Light in the Darkness

A reader to accompany you through Advent and beyond
2020

Readings contributed by members and friends of Community Congregational Church
Tiburon, California

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”
~ John 1:5

The Creation of Day and Night, George Graham
Welcome to

Light in the Darkness

Dear Members and Friends of CCC,

For those of you familiar with the look and feel of our annual Advent reader, you'll notice that this year we're doing something a little different. First and most obvious, we're not offering a print version of the reader, but true to the times, it is coming to you electronically. You will be able to view it on your computer and/or download and print all or parts of it if you wish. The second big change involves the structure of the reader. In years past it has served to move us through Advent (and on to Epiphany) much like an Advent calendar does, i.e., one day at a time, beginning with the first Sunday of Advent. Each page was headed with a date, and many people chose to read a page a day through the season. Others preferred to binge read or to use the reader as a divinization tool by opening it at random and accepting whatever reading appeared at the moment. You certainly can approach this year's reader in any way that works for you, but I want to explain to you how this one is organized.

As I worked with the poems, stories and essays you contributed, the material seemed to form itself into six groupings (though in one way or another every piece deals with the changed circumstances and challenges of 2020). Many of the offerings could fit into more than one group, but I think you will see the common thread that weaves among the writings in each section. I feel that organizing the reader this way adds a kind of meta-meaning to the material, and I hope that you will accept the change from what you're used to.

The world and our lives have been profoundly transformed since last March, and I think most of us know that we will not be going back to “the way it was.” These days, questions like What is happening in the world now? How do I cope and keep up hope? and What are my visions for the future? are very real for us. The pieces in this reader offer some responses to these and other questions. The last section of the reader focuses on the holidays — Advent, Christmas and the New Year. After all, this is our Advent reader, and the holidays are upon us!

This is a rich and varied collection of writing. May you find something here — words and images — that feed your heart and soul and help bring you some light in the darkness.

With love from your editor and compiler, and with deep thanks to all who contributed to the reader,

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Minister’s Message

Something is about to happen, something long awaited. It is the expectancy of body, mind, soul, and spirit, the anticipation of a gift about to be opened. In childhood we felt the exciting and excruciating lead-up to Christmas morning, where shiny wrappings and beautiful bows meant we were about to receive some brand new things. We could hardly wait, but wait we did. The longer we waited, the greater the anticipation.

This season of anticipation is what we call Advent. It is the telling of a brand new story, the emergence of yet another clean slate. And while we bask in the glow of new beginnings, the world around us contemplates the endings instead. As an old year closes, the wounds of grief, sadness, and regret may also vie for our attention.

Most years, this swirling energy of new beginnings and poignant endings expresses itself in a flurry of soirees, gift-giving, and choral music. On Christmas Eve we pass the light to one another, and at the close of our *Silent Night*, we say farewell with warm embraces and well-wishes for those we love. But as we come to this Advent, it is with the words that describe pretty much everything in our lives, “This year, it’s different.” We’re receiving unexpected gifts, in more humble wrappings, guided more by wisdom than frivolity.

The darkness this time brings us the same wonder as the light. We’ve been given days and days of “minding the interior” in degrees we would never have imagined one year ago. For me, this year’s new introspective beginning takes me to the opening lines of John O’Donohue’s *Blessing for Light*.

> Light cannot see inside things.  
> That is what the dark is for:  
> Minding the interior,  
> Nurturing the draw of growth  
> Through places where death  
> In its own way turns into life.  
>  
> In the glare of neon times,  
> Let our eyes not be worn  
> By surfaces that shine  
> With hunger made attractive.  
>  
> That our thoughts may be true light,  
> Finding their way into words  
> Which have the weight of shadow  
> To hold the layers of truth.

Our hope is that this Advent reader — one like no other, for a year like no other — will nourish and guide our souls, as together we await the gifts of both light and darkness. May they all be welcomed in us, and may they become the birthing place of all the beautiful things we long to see.

Peace on Earth,
David Starbuck Gregory
How It Looks From Here
Three Selections from Jolyn

These selections are more representative of where I am personally in my spiritual journey than of any theme ...

~ Jolyn O’Hare

Revolutions do not happen only in grand moments in public view but also in small pockets of people coming together to inhabit a new way of being. We birth the beloved community by becoming the beloved community.... When a critical mass of people practice together, in community and as part of movements for justice, I believe we can begin to create the world we want, here and now.

~ Valarie Kaur

* * *

Renewal

An epiphany enables you to sense creation not as something completed, but as constantly becoming, evolving, ascending. This transports you from a place where nothing is new to a place where nothing is old, where everything renews itself, where heaven and earth rejoice as at the moment of Creation.

~ The Essential Kabbalah
Daniel C. Matt

* * *

Does a drop stay still in the ocean? Move with the entirety, and with the tiniest particular.
Be the moisture in an oyster that helps to form one pearl.

~ Rumi
Journeying in Our Times
Three Contributions from Christopher Love

The land of oneness lives in your heart, and has been waiting for you to return to it for a very long time. It was patient, and unconditional in its love for you, and knew that you had many steps to walk, many marathons to run, and a long, difficult voyage on the vast sea of your destiny before you got here, and you did.

~ Ora Nadrich, Live True: A Mindfulness Guide to Authenticity

***

Walk Slowly
It only takes a reminder to breathe, a moment to be still, and just like that, something in me settles, softens, makes space for imperfection. The harsh voice of judgment drops to a whisper and I remember again that life isn't a relay race; that we will all cross the finish line; that waking up to life is what we were born for. As many times as I forget, catch myself charging forward without even knowing where I'm going, that many times I can make the choice to stop, to breathe, and be, and walk slowly into the mystery.

~ Danna Faulds

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We live between the act of awakening and the act of surrender. Each morning we awaken to the light and the invitation to a new day in the world of time; each night we surrender to the dark to be taken in the world of dreams where time is no more. At birth we were awakened and emerged to become visible in the world. At death we will surrender again to the dark to become invisible. Awakening and surrender: they frame each day and each life; between them the journey where anything can happen, the beauty and the frailty. When the Celtic imagination searched for the structures of shelter and meaning, it raised its eyes to the mountains and the heavens and put its trust in the faithful patterns of sun, stars, moon and seasons. ... all frailty and uncertainty was seen to be sheltered by eternal beauty which presides over all the journeys between awakening and surrender, the visible and the invisible, the light and the darkness.

~ John O'Donahue, Beauty: the Invisible Embrace
Butterfly Wisdom
Joanne Lefferts
from her blog
Tending the Garden: Seeds of Inspiration

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...*
~ Charles Dickens, in A Tale of Two Cities

*Perhaps the butterfly is proof that you can go through a great deal of darkness and still become something beautiful.*
~Unknown

Charles Dickens wrote these powerful words in his 1859 historical novel about the years leading up to the French Revolution, but they certainly could have been written today:

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...*

It feels like we are in the middle of a kind of revolution now — not in the sense of war, but in the sense of radical change. Merriam-Webster defines revolution this way: *a sudden, radical, or complete change; a fundamental change in the way of thinking about or visualizing something; a change of paradigm.*

This time of the pandemic, the “great pause” from life as we knew it, this time of self-isolation and social distancing, has been extremely challenging. Anxieties are intensified by financial uncertainty, political unrest, unprecedented weather events due to climate change, and protests against racial injustice. Sudden radical change is calling forth from us new ways of thinking, calling for new ways of being, calling for a change of paradigm. How are we to navigate these times? Where do we find hope and strength to carry on? I find inspiration in the wisdom of the butterfly — the wisdom of surrender to the process of transformation. Like the caterpillar in the darkness and solitude of the cocoon, we are being called to let go of the familiar and allow for something new to emerge. We are called to go within to discover the truth of who we are and who we might become as we emerge from this time, transformed by love. It feels like a “best of times, worst of times” scenario. Brought to our knees by circumstances beyond our control, we are called to go within, to the solitude of our own cocoon, where we might discover our deeper truths, find our true courage and strength, come to realize our connection with all of life, and connect with the source of our being, which is LOVE. From this place, we are able to aid in the transformation of our world, embodying wisdom, being a bearer of light and hope, adding our clear vision for our new world emerging. What butterfly wisdom within you is being called forth from these times?
Life is a Loom
Hazel Archer-Ginsberg

Note: Hazel is an anthroposophist who has come into my life during this pandemic time. She has a daily blog called Reverse Ritual from which this piece comes.

