



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
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What Grows in the Dark?
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Meditation on *Gratitude*

In my family, my role at Thanksgiving is to prepare the desserts. Sometimes we stay very traditional with pumpkin pie; often we also add apple pie. I've branched out with a few variations, but there seems to be something about my family that wants to recreate the same experience, over and over again.

There's a precision to baking. All cooking is chemistry, but to produce a baked good the same way over and over again requires the proper re-creation of all elements - ingredients, time taken, temperature maintained. You cannot go opening the oven, pulling out the pie or cake or heaven forbid cheesecake or souffle or other truly delicate delicacy, and sticking a thermometer in it. There is a process to trust, that mostly happens outside our sight, in the darkness and warmth of our ovens.

Irish mystic and poet John O'Donohue writes, "When you sow things in the spring, you commit them to the darkness of the soil. The soil does its own work. It is destructive to interfere with the rhythm and wisdom of its darkness. [...] If you keep scraping up the garden, you will never allow anything to grow."

Gratitude is complicated. Here in this complicated season of gratitude, I invite you to take a look at the insert that was inside your order of service. The image there, the Celtic tree of life, is also displayed on our tapestry. When first going to hang up this tapestry, it occurred to me it is almost impossible to tell the top from the bottom - which is in fact the point. That which is above us, in the light, is equal to that which is the ground below our feet. The things we sow in darkness, that grow and thrive there, uphold us and fulfill us and sustain us. They form us, for good and for ill and for every complicated state of in-between.

Please imagine for a moment we are starting with the trunk of this tree. The middle, the axis, the center for the wild growth above and below. As we embrace the complication of this season, of the loss of light and warmth, we give thanks today for the complexity of the land on which we stand. I acknowledge this morning that this land has been home to humans for tens of thousands of years. Home to the Piscataway people, and Tuscarora, the Massawomeck who became a part of both the Seneca and Iroquois people, the Manahoac and other travelers of the Piedmont tribes of what are now Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania. I speak their names in gratitude.

I now invite you to settle comfortably into your seats, closing your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. Give your hearts and minds and bodies to meditation on gratitude, reflecting on the words of our Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo.

“Perhaps the World Ends Here”

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

Meditation on *Darkness*

“Each tree grows in two directions at once, into the darkness and out to the light with as many branches and roots as it needs to embody its wild desires.” Once again, these words are from John O’Donohue, from his beautiful book *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*.

Let’s look at our tree once again. We trace our way from our solid and sturdy trunk of gratitude - even if there are knots and bumps along the way, we trace down past the land on which we stand to the roots of our tree. The part of every growing thing that must rest, renew, and grow in darkness.

Here I am going to confess something to you, my dear community - I struggle with darkness. I am somewhat seasonally affected, and on cloudy days and especially at this time of year as the days grow shorter and shorter, I struggle. Perhaps some of you do too. When I try to work to reframe the apprehension and sadness that can come to me in the face of this darkness, I will confess something ELSE: I also struggle with these agricultural metaphors. Perhaps it is because I have never lived an agrarian lifestyle. Perhaps it is because I cannot even be trusted to keep a succulent alive. I read John O’Donohue’s metaphors and understand - for example - that it would be a very bad idea to dig up the potatoes I’ve planted every time I read an article about a better way to grow potatoes - but in plain fact the number of potatoes I have grown in my life is zero, and is likely to remain zero for the foreseeable future.

In search of a more helpful metaphor, I have come to one I would like to share with you now in a few moments of guided meditation.

Once again, I invite you to settle yourself into your seat comfortably. Please place both feet flat on the ground, and lift your arms up into the air over your head as you breathe in. As you breathe out, relax your arms into your lap. If any of these motions are unavailable to you, please make yourself comfortable. Please close your eyes, or cast your gaze downward if that is preferable to you.

It’s a beautiful fall day, and you decide to go out exploring with a few friends. You also

bring your dog with you. There are local legends of hidden tunnels nearby, and they say that if you find the right tunnel, one that came from an ancient castle, that tunnel might lead you to buried treasure!

You and your friends walk into the woods. There are leaves crunching underfoot. You can smell the crisp air, feel the crackle of leaves, and nearby you can hear the sound of a running river.

Suddenly, your dog runs ahead! He is sniffing and digging excitedly at the base of a fallen tree. You and your friends rush up to where the dog is, and see a deep hole! You clear aside brush and debris, and move some rocks. You toss a few rocks in the hole trying to figure out how deep it is. Finally, you decide to slide into the hole. After all, you are here to explore! One of you has brought a lamp, prepared for just such a discovery. It is scary, sliding down the tunnel. The tunnel is over 40 feet long! It is chilly and damp. And of course, it is dark.

