

**A REBIRTH OF WONDER**  
**A Sermon Delivered at**  
**First Parish in Needham**  
**Unitarian Universalist**  
**Sunday, December 8, 2010**  
**The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister**

**READING**

from *I Am Waiting*

**Lawrence Ferlinghetti**

I am waiting for my case to come up  
and I am waiting  
for a rebirth of wonder  
and I am waiting for someone  
to really discover America  
and wail  
and I am waiting  
for the discovery  
Of a new symbolic western frontier  
and I am waiting  
for the American Eagle  
to really spread its wings  
and straighten up and fly right  
and I am waiting for the Age of Anxiety  
to drop dead  
and I am waiting  
for the war to be fought  
which will make the world safe  
for anarchy  
and I am waiting for the final withering  
away  
of all governments  
and I am perpetually awaiting  
a rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the second coming  
And I am waiting  
For a religious revival  
To sweep thru the state of Arizona  
And I am waiting  
For the grapes of wrath to be stored  
And I am waiting  
For them to prove  
That God is really American  
And I am waiting  
To see God on television  
Piped into church altars  
If they can find  
The right channel  
To tune it in on  
And I am waiting  
for the last supper to be served again  
and a strange new appetizer  
and I am perpetually awaiting  
a rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for my number to be called  
and I am waiting  
for the Salvation Army to take over  
and I am waiting  
for the meek to be blessed  
and inherit the earth  
without taxes  
and I am waiting  
for forests and animals  
to reclaim the earth as theirs  
and I am waiting  
for a way to be devised  
to destroy all nationalisms  
without killing anybody  
and I am waiting  
for linnets and planets to fall like rain  
and I am waiting for lovers and weepers  
to lie down together again  
in a new rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the great divide to be  
crossed  
and I anxiously waiting  
For the secret of eternal life to be discovered  
By an obscure practitioner  
and I am waiting  
for the storms of life  
to be over  
and I am waiting to set sail for happiness  
and I am waiting  
for a reconstructed Mayflower  
to reach America  
with its picture story and TV rights  
sold in advance to the natives

and I am waiting  
for the lost music to sound again  
in the Lost Continent  
in a new rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the day  
that maketh all things clear  
and I am waiting for retribution  
for what America did to Tom Sawyer  
and I am waiting

. . .  
to get some intimations  
of immortality  
by recollecting my early childhood  
and I am waiting  
for the green mornings to come again  
for some strains of unpremeditated art  
to shake my typewriter  
and I am waiting to write  
the great indelible poem  
and I am waiting  
for the last long rapture  
and I am perpetually waiting  
for the fleeting lovers on the Grecian Urn  
to catch each other at last  
and embrace  
and I am awaiting  
perpetually and forever  
a renaissance of wonder

Now light is less, moon skies are wide and deep;  
the ravages of wind and rain are healed.  
The haze of harvest drifts along the field  
until clear eyes put on the look of sleep.

The sudden spider weaves a silken pear  
to keep inclement weather from its young.  
Straight from the oak, the gossamer is hung.  
At dusk our slow breath thickens on the air.

Lost hues of birds the trees take as their own.  
Long since, bronze wheat was gathered into sheaves.  
The walker trudges ankle deep in leaves;  
The feather of the milkweed flutters down.

The shoots of spring have mellowed with the year.  
Buds, long unsealed, obscure the narrow lane.  
The blood slows trance-like in the altered vein;  
Our vernal wisdom moves from ripe to sere.

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Wonder comes in many forms. I think of a colleague of mine who was driving home from church one Sunday feeling particularly pleased with his performance in the pulpit that morning. So he found himself musing to his wife, “I wonder how many really *great* preachers we have in liberal religion these days.” To which she responded, “One fewer than *you* think, my dear.”

There are two great themes for this time of year: wonder, and waiting. A growing number of Unitarian Universalist congregations organize their worship and programmatic life around such themes. Next year we’re going to try such an experiment here in Needham. There are many reasons for doing this – including the ability to integrate the reflections of children and adults, and to name the seasonal themes that transcend the particular traditions that inform the religious pluralism we cherish. Advent, Hannukah, the many other “festivals of light,” all seem to involve both waiting, often in a time of spiritual as well as physical darkness, and then a rebirth of wonder. Ferlinghetti’s poem captures both.

Parents sometimes ask me how to we should transmit the traditional stories of this season to our children, especially if we don’t believe them literally. I tell them that “wonder stories” are those that are not literally true, just eternally true. That is, they embody or symbolize an eternal truth. Take the story of the Hannukah miracle. You know how the story goes: When the Maccabees surprisingly defeated the much larger forces of the Greek-Syrian king, Antiochus, and removed his idolatrous statue from the Temple, they found that there was only a small, seemingly one-day supply of sacred oil with which to relight the Eternal Flame. And it would take a whole week to properly consecrate a new supply. Yet the wonder was that the flame kept burning for eight days, not just one.