~ Sandra Weil

Life is a loom…and we are the weavers of this fabric we call reality…
Our bodies: a bone spindle, shuttling bobbin souls…
Our fibers interlacing, spinning straw into gold…
and yes, sometimes a strand of sorrow is added to the weft...
These dark threads are just as needed in a weaver’s skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver in our patterns spun in sand…
and now as the fire of life goes inward,
and rest lies upon the patient land...
Our craft is the art of transforming the patchwork shadow,
the wounded ancestor, the demure descendant,
every loose fiber, into a fabric of healed wholeness and peace…
May our transformation be ever-full of grace.

The Weavers
Jeanie Tomanek
In Need of the Breath
Hafiz

My heart
Is an unset jewel
Upon the tender night
Yearning for its dear old friend
The Moon.

When the Nameless One debuts again
Ten thousand facets of my being unfurl wings
And reveal such a radiance inside
I enter a realm divine —
I too begin to so sweetly cast light,
Like a lamp,
Through the streets of this
World.

My heart is an unset jewel
Upon existence
waiting for the Friend’s touch.

Tonight
My heart is an unset ruby
Offered bowed and weeping to the Sky.

I am dying in these cold hours
For the resplendent glance of God.

I am dying
Because of a divine remembrance
Of who — I really am.

~ contributed by Jolyn O’Hare
A deep holiness broods over the dying light. Now, in ourselves we must find our own power of bestowing warmth; that we may shine from within. In the realm of the senses the plant world sinks down into death. Inwardly the fire-spirits, offspring of the lofty Beings of the Sun, bearing the Archetypal pictures of the plant kingdom, stream down into the womb of Mother Earth. All around us we see withering, the color leaving to reveal the essence. As human beings we must not allow the death of nature to draw us into sleep. In autumn we must discover the force of resurrection within, so that we can pass with full consciousness through the gate of death with a wakened soul, in our time. This is possible by what [Archangel] Michael bestows as the Fire of Will. We can come into communion with the most hidden secrets of existence now, whispering: Feel yourself as bearer of the Motherhood of Nature, to conceive in love the fiery germ of Self.

~ contributed by Sandra Weil
**Seasons of Life**
Amaeya Rae

Birthed out of the infinite wisdom and incomprehensible Love of the Creator, the blueprint of life is exquisitely designed to be endless cycles of generation and regeneration.

**Spring**
An apparently lifeless seed gestated in the fertile womb of a human mother or Mother Earth is born as a magical new child of life exploring its source of nurture and growing at a fast pace.

**Summer**
The time of the youth, gangly growth, eager rushing to explore physical capabilities, a propelling eagerness to propagate with others of its species.

**Fall**
The mature adult unhurried, allowing time for thoughtful consideration, stable, rooted choosing to allow what is no longer needed to fall away like wilted leaves.

**Winter**
The wise elder moving slowly, comfortable with rest, content with silence and introspection, serene in the comprehension of the continuum of life.
Visions
A Father, a Son,
and the Evolution of Masculinity
John Boettiger

These are reflections on fathers and their children, especially their sons, and evolving conceptions of masculinity, as illustrated particularly by president-elect Joe Biden and his second son, Hunter Biden. I gathered these reflections this autumn in my own online journal Reckonings: A Journal of Justice, Hope and History. [Go here to find John’s journal.] The two photos I include are of Joe and Hunter Biden. The father's words are about his son. The reflections are partly my own, along with excerpts from an article by Liz Plank in a recent (November 2020) issue of The New Yorker. All this is reminiscent in diverse ways of my own experiences — gifts and struggles often intertwined, often, truth be told, the same — of being a man, a son, a father, a grandfather, a great-grandfather, a husband and a friend — mostly in American culture. They benefit, as well, from the several years my wife Leigh McCullough and I spent as psychologists in a healing community and psychiatric hospital called Modum Bad (“the baths at Modum”) located on farm and forest land near the village of Vikersund, Norway. My wife was director of the Research Institute, and I was professor of human development. (Those interested in reading more about Modum Bad may do so in my 2007 essay, “Modum Bad: A Resource for Healing and Renewal,” originally published by Modum Bad and reprinted in Reckonings.) Modum Bad was my first experience of a living community. The Redwoods was and is my second. CCC is my third. All these reflections have been vivid, lively, the struggles as well as the gifts, although I have occasionally awakened to shame I imagined was long purged. At such times I'm inclined to recall the 13th century Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi’s lovely words, “Don’t go back to sleep.” All speak of where I find myself now, and what is helping me follow my path in these trying times. In regard to some of these experiences, I wish I had done otherwise, or more, or less. On balance, I am hopeful and grateful. When my grandmother, my first real mentor, was asked once by Frank Sinatra if there was a single word that most sustained her, she answered, “Hope.” “Just hope?” he inquired, as if he’d anticipated something more exalted. Bemused, she responded, “Just hope.” She had the courtesy not to remind him that he had asked her for one word. These reflections have been and remain gifts of those people and the mystery that nourished and continues to nourish me. I couldn't be more pleased, now living at The Redwoods, that all four of my children and I, as well as all but one of my six grandchildren and their families, live within easy visiting distance in the Pacific Northwest, the land of my birth.

I was particularly moved by two photographs of Joe and Hunter Biden, and found myself copying those photos and surrounding them with short prose excerpts from an article by Liz Plank in The New Yorker. Here's a bit from Liz Plank’s article:
President Donald Trump and his allies have tried a series of increasingly desperate tactics to derail former Vice President Joe Biden's campaign momentum. As these would-be October surprises fall flat, Trump surrogates appear to have reverted to the oldest tool in their political arsenal: attacking Biden's masculinity. On Wednesday, John Cardillo, a host on Newsmax, a Trump-aligned media network, tweeted out a photo of Biden holding his son Hunter and kissing him on the cheek. “Does this look like an appropriate father/son interaction to you?” Cardillo asked.

While Cardillo isn’t an official Trump surrogate, his attacks are very much in line with Trump’s incessant bullying of his opponent’s masculinity. From mocking him for the size of his masks to simply calling him physically weak, Trump hasn’t been subtle. Many male voters have taken notice. Because like many other institutions in America, fatherhood is changing. Men want to be able to express their love for other men, especially their sons. And they want to be able to do this without being called weak. To deny them this ability isn’t just old-fashioned; it perpetuates a toxic societal cycle that can have dangerous consequences for young men and boys.

Make no mistake: The presidential election was a referendum on masculinity. And there is no better example of the contrasting attitudes of these two men than their behavior as fathers. While Trump believes that men who change their children’s diapers are “acting like the wife,” Biden took on every single one of his first wife’s responsibilities (and far more) when she suddenly died in a car accident along with their daughter. While Trump is known for reportedly calling his son dumb, Biden publicly lauded his son Beau — calling him a better politician than he could ever be — after Beau passed away from brain cancer.

Even when Trump tried to rattle Biden during the first presidential debate by calling his son Hunter a cocaine addict, Biden’s unconditional and warm paternal response turned one of the ugliest moments in presidential debate history into a heartwarming one. “My son, like a lot of people ... had a drug problem,” Biden said. “He’s fixed it. He’s worked on it. And I’m proud of him. I’m proud of my son.”

I’ve spent the past few years speaking to men around the country. And what I’ve learned is that a lot of guys are yearning for permission to connect with others — male and female — and are eager for a gender revolution that sets them free to reveal vulnerability, affection and intimacy without their manhood’s being scrutinized or questioned.

I want to live in a world where boys are hugged more, not less. Especially during one of the darkest years in this nation’s history. America needs a big warm hug — and it needs a president man enough to do it.
If a Child Should Ask
author unknown

If in time to come a child should ask
Why? How?
I would reply,
There came to earth a New Mary —
She sang songs,
She built a web
She grew like a great flower in the light of
Her own truth and sisterhood
She was the Mary of joys and sorrows
She was the inward meeting of the rivers
She was the moon and tides of ocean and blood
She was the wound — and she was wise.

