthest city light. I have been one acquainted with the night.

I have looked down the saddest city lane. I have passed by the watchman on his beat and dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain. I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet when far away an interrupted cry came over houses from another street, but not to call me back or say good-bye;

And further still at an unearthly height, a luminary clock against the sky proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right. I have been one acquainted with the night. (Robert Frost)

Robert Frost knew winter and darkness, didn't he? And so did Sylvia Plath. And so did Abraham Lincoln. And so did Emily Dickenson. And so do you and I.

When I was in seminary, I went to Ron Cook, my advisor at Starr King – and said, *Ron, I am really depressed.*

He asked me what was going on and I told him.

My world was falling apart. The bright, capable woman I'd married right out of college and I had wrecked our marriage. It wasn't as if we hadn't worked on it. We had. But we were not good for each other. And lit was over. We'd been married eleven years. We had two amazing little daughters. It was loss, loss, loss all around And it hurt. And true to my narcissistic self – I focused on me and I felt like a bad person and a failure.

While we sorted our way through things, my daughters stayed with me while their mom went to live in San Francisco and get her bearings. I took the girls to school and pre-school. In the mornings, I worked at the pre-school where my younger daughter was enrolled. In the afternoon, both of my daughters were there for extended day care – while I went to classes at Starr King.

I picked them up and took them home. Fixed dinner. Helped with homework. Read stories. Got everyone ready for bed. Tucked them in.

By 8:30 or so I was ready to begin studying – or paying bills – or doing laundry – or cleaning bathrooms or whatever I wanted to do. But it was difficult for me. I was tired. I just ached.

My advisor Ron Cook listened to this and said: *So you're feeling depressed huh?* And I said yes. And he said: *Good. With all you're experiencing right now you'd be crazy if you weren't depressed. Sit with it. Don't run away from it. Life really hurts sometimes and all we can do and still be honest is sit with it and take it one step at a time.*

That's when I became one acquainted with the night. That particular round of night lasted for four years. For four years, in quiet moments, I often felt as if I had an anvil on my chest.

Mercifully, I was not alone. Edie took me on as a project at about that time. (Talk about both brave and foolhardy! She was.) And she taught me about a different kind of love in the world - A love that is as steady and dedicated as the circling of the earth. A love that calls for the conscious extension of ourselves for the sake of our own and one another's well-being – body, mind and spirit.

My pain did not go away immediately on us getting together and neither did hers from her previous adventures and misadventures in life. But we both worked with a very tough psychiatrist – and labored to learn to just sit with the pain and not hide it and not deny it. Just sit with it and center our in hearts and do what seemed right to do...one step at a time.

Viktor Frankl, many of you already know, was another person acquainted with the night – in more devastating ways than most of us. Born in 1905, Victor Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist. He was Jewish. He lost most of his family in the Holocaust but he survived. He survived Auschwitz, Dachau and Turkheim. His book *Man's Search for Meaning* is the story of how he survived. And his experience led him to believe we human beings can find light and ways to meaning in nearly any setting, even when things are darkest.

So since our theme today is “Light Out of Darkness” I want to share with you some of Dr. Frankl's wisdom.

“Ultimately,” he says “When we're in darkness, we should not ask what the meaning of his life is. We should recognize, instead, that in the darkness we are being asked by Life what meaning we will make of it.”

“In a word, he says” - “each of us is being questioned by life all the time. We are challenged by life to respond by being responsible. And I believe” (he says) “that we must live as if we were living already for a second time and as if we had acted the first time just as wrongly as we are about to act now!” (adapted)

So how might we do better? How might we bring ourselves to consciousness that – even in darkness - each moment offers us another opportunity to create a response in keeping with what we truly value?

Victor Frankl says we grow (even in darkness) through purposeful work, courage and love.

“It is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way.” Victor Frankl says: “We can’t answer by sweeping statements. Life does not mean something vague. It means something very real and concrete, because life’s tasks are very real and concrete. The specific questions we are asked form our destiny. And the questions are different and unique for each individual.

No person and no set of questions can be compared with any other person or any other set of questions. No situation repeats itself, and each situation calls for a different response.

How did Victor Frankl respond?

Before and after the war, he worked as a respected physician, psychiatrist, researcher and author.

During the darkness of the war – in 1942 - he his wife, and his parents were deported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto. There he worked as a general practitioner in a clinic until his skills in psychiatry were noticed. Then he was assigned to the psychiatric care ward. In that unit he organized groups to help ghetto newcomers deal with shock and grief. He set up a suicide watch. He offered a series of open lectures, including such topics as "Body and Soul," "The Psychology of Mountaineering", and "How to Keep My Nerves Healthy."

In October of 1944, Dr. Frankl and his wife Tilly were transported to Auschwitz. Then, she was kept there and he was moved to Dachau where he spent five months working as a slave laborer. In March of 1945 he went to Türkheim, where he worked again as a physician until April 1945 when the camp was liberated.

