

**The Brilliant Darkness,  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis  
12/23/2018**

It is traditional, I understand, for an intern to offer an introductory sermon, telling the congregation a little bit more about themselves. We've done some of those introductions together: when I first preached with Rev. Kathleen on Darwin Day, and throughout the months of my internship.

So today, I want to tell you a story. It's my story, but I hope you will be able to find meaning for yourself, perhaps echoes of your own search for meaning, even if you have walked a different path. It's the story of how seminary took away my belief and helped me find my faith.

When I was growing up, I remember feeling just a little bit out of step with everyone else. I was taught that first you obey God out of fear, and then you grow to love him. Well, I had the fear part down, everyone I knew did that part, but I couldn't imagine ever coming to love God. I just really didn't feel anything one way or the other for him. I will note here that I use gendered language for the Divine, because that was my experience in the stories I'm telling you today--the only language I knew. Now, I assumed that everyone felt like that, because there are a lot of things that work that way. After all, if I meet you for the first time on a certain day, and ask you "how are you?" what are you supposed to say? [pause for response]. Right. "Fine." Now, you might be having an awful day, but everyone knows that "fine" is the "right" answer to that question. For a long time, I kind of assumed that God was the same way--people didn't really have actual feelings about him. The part about "loving him" was just what you were supposed to say. But I'm a rules person, and I was taught that these were the rules you followed if you didn't want to go to hell, and so I followed them. I've always been very good at rules, and I've never been one of those people who wanted to be "out of the box." I might want the box to be a different size, or shape, but I do like the box.

I grew up and I continued my search for God in many places, but I never could quite find him, although I began to realize that other people \*did\* feel something about God, something that I couldn't quite find. I began to wonder if I was broken. He had to be here somewhere, though. God had to be just around the next corner. Finally, I convinced myself that I must just be a liberal Christian. I followed people like Jen Hatmaker and Glennon Doyle on social media, and I really respected them, and they seemed to feel something for God. I'd find God, I just knew, when I was able to spend more time around other liberal Christians. I got here, and I found my people here, and I was excited to start seminary and find my feelings for God. I got to seminary, and I listened to my liberal Christian classmates talk about Jesus, and it was powerful. It was moving, and beautiful, and...I didn't feel \*any of that\*

Well, now I was in quite a bind, because remember, I like boxes, and I'd just blown my last box all to shreds. I knew that I deeply believed in wonder, and searching. I deeply believed in science and process, so I started there. I started trying on the term "humanist," and in a way that fit. One of my professors, a mentor I really respect, suggested I look up religious humanism. I said "Oh, I've heard sermons about that one! That's where you believe you're a god." She responded "Welllllll....might want to do some more reading." I told her the one thing I knew is that I wasn't an atheist, because I believe in mystery. She responded again, "Welllllll....you might want to do some more reading." And so I did.

Ursula Goodenough said that "Humans need stories — grand compelling stories — that help to orient us in our lives in the cosmos....And then, after that, we need other stories as well, human-centered stories..."

Stories have always resonated with me, and so I decided to return to the stories. I decided to return to my stories. To tell myself my stories of meaning (begin changing slides)

I was a weird child, you see. When I was a kid, it wasn't cool to be a geek, and yet I loved to watch all the sci-fi movies with my father, go to science museums...my high school job wasn't at a fast food restaurant, like many people--instead, I worked in a library! From the time I was little, science has always been important to me, but so has the possibility of more, something that we can't explain with science--yet! A classmate asked me recently in a conversation about sacred texts, "If you don't have a sacred text, where do you find meaning?" I told her the truth, the truth I had finally discovered--I find meaning everywhere. I find meaning in the night wind between the winter trees. In the deep quiet of space. When I was a little girl, my father and I used to go out and look at the stars, and I always loved this one. [Slide with Orion the Hunter constellation] And when I started over, when I started to tell myself the stories that helped me find meaning, to connect with the mystery, this is where I went. As I was searching, I took a class in Christian History and encountered the mystic Pseudo-Dionysius, and he writes of "where the pure, absolute and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness" -- that's where sermon title comes from.

Because there's a movie that some of you may have seen called the Matrix. In it, the protagonist goes on his own quest for answers, and he goes to visit the Oracle. In the waiting room, he sees a child just staring at a spoon, and the spoon is bending! After he leaves the Oracle, with more questions than answers, as visits to oracles usually go, his mentor and guide tells him that the child understands something that Neo doesn't -- that there is no spoon. People ask about how we bridge the theist-humanist gap. I think that's the wrong question. Like the spoon, I would say rather, how do we understand that there is no gap—that the Mystery belongs to everyone? That Mystery connects the theists and non-theists alike, in the search for answers and the finding of questions.

On Christmas Eve, 1968, astronauts orbiting the moon saw Earth rising for the first time. And regardless of what you believe, whether like my classmates Jesus is the reason for your season, or the driving force behind your call to make the world right, or if a personified deity might not resonate, but you believe deeply in the responsibility we hold to save each other and make the world right, whichever you are, or somewhere in between, or on the side...moments like the first earthrise can bring us all to our knees.

In this season of darkness, of stillness, I am reminded of the void of space, that really contains so incredibly much potential and so much history. I am reminded of the deep and powerful faith I have found at the end of this journey of letting go. As you also embrace this season of the earth lying fallow as the sun begins to return, as the dark of winter offers us time to contemplate, I hope you will also think back on your own journey, and embrace the Mystery that connects us all.