I met her while I danced
And when I heard the wolf howling in my soul
And I saw its silent agony behind another’s eyes
She was with me.
I found my tears upon her face
And it was the face of the living God —

I found her weeping in the holocaust
Searching for the million children she had lost
I heard her scream as she looked upon their faces
I was with her
I found my strength with her —
Standing silent by the wire
And as I struggled with my anger and my fear
She told me that we are the weavers
Of the New Day
She held me, this New Mary.

“We are the purpose,” she said
“The vision is us.”

I was brought up in the Lutheran faith, and it was not until later in life that I discovered Mother Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows. She is the one I turn to when I’m feeling discouraged. When communing with Mary, I no longer feel alone. This poem reveals a New Mary — a Mary who is not only merciful and compassionate, but strong and fiercely protective. She gives me strength and she infuses me with courage and with Hope. This poem reminds me that we have a purpose and that we can create a New World.
““The vision is us.”

~ Gailya Magdalena
God's Plan is Offered to Us to Join Him in Redeeming the World We Live In
Rogers Carrington

This piece tackles the hard question: What is God’s plan and how do we fit in? Although this is a difficult subject, it is worth considering. During this time of stress and frustration I think it is important to have a bigger vision of where “all of this” is going. I hope my piece triggers hope, and possibly a way to see what so many in our congregation are doing to further God’s plan. I hope you will enjoy what I have written. As you’ll see, it’s in the form of a dialogue between me and my imaginary reader.

~ Rogers

We are told in many ways that God has a plan: a plan for our lives and a plan for the planet. So, what is God’s plan? Part of his plan, we are told, includes us. God waited for billions of years until one of his creations called Humans evolved to the point where God decided it was worth giving Humans an opportunity to join with Him in the Great Human Experiment, and co-create together a world that was more like the place in the universe that God calls home. Yes, I know God is everywhere, but I’m talking about that special place we call Heaven where he and Jesus spent so much time before God created the earth. Jesus speaking (John 17:24) said: Father, I want those you gave me to be with me right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me, having loved me long before there ever was a world.

Jesus let us in on God’s plan for us when he gave us what we know as the Lord’s Prayer. His prayer begins with: Our Father who lives in that place we call Heaven, we don’t have spiritual words to define the depth of your name. This next part is where Jesus spells out God’s plan. Jesus says: I want the way we live on earth to be the same as the way we live when we are home in the universe. Jesus was with God for billions of years before God gave him the assignment to come to earth in Human form, to one more time teach us to love God, ourselves, and each other. Jesus concludes his prayer with the acknowledgement that God is in charge of the world, has the power to transform the earth and sustain it for ever and ever.

The importance to me of the Lord’s Prayer is that Jesus gave us this prayer so that we can make his plan our plan. When we say the Lord’s Prayer, if we mean it, it becomes our prayer to God to empower us to co-create with him the planet earth so that it is like where he lives in the universe, that place we call Heaven.

Now wait a minute, you might say. I thought prayers to God were intended for him to do things to make things right that we didn’t know how to make right. And another thing, if he is the loving God (and we are told he is), why would he allow people to do all the hateful, harmful things that they do?

It’s true. I know a lot of people who are discouraged with God because they pray and tell God what they want and wait for it to happen. When it doesn’t happen, they wonder if God is really in charge and why there is so much suffering in the world. The answer is that Humans, not God, create suffering. God invites us to help clean it up. Now you might say: You’re telling me we are supposed to join with God to clean up the mess we created and co-create solutions to the world’s problems. How are we supposed to do that in partnership with an unpredictable God that often pays little attention to our plans and what we want?

These are good questions, but it doesn’t change God’s plan and our invitation to participate in his plan. Our basic problem is two-fold. We have free choice and can make excuses and go our own way (choosing me instead of we), or we can commit to doing God’s plan. The second part is that we need to get used to not being in control of God’s timing. He knows what he is doing and we don’t. We need to grow up and learn to trust God and his plan.
Here you might say: If I was going to join God in doing his plan, then I would like to know how long it will take to get the job done. My response is to say sorry, you don’t get to know the timing. All you get to know is that your job is to take responsibility for all the wrong that people do in the world. God did not cause the problem, but he is there to help us solve it.

You have to be kidding, you might say. I didn’t cause all the wrong in the world. Why am I responsible for it? Oh! I get it, all of us Humans are responsible, so together we need to make it right. Well, then how does God help us? My response: Helping us is up to God to use our efforts with others to work the plan. His job is to support us emotionally and enliven our spirits, if you ask, so you can get that part of the work done that has been assigned to us.

You ask: If I agree, what’s in it for me? And I answer: You mean in addition to spending all eternity with the creator? Yeah, yeah, I know that’s the big hook (you say), but isn’t there something now that would make it worth it? Yes, there is (I respond). Knowing you’re on the winning side is big, even when the struggle seems hopeless. Doing what is right in this case is not a moral issue. It is about doing whatever is necessary, in order to do your part and having the Boss supporting and encouraging you all the way.

Your next question might be: If I am seriously considering committing to this plan, how do I connect with God in order to know how to go about this plan? I mean we’re talking about something enormous. And my response would be: You’re right, you need to learn how to stay connected to God so he can help you. If you try to set goals and make plans and depend only on your own skills and fortitude, you are likely to get frustrated and discouraged. God will support you and change you and your plans several times over and make them better if you learn to keep him in charge. You are a servant; God is the Boss.

You respond: This is crazy. I come on board, figure out ways to help, develop plans and get to work, and then without any warning from God, my plans get changed and I’m supposed to think his way of developing and implementing a project is better. Is that right? Yes (I say). Having the opportunity to learn how to work together with God is a wonderful privilege. Once you get the hang of it, you may wonder why it took you so long to join the most fabulous organization in the world. You may be surprised by who all the others are who decided to join with God in changing the world. You may notice that a lot of them don’t go to church, are loners, or have joined other organizations that are committed to bringing about God’s plan on earth. Some don’t even know they are working on God’s plan. It doesn’t matter. God knows their heart, uses them, and blesses them for the help they give.

And now you may ask: You mean this is not an exclusive Christian Church project, that God may choose anyone he pleases who looks like he or she can help? I respond: Yes. That’s about it. God’s the Boss and you need to do your best to stay open to what God wants so you feel good about doing your part and don’t think it is all up to you to make God’s plan work. There is a lot more to say about how to stay connected so you don’t get sidetracked, but for now, what do you think? Do you want to join the team that’s redeeming the world? All I can promise is that making this commitment will change your life forever and for the better as your commitment grows and you see positive change happening.

In the Gospel of John, Chapter 3, John said: God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. That is why whoever accepts and trusts the Son, gets in on everything, life complete and forever. Jesus, again in Chapter 4, said to the Samaritan women: It’s who you are and the way you live that counts before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is looking for, those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself — Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves in adoration.
Verse for America
Rudolf Steiner, 1923

May our feelings
Penetrate to the center of our hearts
And seek in love to unite with those who share our dreams
And with the spirits who look down benevolently
On our hearts’ earnest strivings,
Sending us strength from realms of light
As they illuminate our love.

~ shared by Joanne Lefferts

2020 has been a year of total upheaval of life as we knew it. Global Pandemic. Political unrest. Unprecedented catastrophic weather events due to climate change. Racial injustice magnified in acts of brutality perpetuated by those who are meant to protect and serve the most vulnerable among us. As events have unfolded, the shadow side of our great American experiment of democracy has been revealed and brought out into full view where we can no longer ignore it or deny our part in perpetuating the problem, through our silence.

It’s challenging to feel hopeful in the midst of it all. It would be easy to succumb to feelings of anger, resignation, or despair. What can one person do to make a difference? To meet this time, it’s essential to find the light in the darkness, to become bearers of the light. Each one of us. That’s why I love this verse for America, a gift from Rudolf Steiner in 1923. I came across this prayer/poem recently in a webinar I attended, and I immediately felt the power contained in the words. I wrote it down and printed it out so I would be able to see it every day and contemplate its meaning. It has become part of my daily meditation. It helps me remember something I forget when I get caught up in events of the daily news cycle, taking that to be reality. It reminds me of a larger reality and more eternal truths:

1) Our emotions have power to create.
2) Love has the power to overcome all difficulties, and we have the ability to harness that power and direct it toward what is good and right and true. This verse helps me focus on my heart’s earnest strivings toward ideals of justice and freedom for all beings.
3) There are realms of light and benevolent beings to whom we may reach out in meditation and prayer.
   When we open to divine love and light, we are graced with strength, courage, wisdom and love beyond what we can conceive when left to our own devices. We have but to reach out, willing to receive.