When you and your friends are standing together at the end of the tunnel, you take a moment to get your bearings. You can hear water dripping somewhere. From above, you can hear your dog barking. There is a sound of scuffling, but it is just your friends' feet, as they nervously try to see in the dark. Finally one of you remembers that you have a lamp, and lights it. Please take a moment to imagine what you might expect to see at the bottom of a fifty-foot tunnel in the woods. [pause]

All that I have been telling you is a true story. This happened in September, 1940, in the French countryside. Four young men, led by Marcel Ravidat and his dog, Robot, found this tunnel and lit a lamp in this cave.

What they saw, when the lamp was lit, was a glorious mix of colors, lines, and shapes. There were drawings all over the walls. Animals of all shapes and sizes, bright reds and deep ochres and black lines and yellow highlights. The animals appeared to be moving in the light of the lamp.

In this moment, these young men beheld the ancient cave paintings at Lascaux, the work of human hands from 17,000 years before, creating imagined worlds that had remained unseen for all of recorded human history. This was art, grown in the dark. This was us, our human reflection.

Meditation on *Creation*

The cave paintings at Lascaux were creation - grown, preserved, protected, and only gifted back to us from our ancestors through the grace of darkness.

I invite you, once again, to consider our tree. We have moved from the sturdy if bumpy trunk, to the deep roots, and now to the growth above. That creation which cannot occur without the work of darkness. Growth arising from human hands and human hearts; protected and preserved in darkness. It is this comfort, this thought, this beauty I turn to in the coldest months, on the longest nights.

The paleolithic people who created the paintings at Lascaux worked mostly in darkness. They would light fires or place lanterns at the bottom of the cave to work, and also constructed scaffolding to allow them to reach higher, more remote parts of the cave. Imagine standing on a ladder to paint a ceiling - by the light of a candle set on the floor. Darkness, and isolation, allowed the pigments to remain in place to be discovered by four French teenagers many thousands of years later. After the discovery in 1940, the caves were opened to the public in 1948, after the terror of war had ended in France. By 1955, mold and lichens began to be noticed in the caves - the cumulative effect of so many humans, and so much light, placed into the space was harming the paintings. In 1963, the caves were closed to the public. One of the four young men who discovered the caves originally, Jacques Marsal, guarded the cave from its discovery onward, and in 1963 became its official guardian. (He remained a guide at Lascaux until his death in 1989.)

There is much, much more that we don't know about the creators of the paintings at Lascaux, or at any other paleolithic site containing the art of our ancestors. But here is some of what we do know. We know that humans of all ages had a hand in creating the images at Lascaux. We even know that, as with modern humans, the majority of those creators were right-handed. How do we know these things?

This brings us back, full circle, to our hand turkeys. Hand stencils - like our turkeys - are present at paleolithic sites around the globe. Not only in what is now Europe, but in what is now Indonesia, Spain, Australia, the Americas, and Africa, we have found the hand-prints of our ancestors. In many instances they are negative hand-stencils, created by holding the hand against the wall and blowing pigment against the back of it, to outline the hand in darker shades of ochre and deep red. Early humans - of many ages and hand-sizes - chose again and again to leave their mark by leaving the stamp of their existence on these dark and cool walls. They are some of the oldest art we humans have; art we choose to create again and again, placing our hand, our own signature, a

part of ourselves to outline for all to see.

On the insert, on your own picture of our tree, you have probably noticed a short URL at the bottom. If you choose to type this link into the browser of your choice, you will be taken to an episode of the podcast “The Anthropocene Reviewed,” by the novelist John Green. It was his observations about Lascaux in this podcast that planted the seed for these reflections, to return to an uncertain agrarian metaphor. I invite you to listen to it on your own if you should be interested.

Right now, I ask you to settle one last time. This time you do not need to close your eyes - I invite you to keep them open and examine your hands closely. If your sight is not strong, I invite you to explore your hands by touch - the right outlining the left, or vice versa. Of course if you did not make a hand turkey earlier, this would also be an excellent time for that. As you examine this most human instrument, that with which we plant, grow, and create even in the darkness, I will share these words from John Green’s podcast with you.

“[T]ourists can still visit an imitation cave, called Lascaux Two, in which the artwork has been meticulously recreated. Humans making fake cave art to save real cave art may feel like peak anthropocene behavior, but I have to confess that, [...] I actually find it overwhelmingly hopeful that four teenagers and a dog named Robot discovered a cave with 17000-year-old handprints, that the cave was so overwhelmingly beautiful that two of those teenagers devoted themselves to its protection, and that when we humans became a danger to that cave’s beauty, we agreed to stop going.”

“[The communities that created Lascaux] hunted and gathered, and there were no large caloric surpluses, so every healthy person would have had to contribute to the acquisition of food and water. And yet somehow, they still made time to create art...almost as if art isn’t optional, for humans.”