

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 16 December, 2012

Turning Toward the Light

Dedicated to the Memory of the 26

Charlotte Bacon, age 6; Daniel Barden, 7; Rachel Davino, 29; Olivia Engel, 6; Josephine Gay, 7; Ana Marquez-Greene, 6; Dylan Hockley, 6; Dawn Hocksprung, 47; Madeline Hsu, 6; Catherine Hubbard, 6; Chase Kowalski, 7; Jesse Lewis, 6; James Mattioli, 6; Grace McDonnell, 7; Anne Marie Murphy, 52; Emilie Parker, 6; Jack Pinto, 6; Noah Pozner, 6; Caroline Previdi, 6; Jessica Rekos, 6; Avielle Richman, 6; Lauren Rousseau, 30; Mary Sherlach, 56; Victoria Soto, 27; Benjamin Wheeler, 6; and Allison Wyatt, 6.

Rest in peace.

In this season of making light in the darkness, we were plunged into darkness. The intersection of madness and guns has, once again, wrought incalculable suffering: six adults and twenty children are dead.

But I do not have the heart this morning to preach a sermon about madness or guns. This is a sermon about hope.

Here is poet Jan L. Richardson's *How the Light Comes*:

I cannot tell you
 how the light comes.

What I know
 is that it is more ancient
 than imagining.

That it travels
 across an astounding expanse
 to reach us.

That it loves
 searching out
 what is hidden
 what is lost

what is forgotten
or in peril
or in pain.

That is has a fondness
for the body
for finding its way
toward flesh
for tracing the edges
of form
for shining forth
through the eye,
the hand,
the heart.

I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.
That it works its way
into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
or arrive in a shape
you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
To let it find us.
May we open
and open more
and open still

to the blessed light

that comes.¹

On Friday evening, I sent out the link to the website *We the People*, to a petition calling on President Obama’s administration to address the issue of gun control through the introduction of legislation in congress. *We the People* petitions need 25,000 signatures before the White House will respond to them. As of early this morning, the petition had over 114,000 signatures. There is reason to be hopeful.

I want to share with you three stories that point to an ultimately hopeful view of the unfolding of our lives, and of history itself. I tell them this morning because, whether or not it is true, we will be better for throwing our weight to the side of a long view of hope, acting as if we believe, as nineteenth-century Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker wrote, that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

The first story is from the annals of Women’s Strike for Peace, “the first great antinuclear movement in the United States; the one,” as activist and author Rebecca Solnit tells it, “that did contribute to a major victory: the end, in 1963, of aboveground nuclear testing, and so [the end] of the radioactive fallout that was showing up in mother’s milk and baby teeth....

“Positioning themselves as housewives and using humor as their weapon, ... [members of Women’s Strike for Peace] ... told of how foolish and futile [they] felt standing in the rain one morning, protesting at the Kennedy White House.

“[And then,] years later, [one of them] heard [pediatrician] Dr. Benjamin Spock, who had become one of the most high-profile activists on the issue, say that the turning point for him was spotting a small group of women standing in the rain, protesting at the White House.

“If they were so passionately committed, he thought, he should give the issue more consideration himself.”²

¹ Jan L. Richardson, *How the Light Comes: A Blessing for Christmas Day*. Thanks to Bethany Lowe for sharing this with me!

² Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, Chapter 1: “Looking into Darkness,” paragraph 5 (Sorry I don’t have the page number; I’m reading on a Kindle.)

Hope.

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“The essence of chaos theory is something called ‘sensitive dependence on initial conditions.’ This means that a very small perturbation or change in a system can have a profound effect; that tiny, local actions can have widespread, far-off, complex consequences.”³

Exactly forty years ago, MIT meteorologist Edward Lorenz gave a talk at the American Association for the Advancement of Science entitled *Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?* This idea, an illustration of the chaos theory, is what we know today as the Butterfly Effect. The seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism is the Butterfly Effect principle, celebrating our deep interconnection with every other living being. *Everything* we do makes a difference.

So here’s the second story about taking that long view of hope, and an ultimately hopeful view of the unfolding of our lives, and of history itself.