   May the light of love illuminate our way as we move into this brave new world.

   ~ Joanne Lefferts
Everything the Power of the World
does is done in a circle

My favorite day of the year is the winter solstice. Beginning in June, I wait for the day when the wobbly world shifts on its earthen axis and the days start to be longer. While not a specific solstice poem, this piece from Black Elk reminds us there are many things bigger than we, and mysteries beyond our ken. In the quiet of midwinter what better time to remember summer?

~ Cathy Fox

Everything the Power of the World
does is done in a circle

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars.
The wind, in its greatest power, whirls.

Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.

The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were.

The life of man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.

~ Black Elk, Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, 1863-1950
as told through John G. Neihardt, author of Black Elk Speaks
Native American Prayer

This is a prayer my mother sent me more than twenty years ago and I say it upon wakening every day. Much of Native American culture was used for setting up our democracy. To me this prayer is the basis of what I want to honor in my life and because we are blessed to live in such a beautiful place we can see every bit of what is mentioned in the prayer.

~ Marie Salerno

Native American Prayer
Red Cloud Indian School, Pine Ridge, SD

O great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds, and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me! I am small and weak; I need your strength and wisdom. Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset. Make my hands respect the things you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice. Make me wise so that I may understand the things you have taught my people. Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock. I seek strength, not to be greater than my friend, but to fight my greatest enemy — myself. Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes, so when life fades, as the fading sunset, may my spirit come to you without shame.

Prayer to the Great Spirit
James Ayers
Long ago, Plotinus wrote, “If we are in unity with the Spirit, we are in unity with each other, and so we are all one.” The words of this ancient Greek mystic are suggestive, for they call attention to the underlying unity of all of life. The recognition of the Spirit of God as the unifying principle of all life becomes at once the most crucial experience of man. It says that whoever is aware of the Spirit of God in himself enters the doors that lead into the life of his fellows. The same idea is stated in ethical terms in the New Testament when the suggestion is made that if a man says he loves God, whom he hath not seen, and does not love his brother who is with him, he is a liar and the truth does not dwell in him. The way is difficult, because it is very comforting to withdraw from the responsibility of unity with one’s fellows and to enter alone into the solitary contemplation of God. One can have a perfect orgy of solitary communion without the risks of being misunderstood, of having one’s words twisted, of having to be on the defensive about one’s true or alleged attitude. In the quiet fellowship with one’s God, one may seem to be relieved of any necessity to make headway against heavy odds. This is why one encounters persons of deep piousness and religiosity who are intolerant and actively hostile toward their fellows. Some of the most terrifying hate organizations in the country are made up in large part of persons who are very devout in the worship of their God.

The test to which Plotinus puts us, however, is very searching. To be in unity with the Spirit is to be in unity with one’s fellows. Not to be in unity with one’s fellow’s is thereby not to be in unity with the Spirit. The pragmatic test of one’s unity with the Spirit is found in the unity with one’s fellows. We see what this means when we are involved in the experience of a broken relationship. When I have lost harmony with another, my whole life is thrown out of tune. God tends to be remote and far away when a desert and sea appear between me and another. I draw close to God as I draw close to my fellows. The great incentive remains ever alert; I cannot be at peace without God, and I cannot be truly aware of God if I am not at peace with my fellows. For the sake of my unity with God, I keep working on my relations with my fellows. This is ever the insistence of all ethical religions.

~ contributed by Dave Long
Light and Dark
Here are two pieces of witness from the poet William Stafford, who, along with his son Kim, teaches me again and again, to stay awake and focus on what brings us alive.

~ Gail Lester

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy, a remote important region in all who talk: though we could fool each other, we should consider — lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake, or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep; the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe — should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

* * * * *

While the earth breaks the soft horizon eastward, we study how to deserve what has already been given us.

~ Terry Tempest Williams

~ contributed by Sandra Weil
For Courage
John O’Donahue

When the light around you lessens
And your thoughts darken until
Your body feels fear turn
Cold as a stone inside,

When you find yourself bereft
Of any belief in yourself
And all you unknowingly
Leaned on has fallen,

When one voice commands
Your whole heart,
And it is raven dark,
Steady yourself and see
That it is your own thinking
That darkens your world.

Search and you will find
A diamond-thought of light,
Know that you are not alone,
And that this darkness has purpose;
Gradually it will school your eyes,
To find the one gift your life requires
Hidden within this night-corner.

Invoke the learning
Of every suffering
You have suffered.
Close your eyes.

Gather all the kindling
About your heart
To create one spark
That is all you need
To nourish the flame
That will cleanse the dark
Of its weight of festered fear.

A new confidence will come alive
To urge you towards higher ground
Where your imagination
will learn to engage difficulty
As its most rewarding threshold!

~ contributed by Sandra Weil
Lines Written in the Days of Growing Darkness
Mary Oliver (from *A Thousand Mornings*, 2012)

Every year we have been
witness to it; how the
world descends

into a rich mash, in order that
it may resume.
And therefore
who would cry out

to the petals on the ground
to stay,
knowing as we must,
how the vivacity of *what was* is married
to the vitality of *what will be?*
I don’t say
it’s easy, but
what else will do

if the love one claims to have for the world
be true?

So let us go on, cheerfully enough,
this and every crisping day,

though the sun be swinging east,
and the ponds be cold and black,
and the sweets of the year be doomed.

This poem reminds me that nothing remains as it is, but is ever changing. I feel
reassured by this at a time when I see darkness in the world and the future seems
bleak. Mary Oliver’s words give me hope that “what will be” could be filled with
vitality and that I can go on “this and every crisping day.”

~ Diane Suffridge
**Contemplation**  
Bill Eichhorn, 11/5/20

Day’s end brings time  
to sit outside  
waiting for the silence

To listen for creatures  
of the night  
roaming the moonlight

To scan the night sky  
in wonder — the vast  
intimacy

To notice the breath  
slowing with gratitude  
for another astonishing day.

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**The Twilight Hour**  
Macrina Wiederkehr

Twilight is the poet’s hour,  
twilight is the soul’s deep love.  
Light from heaven, accessible,  
light and darkness become one.

As the curtain of day falls away,  
the curtain of night is rising.  
In the falling and the rising  
the star of God’s face shines forth.

O blessed, holy twilight,  
heaven’s face unveiled  
soft glow of sundown  
night glow through sunray.

This is the mystical hour,  
day fading; night rising.  
Sweet space between day and night,  
ask what you will and it shall be done.  
This is the hour of grace.

~ contributed by Jolyn O’Hare
A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark

This poem reminds me to neither deny the dark nor succumb to its dangers. Rather, find the grace that is there for me until light emerges.

~ Peace, Maria Pracher

A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark
Jan Richardson

Go slow
if you can.
Slower.
More slowly still.
Friendly dark
or fearsome,
this is no place
to break your neck
by rushing,
by running,
by crashing into
what you cannot see.

Then again,
it is true:
different darks
have different tasks,
and if you
have arrived here unawares,
if you have come
in peril
or in pain,
this might be no place
you should dawdle.

I do not know
what these shadows
ask of you,
what they might hold
that means you good
or ill.
It is not for me
to reckon
whether you should linger
or you should leave.

But this is what
I can ask for you:

That in the darkness
there be a blessing.
That in the shadows
there be a welcome.
That in the night
you be encompassed
by the Love that knows
your name.
**Early Morning**
Bill Eichhorn, 11/3/20

Early morning,
when the dew baptizes
a new day,
when the rising sun
glistens a garden
browned with autumn —

Early morning is when
“the watchful heart” *
awakens.

“The watchful heart” is from the poem “Everything Is Going To Be All Right” by Derek Mahon, below.

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**Everything is Going to be All Right**
Derek Mahon, from *Selected Poems*

How should I not be glad to contemplate
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?
There will be dying, there will be dying,
but there is no need to go into that.
The poems flow from the hand unbidden
and the hidden source is the watchful heart.
The sun rises in spite of everything
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.
I lie here in a riot of sunlight
watching the day break and the clouds flying.
Everything is going to be all right.

