



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

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**Thresholds: *Lectio Divina***

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We are here. We are now. We have made it to the final week of this indescribable and interminable year of 2020. That alone calls for celebration - at the same time many of us may experience this time, this year, in this moment as far too somber for celebration. Even as we draw near to the end of this season of many holidays across so many countries and cultures, as we approach New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, there is space for stillness.

For years I have tried to take the final week of the year as a sort of extended Sabbath. In the before times I would often daydream of a world where most things simply stopped for the last week of the year. Hospitals and grocery stores would need to stay open of course, firefighters would need to take their shifts, veterinary offices could possibly set up rotations for working one year on, two years off...but maybe, just maybe, there would be some things we could stop for a week. Maybe for one week we wouldn't need to manufacture new cars or sell them to people. Perhaps we could go a week without buying a mattress or - as terrible as it sounds to some of us - a week without buying any books. Maybe for a week we could just BE. Yes, in the before times, if you stood near me for more than about five minutes in the latter half of December, you would probably hear me holding forth on this concept, this cultural holiday to mark this time of transition.

And then, 2020 happened.

Our hospitals and our grocery stores had to stay open. Our firefighters and our veterinarians needed to stay on duty. Others who could work from home, did. And many who couldn't work from home, lost jobs or lost hours at those jobs. Many of us are buying fewer things, taking more walks, reading more books, listening to more podcasts.

Yet... it doesn't feel much like a restful break. Now that our lives are the way they are, what would a break LOOK like at the end of this year?

Hold that question for a moment, please. Just hold onto it while I also talk about poetry.

Here's the thing about me and poetry. In school, I didn't care for it much. It seemed wispy and tenuous, the opposite of a good solid novel, full of robust characters and convoluted plots. Poetry felt inaccessible to me in part because I like words so much. By which I mean I like a LOT of words. I often write more than is needed and cut down. When I was younger I made the grave mistake of conflating QUANTITY with QUALITY. Crime and Punishment had to be better than "Nothing Gold Can Stay" simply on word-count alone, right!? (Wrong: they are both excellent and entirely themselves, their qualities different but bringing gifts of insight and image that have stayed with me for thirty years and more.)

But poetry has a stickiness that even the greatest novels usually don't achieve. One of the first poems I remember loving was not a poem I learned in school, but rather a poem that a character in a Stephen King novel loved. The character quoted the poem - called "Pursuit" by an American poet named Stephen Dobyns - so much that I went out and bought the book that poem was published in. The first book of poetry I ever bought. I still remember the first line: "Each thing I do I rush through so I can do something else." It is a poem about overwork, about exhaustion. It would also be a good poem to talk about 2020 with.

What would a break look like at the end of 2020? I call to your minds that question again, and this morning offer a humble answer for you to consider on your own. It might look like a close and quiet reading of a single poem.

This morning I invite us into a practice of Lectio Divina - literally “divine reading.” Lectio divina is an ancient Christian monastic practice dating to the 6th century of the Common Era, when the “rules” were codified by St. Benedict, though it is interesting to note that the idea of sitting quietly with a piece of Christian Scripture seems to be traceable to Origen Adamantius, a third century C.E. scholar often claimed as one of the first Universalists!

Over the centuries this practice has moved away from one that focuses only on the Christian scriptures. Close reading of other sacred texts from other traditions, close readings of important works of fiction and poetry - one of my favorite podcasts, “Harry Potter and the Sacred Text,” takes listeners on deep dives into the Harry Potter books as a way of pausing for examination, questioning, and contemplation.

The text I have chosen is the poem that Rev. Carl has already shared with us once during the Spoken Meditation - “Dead Stars,” by contemporary American poet Ada Limón.

There are four steps to Lectio Divina as is commonly practiced. I am going to share the steps with you, and then take you through “Dead Stars” as an exercise of using this sacred reading practice here at the turning of the year.

The first step is: Read. Take your time with the text, reading it in whatever way is comfortable. A printed copy, text on a screen, or listening to a recording of the words. This is not meant to be an academic reading, but rather to let you experience the words and notice any phrases or images that stick out to you particularly.

The second step is: Reflect. Read the passage again. Pay attention to the words and phrases and images that sparked something in you during step one. What are they trying to say to you? Are there questions they are asking you? Whatever emotions arrive, let them come. Unlike in some meditative practices, keep the words and emotions centered.

The third step is: Respond. Read the text a third and final time. Then spend some time writing - or perhaps in conversation with someone else, or perhaps playing music or painting or in some other way taking a physical action to respond to the words and emotions that carried the most weight for you at this time.

The fourth step is: Rest. Before returning to your day, rest and be grateful for what you have learned. Rejoice in the sacred within you and your inner peace!

Again, you can do this at any time, with any text that is important or meaningful to you. If a paragraph in an article you are reading strikes you, or a particular passage in an audiobook, you can take some time to absorb it several times.

Our ideas, and the way certain words, phrases, images sit with us can of course change over time. In fact, they should change over time! I am sure many of you have had an experience of revisiting a text - a favorite childhood book, or a television show, or a movie, or a particular song or painting or dance number - many years after you first experienced it, and having it bring up entirely different feelings and ideas! Sometimes you might wonder what on earth was so appealing to you about this text the first time - sometimes you might wonder why you stayed away from it for so long!