Sharon Salzberg, one of my Buddhist teachers, writes of her teacher: “U Pandita, was [leading] ... a three month retreat. He gave unusually extensive talks, translated by a superb interpreter. Later, several friends and I decided to put out a book based on the course. We raised money for the transcription, and found an interested publisher... Writer Kate Wheeler [turned] what was basically an oral transmission of classical Asian Buddhism into a manuscript that would honor that tradition while also engaging the Western mind. She did a wonderful job;” the book was titled *In This Very Life*.

“At the time of the publication, I thought, *Well, we’ve done something good, something that honored our teacher, and that will be of some small service. It’s not going to be a best-seller, but it does express a certain teaching through very clear language, and it’s really an excellent vehicle for the limited impact it will have.* I more or less put it in the minor-good-deed category in my mind.”

And now for the turn in this story: In 1989, “Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the pro-democracy movement in Burma ... was placed under house arrest for her political activities. Her sons were sixteen and twelve..., and she would not see them or her husband for many years. Refusing to

³ Sharon Salzberg, *Faith*, p. 138

accept anything from the military, [at times,] she didn't even have enough money for food. [At one point,] she became so weak that ... she couldn't get out of bed.

“During the six years ... she was under that phase of house arrest, the military offered her many opportunities to leave Burma, but it was clear that if she left, she would not be allowed back in. By staying, she knew she would continue to be a symbol of hope for democracy for the people of Burma. She chose to remain, [and] won ... the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded to her while she was still imprisoned.

“For a brief period, the military released [Aung San] Suu Kyi before confining her again, and she was able to speak and write about her experience.... [She] wrote, ‘The spiritual dimension became particularly important in a struggle in which deeply held convictions and strength of mind are the chief weapons against armed repression.’

“She related how her attempts at meditation had foundered due to a lack of instruction. She would sit on her bed, gritting her teeth, trying to practice, but would only become [more agitated].

“And then her husband sent her a book that changed everything.... Through it, she ... learned how to meditate, and it became her main source of spiritual support during those intensely difficult years.... That book was U Pandita's *In This Very Life*.”⁴

Hope.

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And here is the third and final story. Yesterday afternoon, one of the guests on a special WNYC public radio broadcast was Coni Sanders, daughter of Dave Sanders, the beloved teacher who, in April of 1999, was the only adult killed in the Columbine High School shooting. Coni Sanders is an expert in the trauma of losing a loved one to violence, “followed by the prolonged agony of [being forced to grieve] in front of TV cameras.”

She says, “People kept saying to us, ‘Be strong. Be strong.’ But that was wrong. It made [us] feel that [we] couldn't breathe. I learned ... that it was okay to be weak.” I learned, she says, that “To be defined by Columbine

⁴ Sharon Salzberg, *Faith*, pp. 138-141

... is to let the killers win.... Don't let that terrible day define you. It's so important to see yourself as someone who has been through tragedy, not someone who is the tragedy."

But Coni Sanders wasn't on air to be interviewed about being re-traumatized by Friday's Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings. She was on air because she is now a forensic psychologist, and was answering questions about how to support our children – the importance of assuring them over and over that they are safe.

Coni Sanders "now works with people with criminal histories. 'My personal battle,' she says, 'is against violence. If I can teach one person to turn away from violence, I will have honored my dad.'⁵

Hope.

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Women Strike for Peace in the pouring rain, and Dr. Spock is moved to activism. Two Buddhist students work to honor their teacher with some small service, and the leader of a free Burma is uplifted and upheld. And a young woman whose father was gunned down transformed that horrific tragedy into a tremendous capacity to help others who have been traumatized as she was.

Hope.

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Beloved spiritual companions, may these stories give us a reason to be hopeful, give us hope that inspires us to act as if it makes a difference that we act; inspires us to act, seeking to copy the rotation of the earth, turning from darkness to light.

.... I cannot tell you
how the light comes,
but that it does.
That it will.
That it works its way

⁵Please listen at <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/bl/blogs/scrapbook/2012/dec/15/special-coverage-sandy-hook-shooting/> and see <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/07/27/columbine-families-plan-to-reach-out-to-aurora-shooting-victims/>

into the deepest dark
that enfolds you,
though it may seem
long ages in coming
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you did not foresee.

And so
may we this day
turn ourselves toward it.
May we lift our faces
To let it find us.
May we open
and open more
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to the blessed light
that comes.⁶

Amen.

⁶ Jan L. Richardson, *How the Light Comes: A Blessing for Christmas Day*. Thanks to Bethany Lowe!