~ contributed by Sandra Weil
Sharing Stories
A Gradual Easing
Jerry White

We had just gotten to the North Coast. We checked into our very comfortable hotel room and headed to the beach in Little River. I sat on a log and watched the sun sparkle on the water and the waves. As I did, I felt a weight lift from my mind, my shoulders, my whole body. I was free again from thoughts of covid-19, urban wildfires, racial tensions, and the election.

It didn’t last quite that strongly for the two nights we were away. It was a gradual easing that I would nurture and bring back home. No cell service, no TV, walks on the Mendocino headlands and sweet dinners out together with my beloved. Lots of gratitude and feelings of enoughness.

A Lesson From the Past
Kathleen Hasse

While growing up in western Pennsylvania my parents instilled in me a “one foot in front of the other” kind of attitude. I distinctly remember the day and circumstance when that lesson came across to me. Little did I know then that there would be times in my life when I would remember that day and use that phrase to move forward.

This year of 2020 has been a rough year for all of us. The pandemic stopped us in our tracks, not to mention all the chaos swirling around our world. On a personal level my beloved partner Robert and my sister Marguerite died within six weeks of each other. That was an emotional, heart-wrenching time. I also had to find a new place to live. So, putting one foot in front of the other, I began by letting the universe know I needed a place to live, specifically, the right place. Then I began purging things I no longer had use for. Miracles have come to me in the past. I felt strongly there would be another at just the right time. I went to Yosemite with my family for some much-needed fun. A friend said to me “When you get back, your miracle will be here.” And it was! Here I am in just the right place. I say thank you to the universe of angels who led me to this place where I can relax, mourn the losses, and release the past. And thank you also to my parents who taught me to put one foot in front of the other!!
Stepping Past the Edge
Gail Lester, June 26, 2020

Band of pearl fog hangs low
on San Pablo Bay
where waters shine silver
in today’s early light, and
a turkey vulture seeks thermals to ride.

Reeds near shore
shimmer rice green on
indigo shallows
while we stand at the edge
of Summer’s honey grasslands.

By our trailhead,
we FaceTime briefly with two little
mountain girls,
but they cannot see us.
Where are you, Granny?
I love you girls,
I say, wondering where I am for them.

Then you sight a feather
on the path — Owl?
Who has loosed this work of beauty?

Mother quail races after her erratic
enduring chick. How do you know
it’s the last one? you ask.
Maybe others stand safe in the bushes.
Their sentry catches up
zig zagging past.

We lean against a wooden footbridge,
watch an orchestra of juncos
glean seeds from their hiding places
in dried June grass, trembling
stems uncontrollably.

A few more turns into the woodland,
a young buck darts to reach a fawn
uphill from the trail.
Leaps across our path, stubby
antlers fat with velvet.

Keep each other safe,
Protect our fellow beings.
All species need each other
in this breath holding world.
In the last year of my mother’s life, she would awaken often in the night, in pain. When I was with her we would talk about ways to ease her pain, and I suppose I hoped also to ease what I felt when in my home 600 miles away I would open my eyes to the dark night and wonder if she was awake, in pain, and feeling alone. I gave her some of my favorite tapes of relaxing, dreamy music, and we practiced together letting go into a place of deep relaxation.

On one of my visits I went into her bedroom in the morning and asked how she had slept. She said, “It was one of those nights. I was awake with the pain. So I put on my Angel Island tape.” “What’s that?” I asked. “It’s what I call this one,” she said as she tapped it with her finger. “It makes me think of those pictures you sent me long ago when your church would go to the top of Angel Island. Those red balloons going into so much blue. All that sun. Everyone so happy. So I turned it on and began the relaxing exercise. I don’t feel I was asleep. I don’t feel it was a dream—it was more like a vision.” As she began to tell me, I grabbed pen and paper and clicked on the recorder. Here are my mother’s words.

We’ve gone to Angel Island. After a while, it’s the time for the red balloons. We’re singing in a big circle, then there’s a blessing, and then the balloons are released. A wind comes up and some of us, we’re very light, lift up almost as quickly as the balloons. As I rise, I look about me and I recognize people—some from here, and from Arizona of course, even from Lake Forest, someone I recognize from France. We rise and drift, and as we lift into the blue, the same feeling is there from before when only balloons were rising. Everyone is looking up and smiling. People are pointing and saying what a beautiful sight. We know we see and feel more than the people on the ground. We hear the wind more strongly and it is warm and somehow feels—it’s hard to explain—but it feels as if it, the wind, is the path that has come for us. And we are not drifting with the wind, but feel solidly in it, on it, and great pleasure to be with it, as if it is an old friend. We see you all below in clear detail, although you are all straining to make us out against the blue. Some have begun to wander away and begin their picnics. Some children are playing. Some of you are watching still, shielding your eyes from the sun. Those of you who are watching are not laughing and talking anymore. You are quiet and watching until the very last possible sight of us. I feel such love for all of you. I look at each of you who are standing watch and I can see a beam that travels from me to you and when it hits you, both of us light up and glow for a moment and then . . . we are out of your sight, though we can still see you clearly. And you look for a few moments more and then quietly walk away. You are smiling. You watched ’til the end. One thing that was beautiful—it was all beautiful—when you walked away, you caught the hand of someone else and the light glowed for a moment between you.

Above is the photo I used. I took a picture of it from the little book I made. I don’t know what all those little white sparkles are, but I think they add rather than distract. They give it an other-worldly feeling.

~ Linda
A Precious Memory
Cathy Fox

I am sending this because it is a precious memory for me, and perhaps other Wisdom Seekers, of a serendipitous event. It was the annual Wisdom Seekers Christmas party. That year it was held at my house. We were each to bring a poem, song or story to share. After arriving, Sally Blackburn realized she had left her offering, “A Child’s Christmas in Wales” at home. She told of its significance and deep tradition for her, read every Christmas. Suddenly I remembered the miniature book my mother had slipped into my Christmas stocking when I was young. We sat in a circle, crackling fire, and each read aloud a page from the tiny book. When we were done twilight had descended. Sally’s tradition has become my tradition, reading Dylan Thomas, and when I do each year I see all the faces in that firelight, in that twilight, in that circle. Here is a short excerpt from “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.”

~ Cathy

One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the sea town corner now and out of sound except the speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.

... It was snowing. It was always snowing at Christmas. December, in my memory, is white as Lapland, though there were no reindeers.

But here a small boy says, “It snowed last year, too.” “But that was not the same snow,” I say. “Our snow was not only shaken from whitewash buckets down the sky. It came shawling out of the ground and swam and drifted out of the arms and hands and bodies of the trees. Snow grew overnight on the roofs of houses like a pure and grandfatherly moss....”

Years and years and years ago, when I was a boy, and there were wolves in Wales, and birds the color of red flannel petticoats whisked past the harp shaped hills, and we sang and wallowed all night and day. ...it snowed and it snowed.

Always on Christmas night there was music. An uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang “Cherry Ripe” and another uncle sang “Drake’s Drum.” It was very warm in the little house. Auntie Hannah, who had gotten into the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts and Death, and then another in which she said her heart was like a Bird’s Nest and then everybody laughed again; and then I went to bed. Looking out my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steadily falling night.

I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words into the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.
During these dark and wintery days when the light slips away in late afternoons, I have a tendency to remember my childhood and the place where I grew up. This was in Ardmore, Pennsylvania. Memories can be a “light in the darkness.”

~ Barbara

It was a new house built of stone, on a deep suburban lot near the Philadelphia county line and we moved into it just before the second World War was declared on December 7, 1941. We shared a driveway with the next door neighbor and did not build a fence so our back yards could remain large enough for a small baseball field, where all the neighborhood kids could play. I was the only girl in a neighborhood full of boys. My father’s “victory garden” produced delicious beefsteak tomatoes; shelling peas, limas and green beans were tied to poles in the far corner of the lot, and another neighbor grew enormous yellow sunflowers providing seeds for snacks. Mother grew purple iris in the spring and dark red roses in the summer, and I spent hours reading books outdoors under the large sheltering apple tree. Our car was kept in the driveway so I could use the garage as a stage for putting on performances, mostly song and dance numbers starring myself and whoever I could persuade to join me. Dressing as Carmen Miranda was a favorite costume. My father built a wooden puppet theater so I could manage to perform with marionettes. I was writer, producer and stage manager from Kindergarten until fifth grade. Any money earned went to the Red Cross during those early times.