Well, how often have you or ever felt exhausted? -- depleted, saying, “There’s not enough in me to keep going. I’m sputtering, about to burn out,” only to find that we are somehow refueled from some wondrous source within not quite of our own making?

I don’t know about you, but this year I find myself feeling particularly dark and gloomy about the state of the world, the economy, our politics, the quest for equity, justice and human rights.

Just the other morning I had been doing some early morning biblical study, which is part of my Advent practice, and I had been reading in Isaiah, “O my people, your leaders mislead you . . . What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? Says the Lord God of hosts.” [Isaiah 3:12b, 15] I’d been pondering the old English carols Benjamin Britten selected for his *Ceremony*. You can tell that many of the country folk who originated them didn’t believe everything that “clerkes finden in their book,” about apples and gardens. But they find inspiration in the idea that the world was changed when people began to believe that the Holy appeared in human form in a poor, unmarried woman’s child, born in a stable, not a palace.

Then I came out of my study to read the newspapers and have breakfast with Gwen. Soon I was tossing the paper down with disgust, as I read about the Senate minority resolving to hold up all legislation – whether on unemployment benefits, food safety, arms control, or the end of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” -- unless tax cuts continue for the richest 2% of Americans.

“Well, that’s it!” I said to Gwen. “Sign me up for the class war! Cutting the budget deficit requires sacrifice by everyone it seems, except those who already have most of the wealth!” Then I added a few well-chosen words I won’t share from the pulpit.

Gwen was doing some physical therapy exercises on the finger she broke in an accident a few weeks ago. She looked up calmly and said, “The miracle is that my fingers can now bend again. You have to wonder when they’ll learn to do the same.”

Emerson once said, “The one miracle that God works evermore is in Nature and imparting himself to the [human] mind,” adding, “I can believe a miracle because I can raise my own arm.” Gwen had just reminded me of that wisdom, and humbled and calmed me. “I’m just waiting,” said I, taking a deep breath.

But as I began my day, I decided not just to wait. So I sent off an email to Senator Brown, telling him what I think of holding justice hostage. It may not change his mind, but it certainly made *me* feel better. Then, as I pondered how not to let my own spiritual fuel supply run low this winter, I took another breath, and then another. “This is how the Buddhists do it,” I thought. “They attend to the miracle, the wonder, of not only breathing, but of being involuntarily breathed, in and out - - breathing out impatience, breathing in the here-and-now.

When I went outside, I noticed the last dry, golden leaves on the trees sparkling in the sun and fluttering in the wind; the clouds scooting by in the sky overhead. Then I got in the car to go see,

for the second time this month, a newborn infant and mother. Talk about a wonder, a miracle! Coming home, I pondered the wonder story told in Advent about Mary, the mother of Jesus, visited by an angel, and told that she should not be afraid, and singing that God has expanded not only her womb, but her soul.

“She did not cry, ‘I cannot, I am not worthy,’” writes Denise Levertov,  
“nor, ‘I have not the strength.’  
She did not submit with gritted teeth,  
raging, coerced. Bravest of all humans,  
consent illumined her.  
The room filled with its light,  
the lily glowed in it,  
and the iridescent wings.  
Consent, courage unparalleled  
opened her utterly.”

And so I ask: is it beyond us, in this season, to cease *waiting* for a rebirth of wonder, and instead consent to its coming? To set aside just a few moments each day to be refueled by the wonder of existence itself, as a precious, passing miracle?

There are two ways to go through life, declared Emerson. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is.

“Listen,” says Mary Oliver, “are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?”

“Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?”

So don’t just wait for a rebirth of wonder. Prepare for it now. Consent to its rebirth within you, and you will never lack for the gladness which is gratitude, which fuels compassion for others, and which prepares a way for justice, and welcomes true peace.

So may it be, in this holy season of singing and waiting and wonder, and all the days of our lives.  
Amen.

People, look East, the time is near of the crowning of the year.  
Make your house fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table.  
People, look East, and sing today: Love the Guest is on the way.

Furrows be glad. Though earth is bare, one more seed is planted there.  
Give up your strength the seed to nourish, that in course the flower may flourish.  
People, look East, and sing today: Love the Rose is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim, one more light the bowl shall brim,  
Shining beyond the frosty weather, bright as sun and moon together.  
People, look East, and sing today: Love the Star is on the way.

Benediction

poetry of Arthur Noyes

Knowledge, they say, drives wonder from the world;  
They say it still, though all the dust's ablaze  
With marvels at their feet while Newton's laws  
Foretell that knowledge one day shall be song.

We seem like children wandering by the shore  
Gathering pebbles colored by the wave  
While the great sea of truth from sky to sky  
stretches before us boundless, unexplored.

Go now in peace, and renew your souls in wonder.  
Amen and amen.