Meanwhile, his wife Tilly went to Bergen Belsen where she died. His father had died in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. His mother was killed in Auschwitz, and his brother Walter died in Auschwitz. Apart from him, the only survivor of his family was his sister Stella who had escaped to Australia.

“In darkness - don’t aim at success” Victor Frankl says, “The more we aim at success and make success a target, the more we are going to miss it. Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued.

It must pursue us, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of our dedication to a cause greater than ourselves or as the by-product of our surrender to a task or the welfare of a person other than ourselves.

Happiness must happen in the course of our work, and the same holds for success. We have to let it happen by not caring about it. We have to listen to what our conscience commands us to do and go on to carry it out to the best of our knowledge and ability. Then if we live, we will live to see that in the long run—success will follow us precisely because we had forgotten to think of it. (adapted)

In 1942, when his sister escaped to Australia Victor Frankl was granted a visa to the United States. He could have been home free too. Emigration would have gotten him out of harm's way and also would have enabled him to continue his psychiatric work in a free and unabated intellectual environment.

The one thing that emigration would not allow him to do, however, was to help his family. He would have to leave them to fend for themselves in Vienna. So finding himself at this crucial impasse, he went for a long walk around the city. When he arrived at home, he saw that his father had just recovered a piece of wreckage from a local synagogue that had been destroyed by the Nazis. As it happened, the wreckage contained an inscription of one of the Ten Commandments. It said: "Honor thy father and mother." The moment he saw the inscription, he said, he knew exactly what he had to do.

And he knew what he had to do because, ultimately for him, in the face of all the darkness in the world – the guiding light was love.

"Love goes very far beyond the physical person." – he says. "It finds its deepest meaning in the spiritual being, in the inner self. Whether or not a person is actually present, whether or not a person is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance. We can still love." (adapted)

He continues to tell a story of his slave labor in Dachau:

"We were at work in a trench" he says. "The dawn was grey around us; the sky was grey; the snow was grey - the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad was grey, and so were all their faces.

I was conversing silently in my mind with my wife maybe, or perhaps I was struggling to find the reason for my sufferings and my slow dying.

And then, somehow in a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt my spirit transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious "Yes" in answer to my question about the existence of an ultimate purpose.

And at that moment, literally, a light was lit in a distant farmhouse, which stood on the horizon as if painted there.

“Et lux in tenebris lucet” — *I thought!* “*And the light yet shineth in the darkness.*”

For hours I stood hacking at the icy ground. The guard passed by, insulting me, and he couldn't hurt me. Because I was communing with my beloved and because more and more I felt that she was present, there with me;

Her presence was so strong, I had the feeling that I was able to touch her, able to stretch out my hand and grasp hers. She was there. I knew she was there. And then, at that very moment, literally, a bird flew down silently and perched just in front of me, on the heap of soil which I had dug up from the ditch, and looked steadily at me.

“Et lux in tenebris lucet” — “*And the light yet shineth in the darkness.*”

We cannot make winter and darkness go away my friends.

We cannot even pursue the light.

We can only experience our experience honestly and call ourselves to faithfully do our work, to courageously choose the best responses we can, and to leave our hearts open for love. Then – as we do – the light in its own time comes round.

This time of year, in the Northern Hemisphere we like to remember that. And we like to hear the ancient words of the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah who says:

Now the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. And upon those who have dwelled in the valley of the shadow of death, a great light shined For unto us a child is born, and unto us a new hope is given.

In days gone by – that new hope may have been called Judah Macabee or Rabbi Hillel or Rabbi Jesus – or cross culturally maybe it was called Mohammed or Buddha or Rumi or Lao Tzu.

More recently, though, that new hope has taken to appearing like a sudden light in a farmhouse window. Or like a little bird that flies down and lands on a heap of despair and looked steadily at a man and (I swear to god) brings his dead wife alive for him in his heart.

So now – among other names – maybe that new hope that comes to us is called Victor Frankl.

And if it is – (and I think it is) Victor Frankl tells us from his experience deep in the darkness and gloom – that the name of that new hope is you and me too. And he tells us if we do the meaningful work we are called to do – if we make the courageous choices that come to us to make – and if we put everything on the line for love – the light will follow

So brave hearts – may we continue to be true. May we do our work, make courageous choices, repent our errors, try again and keeping giving everything we have for justice and love. And as we do....may the light come soon. – Even as we journey on, may the light come soon.

PLEASE STAND NOW AS YOU ARE WILLING AND ABLE AND JOIN IN SINGING
#226 – People Look East.

Extinguishing the Chalice
Closing Words and Closing Song

Now Spirit of Life – Upwell within our hearts

Wean us from fear – Through all our pulses move.

Lead us from anxious ways – Teach us to trust.

And let us share your love with simple joy.