During the war, practice blackouts were held at night since the Philadelphia Navy Yard was a mere twenty miles away by air. All lights turned off, my parents and I huddled in the den of the house, black shades pulled down at the window, listening to the radio which had a large green light that glowed in the dark. We heard Tokyo Rose propaganda among other news. The enemy never reached our shores, except for a slight skirmish off the coast in New Jersey. Comic books featured Terry and the Pirates and the Dragon Lady.

For Fourth of July, I would decorate my bicycle with red, white, and blue crepe paper. The American Legion was housed in a commercial building on Sutton Road and when D-Day was declared, I rode my bike in a local parade and joined the celebration there. I walked to school by myself two blocks away, from first through sixth grade. I was independent and an only child for eight years. My bedroom faced a large deck where I could see the stars at night. I had privacy and wrote poetry.

At Christmastime we hung stockings by the fireplace and hauled in a fresh evergreen tree the day before Christmas. (I still have the Bavarian ornaments from those days.) The scent of sugar and spices rose from the kitchen where mother baked dozens of cookies with the help of my grandmother, who always visited for the holidays. We decorated the tree, the cookies, and the outside doorway in the bitter cold, frequently stringing lights among snow flurries. Add I remember sliding under the tree, secured in its stand and decorated with strands of bubble lights, to look up into green boughs twinkling with color. It was magical.

Everything waited to be done the day before Christmas. Sterling silver, antique china, l and crystal goblets were set upon the white linen tablecloth in the dining room. Candles and greenery decorated the mantelpiece and windows. Bing Crosby sang White Christmas all day long on the radio. From the time I was four, it was a tradition for me to recite “‘Twas the Night Before Christmas” with appropriate hand motions. Before I fell asleep on Christmas eve, I was sure I heard the prancing of reindeer hooves on the roof.

Our family lived in the house on Sutton Road for nearly sixty years. I lived there when I commuted to Drexel University in Philadelphia. My younger sister resided there with her husband many years after I moved to California and after my parents retired to Lancaster County. The house still stands, almost eighty years old.
Suddenly
Linda Spence

You know what I mean...you’ve hopefully put on some music, and you are walking through the room collecting the detritus from the day before, that magazine, and that one, the unfinished editorials, those 2 books, the cushion, a stray dish towel, 3 pens and a notebook, when suddenly the soprano flies to that impossible note and the orchestra sweeps full on high and then the tenor meets her half way down where they blend and soar together and you must, simply must lift your chin high and fling your arms into the air once twice and grin wide as the tears flood your vision...and everything in the room, the detritus, all of it, everything glows in beauty.
Coping and Hoping
Greeting Card Wisdom

My sister-in-law sent me a card a few years ago and I liked the words, though I don’t know who wrote them.

~ Eloise Rivera

Count your garden by the flowers, never by the leaves that fall
Count your days by the golden hours, don’t remember the clouds at all.
Count the nights by the stars, not shadows.
Count your life by smiles, not tears.

____________________________

Working Together
David Whyte

We shape our self to fit this world and by the world are shaped again.
The visible and the invisible working together in common cause, to produce the miraculous.
I am thinking of the way the intangible air passed at speed round a shaped wing easily holds our weight.
So may we, in this life trust to those elements we have yet to see or imagine, and look for the true shape of our own self, by forming it well to the great intangibles about us.

~ contributed by Sandra Weil
What Will Become of Us…?
Gail Lester, 2020

you asked as you stood to go,
eyes pooled with worry
that mirrored our civilization.

Today a great flock of waxwings
streaked from the tops of cedars,
like a fair-haired flurry of leaves
in fall. A pair of swallows
surveyed the scene
from their wire above the street.
A jay wants to be in this poem.
Tapped on the window,
cocked his head.
I have pressed my nose into
cool apple blossoms this morning,
and poured fresh water for birds.

Robins Bathing
Marie-Claire Dole
What Keeps Me Going During These Trying Times?
Shannon Griffin

My husband being patient and kind, and providing perspective when I am stressed and tired from work at the Public Health Department.

My dog, who loves me unceasingly and in the sweetest of ways.

The birds in our yard who eat from our many bird feeders and bathe in our water fountain. My soul is soothed by them, a smile comes to my face every time.

Friends with whom I laugh, sometimes even belly laughs. Every laugh is worth the wrinkle.

My gratitude journal which helps me put things into perspective for my many blessings. How I wish I could wave a magic wand so that everyone could feel blessed, safe and healthy.

Mental jujitsu — I stop myself from dwelling on all those suffering from the pandemic who I cannot help. It is overwhelming. Then I find ways that I can help, financially and emotionally. Then I let go. And then it all begins again.

Keeping an eye out for the silver linings to this pandemic — there have been many. I should start writing them down. Heck, I will start writing them down!

Laughing out loud with friends from work. In the middle of a pandemic, it is the best medicine.

Being especially kind on the phone, especially when I am working, so the other person on the line feels good at the end of the conversation.

My church community means the world to me. No words are sufficient. But I must say thank you and that you make my heart smile.
What Helps Me Navigate and Reorient in This Time of Change?
Lillie Kocher

What helps me navigate and reorient in this time of change?

Connection. To everyone. Everything. You. Me. God. Nature. Life. My body. Mind. Spirit. All that is. Expressed in every form — all the senses — all our creations and imaginings through music, videos, books, poems, film, talking, laughter, singing, dancing, moving; you name it. It boils down to seeing you on Zoom, talking to my daughters, sister and brothers, calling you up, walking, saying hi and petting the dog, aweing at the trees and flowers and sky. Appreciation. I don’t know what God is — who really does? But there is a something that runs and oversees it all. I contemplate the mystery that is life, me, and God. And I love it even when I’m anxious, lonely, depressed, inadequate, afraid of its unknowns and uncertainties. I need it. I need love. I love you. Myself. Them. All of it. Call it prayer, meditation, it’s Presence, even when I’m avoiding it, it’s Reality.

I pray to do some good. To contribute to solving some of our human challenges. Bring more awareness of love to our human tribe. Some healing. Forgiveness. Understanding. Tolerance and patience with one another. Which brings me to Commitment. An urge to help every being share in the blessings of life — the peace, liberty, abundance of goodness that the God of it all made possible for us — if we do what God’s wise leaders tell us to heal our divides and wounds and promote a good life for everyone. I only feel at peace if I share and give my life energy beyond me, staying connected to life.

What new world might we be moving toward?

Hopefully one where we humans evolve to greater life-giving connections. May the sacred awe and holy awareness of God’s gifts of life to everyone be illumined at Christmas, and inspire our human love to match that of God, for our entire rainbow connection.
I Say Yes!

Amaeya Rae

I Say Yes!
Can we as humans move
    from an ego-centric, ethno-centric “me and mine” focus
to a global-centric, life-centric, inclusive focus?
I say Yes!
Are we capable of shifting our belief
    from “Might makes Right”
to “Right makes Might”? 
I say Yes!
Can we shift
    from competition and win/lose
to collaboration and win/win?
    (and eventually one/one)?
I say Yes!
Can we move
    from the need for external policing
to the ability to regulate our own behavior?
I say Yes!
Can we shift
    from our humanity obscuring our divinity
to our divinity expressed in our humanity?
I say Yes!
What say you?
Life Goes On
Howard Thurman
from Meditations of the Heart

During these turbulent times we must remind ourselves repeatedly that life goes on. This we are apt to forget. The wisdom of life transcends our wisdoms; the purpose of life outlasts our purposes; the process of life cushions our processes. The mass attack of disillusion and despair, distilled out of the collapse of hope, has so invaded our thoughts that what we know to be true and valid seems unreal and ephemeral. There seems to be little energy left for aught but futility.

This is the great deception. By it whole peoples have gone down to oblivion without the will to affirm the great and permanent strength of the clean and the commonplace. Let us not be deceived. It is just as important as ever to attend to the little graces by which the dignity of our lives is maintained and sustained. Birds still sing; the stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields, and the heart is still inspired by the kind word and the gracious deed. There is no need to fear evil. There is every need to understand what it does, how it operates in the world, what it draws upon to sustain itself. We must not shrink from the knowledge of the evilness of evil. Over and over we must know that the real target of evil is not destruction of the body, the reduction to rubble of cities; the real target of evil is to corrupt the spirit of man and to give to his soul the contagion of inner disintegration. When this happens, there is nothing left, the very citadel of man is captured and laid waste. Therefore the evil in the world around us must not be allowed to move from without to within. This would be to be overcome by evil. To drink in the beauty that is within reach, to clothe one’s life with simple deeds of kindness, to keep alive a sensitiveness to the movement of the spirit of God in the quietness of the human heart and in the workings of the human mind — this is as always the ultimate answer to the great deception.