This poem has only lived with me for a few months, but it has been a great balm to me in that time. I will share the poem with you again, and ask Rev. Carl to share his beautiful slides as well. I will note that there was a link to this poem sent out in the emails announcing this service, so if you would like to spend more time with it, it is easy to read via that link or a quick Google search.

“Dead Stars,” by Ada Limón

Out here, there’s a bowing even the trees are doing.

Winter’s icy hand at the back of all of us.

Black bark, slick yellow leaves, a kind of stillness that feels  
so mute it’s almost in another year.

I am a hearth of spiders these days: a nest of trying.

We point out the stars that make Orion as we take out  
the trash, the rolling containers a song of suburban thunder.

It’s almost romantic as we adjust the waxy blue  
recycling bin until you say, Man, we should really learn  
some new constellations.

And it’s true. We keep forgetting about Antlia, Centaurus,  
Draco, Lacerta, Hydra, Lyra, Lynx.

But mostly we’re forgetting we’re dead stars too, my mouth is full  
of dust and I wish to reclaim the rising—

to lean in the spotlight of streetlight with you, toward  
what’s larger within us, toward how we were born.

Look, we are not unspectacular things.

We’ve come this far, survived this much. What

would happen if we decided to survive more? To love harder?

What if we stood up with our synapses and flesh and said, No.  
No, to the rising tides.

Stood for the many mute mouths of the sea, of the land?

What would happen if we used our bodies to bargain

for the safety of others, for earth,

if we declared a clean night, if we stopped being terrified,

if we launched our demands into the sky, made ourselves so big  
people could point to us with the arrows they make in their minds,

rolling their trash bins out, after all of this is over?

Now we have heard this powerful poem two times. What phrase or image or even single word is sticking with you? Does something resonate? Do you have questions you might feel as though the text is posing?

Each time I read this poem, something else sticks out to me. Here in this season, this liminal space between one year and the next, entering our second pandemic year, the “stillness so mute it’s almost in another year” stands out. There is a comfortable familiarity that I hear in the words “song of suburban thunder,” picturing my own waxy blue recycling bin as I trundle it down to the curb.

But the heart of this poem, for me, remains these lines: “Look, we are not unspectacular things. We’ve come this far, survived this much. What would happen if we decided to survive more? To love harder?”

Perhaps it's cheating to select a text that is literally asking questions of all of us, but they are worth spending time with: What WOULD happen if we decided to survive more? What WOULD happen if we decided to love harder?

What I love the most about this, at this tender and shifting time of year, is the gift the poet gives us before she asks us these hard questions of the heart. She is not asking from outside: she is a part of "we." And we - all of us, each of us, the whole of us together - are not unspectacular. There's a playfulness in that double negative. We pause, we think, oh! Oh goodness. Is she saying...that we ARE spectacular? She is. Because we are. And it is so hard to think of ourselves that way.

Our days grind. Our hearts waver. Our minds struggle. Our bodies tire, and sometimes they sicken, and add a whole new level of worry, of struggle, of wavering.

Perhaps hiding the compliment - the truth - inside that double negative softens us. We are NOT... and at the word "not" we are ready, ready to believe the criticism we think is coming, ready for a litany of lack, ready for another statement of our not-enough-ness, when suddenly: UNSPECTACULAR.

We were so ready to receive the harsh truth, and so when the truth arrives, there is a gasping, a softening. We are the stuff of stars. We are the legends writ large in the constellations. We are the story, we are the song, we stand in the streetlight spotlight and wonder - what more can we do?

This is the threshold invitation I give to you, that this poem gives to you at the end of this year unlike any other - take a moment to look back. What have you done this year you never thought you would have to do? What have you survived? What have you loved, no matter how challenging, no matter the struggle?

And then the other side of the invitation - to look ahead. To straighten up a little, to lift your chin, and lift your gaze to 2021. And here is what lands with me as the other Big Question in this poem: “What would happen [...] if we stopped being terrified?”

You do not have to answer this question now. Of course, you do not have to answer this question at all. But now that you have invited these questions into your hearts: “What if we decided to survive more, to love harder, to stop being terrified?”

As we draw near to the close of the reading and reflection that we are doing together as a community this morning, I invite us to reflect on the final lines of the poem. “What would happen [...] if we [...] made ourselves so big people could point to us with the arrows they make in their minds, rolling their trash bins out, after all this is over?”

More literal questions... but the unspoken question I receive from this poem is “After all WHAT is over?” This poem was published in a collection called *The Carrying* which was originally published in 2018, well before the current coronavirus pandemic. So that is what I am sitting with, as I cast my consideration into the year before us. There is always something else to be over, because there are not only always new things beginning, but there are things that have dragged on. Parts of our personal histories we haven't looked at. Our nation's continued hesitancy to truly engage with its legacy of oppression and white supremacy. Our shared struggles for economic justice, the sharp illustration this past year has given us of the inequity in our health care and support systems? Things also end that we love, that we mourn, that we miss. All these complicated things, what will future generations look to the sky and spell out there? Will they see our hearts there writ large, new constellations for a new age? Will we allow ourselves to be spectacular enough to tell those stories, to be the seed of legend - to be told for generations to come - of the time we decided to stop being terrified, to survive more, and to love harder?

And at the last, a reminder. The fourth step of *Lectio Divina* is rest. Let these words sit, or let them slip away. Write a response, write a poem to answer, play music, or allow



silence in. Rest for the year that has passed. Rest for the year to come. Rest to survive.  
Rest to love. Rest, my not unspectacular community. Rest. And then rise.