~ contributed by Dave Long
Brian Doyle was an author whose prodigious literary output earned him numerous honors including the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature. He died in 2017 from complications related to a brain tumor. He was sixty years old.

Gail Lester contributed this prayer to the reader. It is filled with gratitude, humility and humor, which is probably why she wanted to share it with you.


Personally I never thought a cool woman would come close to understanding me, let alone understanding me but liking me anyway, but that happened!

And You and I both remember that doctor in Boston saying polite but businesslike that we would not have children but then came three children fast and furious!

And no man ever had better friends, and no man ever had a happier childhood and wilder brothers and a sweeter sister, and I was that rare guy who not only loved but liked his parents and loved sitting and drinking tea and listening to them!

And You let me write some books that weren’t half bad, and I got to have a career that actually no kidding helped some kids wake up to their best selves, and no one ever laughed more at the ocean of hilarious things in this world, or gaped more in astonishment at the wealth of miracles everywhere every moment.

I could complain a little here about the long years of back pain and the occasional awful heartbreak, but Lord, those things were infinitesimal against the slather of gifts You gave mere me, a muddle of a man, so often selfish and small. But no man was ever more grateful for Your profligate generosity, and here at the very end, here in my last lines, I close my eyes and weep with joy that I was alive, and blessed beyond measure, and might well be headed back home to the incomprehensible Love from which I came, mewling, many years ago.

But hey, listen, can I ask one last favor? If I am sent back for another life, can I meet my lovely bride again? In whatever form? Could we be hawks, or otters maybe? And can we have the same kids again if possible? And if I get one friend again, can I have my buddy Pete? He was a huge guy in this life — make him the biggest otter ever and I’ll know him right away, okay? Thanks, Boss. Thanks from the bottom of my heart. See You soon.

Remember — otters. Otters rule. And so: amen.
Richard Rohr, American author, spiritual writer, and Franciscan friar explains that first come the structure and rituals that ground us. Mine:

Step outside
touch the earth
stand in the garden
inhale scent of gravel, fog, breeze.

Finger leaves and branches:
the furrowed pitcher sage
square edges of lipstick plant
fleshy cool Autumn Joy sedum.

Survey bees covering flower heads
of hyssop and rosemary,
hummingbirds in the scarlet Epilobium.

Ground myself with poetry — with the brave intimacy of Debby Buchanan’s work in my hands, its cover meticulously painted by Andy. She permits me to accept that life is complex, painful, hurtful, yet so, so tender.

The gift of sitting practice: Now I sit in my mountain-viewing chair, newly so, since we rearranged the furniture. I breathe, count my breaths…1,2,3,4, 1,2,3,4… My breathing expands, deepens. Soon I glimpse the eternal space between words.

On Portland nights, I sit across the room from you, on the sofa that escaped the revolution in Beirut? In Mosul? Transported to safety by a warlord. These days a pillow supports my back perfectly. In the morning, another pillow on the futon in the room that used to be Najib’s, your beloved father-in-law who lived out his last years here. Light streams through French doors.

And still back home, I sit many times on Grama’s rocker, the one with the spring poking through and the plaid upholstery Mom chose in the seventies. All: sanctuaries.

But Rohr also tells me resilience requires new places to lay our eyes:

On days when I feel despair, I stamp Vote your Power postcards in Fran’s courtyard, surrounded by purple petals.

Last week I joined Ellie and Tracey for a walk along Crowne Beach in Alameda. A three-mile expanse with hardly a soul on it. Just a gentle warm breeze, lapping waves, sand beneath my toes and jaw-dropping views of the San Francisco skyline.

At home I explore neighborhoods I’ve never walked, most right here in town, like the Forbes area, where so many art rocks make me wonder if there was some park and rec class I missed. One long property hosts a rock to honor every victim in recent memory lost to death by police. Several other yards paint out the words Biden-Harris.

Telling you, you brightened… “You could paint one that says Biden-Harris Rock!” (And we did.)

So I learn to gaze more, to watch titmice, to have faith that goldfinches will come, and take comfort that I don’t need to “own” Babu Nob Kitten, who visits, but lives out her own spirit and walks her own path, answering to several aliases throughout her territory.
Hope

I have a book called *An Almanac for the Soul* by Marv and Nancy Hiles, from which I usually read an entry each morning. In my den, however, I have a bookshelf of books some of which I haven’t opened for years. I found this entry in a book entitled *All the Days of My Life*, also by Marv and Nancy. I found an entry for December 8th which to me speaks to the times we are living this year.

~ Sally Blackburn

Hope is the ability to picture ourselves coming out the other side of whatever chasm of pain, disease, or tragedy in which we might find ourselves. Hope leans ahead into the reality of what we envision. It is time as a country to dream our way into a new and better world, to change our self-image — to become servants rather than masters, in the community of nations.

*Dreamboat*
Jeanie Tomanek
As We Wait
and Celebrate
Celebrating and Waiting

Three Quotes

Celebrating the Holidays

To celebrate these holidays is to do much more than buy presents, open them, cook dinner, show up for dinner, or make children happy. The joy is not just for children. It’s for each and every one of us.... Once we recognize the real power of holidays, we begin to approach them with deeper devotion. A holiday is a holy day, and holiness doesn’t happen to us. Holiness is a choice we make, and holidays are portals of energy through which the experience of things that matter most is increased within us and in the world in which we live. Bear witness to what happened to someone else two thousand years ago or more, and you will enter the timeless dimension in which it is happening to you.

~ Marianne Williamson
Everyday Grace: Having Hope, Finding Forgiveness and Making Miracles

~ contributed by Christopher Love

The Blessedness of Waiting

The blessedness of waiting is lost on those who cannot wait, and the fulfillment of promise is never theirs. They want quick answers to the deepest questions of life and miss the value of those times of anxious waiting, seeking with patient uncertainties until the answers come. They lose the moment when the answers are revealed in dazzling clarity. The greatest, the deepest, the most tender experiences in all the world demand patient waiting.

~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Christmas Sermons

~ contributed by Sandra Weil

Waiting

I had tended to view waiting as mere passivity. When I looked it up in my dictionary however, I found that the words passive and passion come from the same Latin root, pati, which means “to endure.” Waiting is thus both passive and passionate. It’s a vibrant, contemplative work. It means descending into self, into God, into the deeper labyrinths of prayer. It involves listening to disinheritied voices within, facing the wounded holes in the soul, the denied and undiscovered, the places one lives falsely. It means struggling with the vision of who we really are in God and molding the courage to live that vision.

~ from When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction For Life’s Sacred Questions
Sue Monk Kidd

~ contributed by Christopher Love
‘Twas the Week Before Christmas
Lisa Bogart

Our congregation may be older, but we are young at heart, especially at this time of year. And 2020 is no different. The light of the season still shines. I wrote the following poem twenty-three years ago when I still had a four-year-old at home. I share this with you as a reminder of the best part of Christmas, the part that never changes, pandemic or not.

~ Lisa

‘Twas the week before Christmas and all through the house
There were unfinished projects piled, making me grouse.
Some presents were wrapped with extra good care
But would have to be mailed or they’d never get there.
The vision I’d had of handwritten cards
Danced out of my head with other project discards.
My days had been filled with mountains of crap
And all that I wanted was a long winter’s nap.
Christmas used to bring magic with cookie dough batter.
I slumped in my chair and I pondered the matter.
Where had I gone wrong?
I thought with a humph.
I’d better get out of this pre-Christmas slump.
But how to connect with the magic I miss?
And reach for some level and holiday bliss?
When what to my wondering eyes should appear?
But my four-year-old son, whom I hold very dear.
“Is it time to make cookies?”
he asked in a rush.
I squashed my first thought — to tell him to hush.
His bright eyes were eager,
“Let’s measure the flour?”
I sighed as I thought: This’ll take more than an hour.
Somewhere in the mixing and tasting and mess
I forgot all the things that were bringing me stress.
The happiest parts of December I’ve found
Are intangible treasures that ‘round me abound.
Singing Rudolph at high pitched and multiple squeals,
Not reaching for bargains or incredible deals.
Walking at night to view neighborhood lights,
Not checking and planning for pre-Christmas flights.
Christmas is in the eyes of my son.
Mary had the same thought about her Little One.
I share in her joy of this most festive season.
I know the hefty heap of hype is the reason.
I feel overwhelmed with the time tasks demand.

Really there’s only one thing He commands:
“Honor My Son and love Him as yours.
He’s the one piece of Christmas to truly adore.
Not sweaters or bikes or trinkets or trees,
Just discover my love on your bended knees.”
I’ll hold onto this thought as the floodwaters rise
When I wade through the mall in search of some prize.
The joy of this season is clasped deep within
I smile and thank Him. Let peace begin.

Artwork by Lisa Bogart
On the Pulse of Morning

Maya Angelou

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Mark the mastodon,
The dinosaur, who left dry tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.
But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.
I will give you no hiding place down here.
You, created only a little lower than
The angels, have crouched too long in
The bruising darkness,
Have lain too long
Face down in ignorance.
Your mouths spelling words
Armed for slaughter.
The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me,
But do not hide your face.
Across the wall of the world,
A river sings a beautiful song. It says,
Come rest here by my side.
Each of you a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
Yet, today I call you to my riverside,
If you will study war no more. Come,
Clad in peace and I will sing the songs
The Creator gave to me when I and the
Tree and the Rock were one.
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your
Brow and when you yet knew you still
Knew nothing.
The River sings and sings on.
There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,
The African and Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree.
They hear the first and last of every Tree
Speak to humankind today. Come to me, here beside the River.
Plant yourself beside the River.
Each of you, descendant of some passed
On traveller, has been paid for.
You, who gave me my first name, you
Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then
Forced on bloody feet,
Left me to the employment of
Other seekers — desperate for gain,
Starving for gold.
You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede, the German, the Eskimo, the Scot.
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,
Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare
Praying for a dream.
Here, root yourselves beside me.
I am the tree planted by the River,
Which will not be moved.
I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree
I am yours — your passages have been paid.
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.
Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.
Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands.
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts.
Each new hour holds new chances
For new beginnings.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.
The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out upon me, the
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.
No less to Midas than the mendicant.
No less to you now than the mastodon then.
Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope —
Good morning.

Maya Angelou
Experiencing Advent

“Prepare you the way of the Lord”

Be like Mary, surrender
Say Yes to what is
Open up each week to the Light
Of the Advent wreath candles
To Hope, Love, Joy and Peace
In this darkest time of the year.
Open up to the Light
In the darkest places
In your heart and soul.

Welcome and celebrate
Not only the human person
Of Jesus, but more importantly
Make room for the Indwelling Christ-child
To be born in your soul,
The very heart of your Being.

Let the transformation begin anew
Let the Indwelling Christ-child
Become the center of who you are.
(“It is not I that live, but Christ in me.”)

Nurture that Child within
Allow this Child to grow
And bring Hope, Love
Joy and Peace to yourself
And to the world.

When Jane and I were travelling in Italy a couple of years ago, we were both surprised and touched by the number of Italian painters including Raphael, Fra Angelico and Botticelli that were moved to capture the poignancy and intimacy of the moment of Mary consenting to the angel of God’s calling her forth to receive the Divine presence into her body. We were particularly drawn to The Annunciation by Botticelli.

Peace and grace,
Richard
Carolyn Long and Barbara Buckley were colleagues as clinical social workers with cancer patients before they retired. The following piece was written by a chaplain with whom they also worked about an experience they had together — eighteen years ago!

Had the three wise men with gifts been two wise women in raincoats, they probably would have looked much like Carolyn and Barbara. Had I remembered that the Greek word for the three wise ones is *magi*, I probably would have known that something magic was about to happen.

Following a star of some sort, my two social worker colleagues arrived at my office door appearing a bit sheepish, freshly escaped from the rain, with an idea. “Remember Laura?” Carolyn asked. Yes, I did remember Laura. A woman in her forties, Laura has been sick for many years. She has outlived any prognosis for her death. She was referred to hospice once, but she didn’t die. Clinging to life, she is at home, too strong to leave this life, too weak to go anywhere. Laura is isolated, shunned by her family, and pretty much without any support. Living on the threshold of Life-Death. Laura used to go to church but hasn’t had the energy to go for a while. “Well, I had this idea,” Carolyn continued. “I thought that maybe we could sing a Christmas carol to her over the phone ....” Now that's an act of faith — asking me to sing!

Looking around on the shelf of old, dusty books, I dug one out that looked promising because its cover was the typical, unappealing church reddish-brown: *The Presbyterian Hymnbook*. “Silent Night” was deemed too depressing in its somber tune. “Glor-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ria” sounded upbeat. What song was that from again? None of us being real musical geniuses, we realized it must have been from “Angels We Have Heard On High” after we sang through the refrain and came to that line.

Ok, we were ready. Speaker-phone on. Carolyn thought that most likely we would leave our little carol on the answering machine, because most times Laura is too weak to pick up the phone. Yet the phone was picked up, and Carolyn explained what we had planned. Angels we have heard on high, singing sweetly through the night ... we began, none of us sounding all that sweet, but we made it through the song all right. In excelsis de-e-o, we finished a couple minutes later. Silence. Silence. More silence.

Then some sounds that clearly sounded like crying. Almost sobbing. “Oops, was this a little over the top?” I wondered. Between her sobs, Laura said that she didn’t know what to say, that she thought she was all alone, that now she knows someone is thinking of her. Carolyn pointed out what wasn’t a secret: “Well, none of us are real good singers ....” Laura simply said: “This is the most beautiful song I ever heard. Like from heaven. Like angels singing from heaven.” And then again and again: “This will keep me warm. This will keep me warm. This will keep me warm.”

I feel blessed to have been invited into this experience yesterday. This was truly an encounter of mutual giving and receiving. We were blessed by Laura allowing herself to receive the carol on a soul level, by allowing herself to share how this touched her. That was her gift to us.

I am utterly amazed how this little, simple thing meant so much to someone. Or, as Barbara said later, it took “no money, no time, no talent.” I can’t help but think of the simplicity that is reported in the narrative of Jesus’s birth: manger, bands of cloths, shepherds. No Hilton. No fancy orchestra. No money, no time, no talent. Just a simple connection with love. Sharing human divinity. Sharing divine humanness.

~ Birte Beuck, 12/20/2002

~ contributed by Carolyn Long and Barbara Buckley
Blessings at Year’s End
Howard Thurman
from Meditations of the Heart

I remember with gratitude the fruits of the labors of others, which I have shared as a part of the normal experience of daily living.

I remember the beautiful things that I have seen, heard and felt — some, as a result of definite seeking on my part, and many that came unheralded into my path, warming my heart and rejoicing my spirit.

I remember the moments of distress that proved to be groundless and those that taught me profoundly about the evilness of evil and the goodness of good.

I remember the new people I have met, from whom I have caught glimpses of the meaning of my own life and the true character of human dignity.

I remember the dreams that haunted me during the year, keeping me ever mindful of goals and hopes which I did not realize but from which I drew inspiration to sustain my life and keep steady my purposes.

I remember the awareness of the spirit of God that sought me out in my aloneness and gave to me a sense of assurance that undercut my despair and confirmed my life with new courage and abiding hope.

~ contributed by Dave Long

Lighting the Way

The Hermit stands alone on the top of a mountain. The snow-capped range symbolises his spiritual mastery, growth and accomplishment. He has chosen this path of self-discovery and, as a result, has reached a heightened state of awareness. In his right hand, he holds a lantern with a six-pointed star inside; it is the Seal of Solomon, a symbol of wisdom. As the Hermit walks his path, the lamp lights his way — but it only illuminates his next few steps rather than the full journey. He must step forward to see where to go next, knowing that not everything will be revealed at once. In his left hand, the side of the subconscious mind, the Hermit holds a long staff (a sign of his power and authority), which he uses to guide and balance him.

~ Brigit Esselmont
from the website biddytarot