

"Cherish the Light"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
July 31, 2016

"Just Delicate Needles" Rolf Jacobsen

It's so delicate, the light.
And there's so little of it. The dark
is huge.
Just delicate needles, the light,
in an endless night.
And it has such a long way to go
through such desolate space.

So let's be gentle with it.
Cherish it.
So it will come again in the morning.
We hope.

.....

My friend Dave is a lighting designer. As I am someone drawn to light and shadows, I wish I could see the world – for even one day – through Dave's eyes. For example what does this sanctuary look like to him? What does he see as the light moves across the mural like a slow ocean wave?

He tells me about an exercise he has done with students.

A caveat: none of whom are blind. For many people who are blind, there is actually very little absolute darkness. More often sight consists only of light and shadow. And so the poet's words, "The dark is huge" may sit differently when light consistently overwhelms darkness.

Class begins. Gathered in a black box theater, the students may wonder what this successful artist will share. They are surprised when the first thing he does is he turns off the lights. As the class sits in total darkness he asks:

What do you recall of the light?
What can you recreate in your mind's eye?

Imagine: You are outside. It is night.
And you hear these words:

*It is so delicate, the light.
And there's so little of it. The dark
is huge.
Just the delicate needles, the light,
in endless night.
And it has such a long way to go
through such desolate space.*

Spencer Johnson is in the hospital again. He always manages to get a room with a view – from this window one sees the river and an expanse of sky. We set our sights to that view and we take in the light ... talk about the summer sky of late, the nightly light show we are being treated to.

We are quiet for a bit. And then ...

"The nurse came in yesterday and began to pull down the shade as if to shut the world out." Spencer tells me.

He stops her because looks for light all through the night – the delicate needles in the dark.

I do, too. Neither shades nor drapes have graced any bedroom where I've laid down to sleep. No shutter is drawn.

I am in college and living in an old house with 7 bedrooms – all occupied by beloved friends. 25 West Street has 25 steps that lead from the sidewalk to the porch and front door. A wide railing surrounds the porch. I frequently hop up and stand on this railing because I am the exact height that is the distance between the railing and the roof. I like to think that the porch fits me like a glove.

And the fits-me-like-a-glove porch rests within a lush cloud of trees that loom high above the street. As the daylight fades and then deep into the night, we sit on that porch knitting our stories together. In the huge darkness, light is like a delicate needle. It emanates from the streetlight and somehow, quite mysteriously; this light turns the tree's chartreuse leaves to a deep violet that mesmerizes. We rest in a "lush hush."

"Hush. Hush. Somebody's calling my name ... oh my Lord, oh my Lord, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

I hear this hymn as a still, small voice, as I travel from the memory of the dark, peaceful night through 34 years since and desolate space between.

Hush. Hush. Would that the world's din would hush.

I watch the convention as our country is being described in a way that can only be named as "dystopian." A terrifying place. Desperate. Hopeless. Chaotic. Violent.

And you may look up ... and out ... into the eyes of your brother, your sister, your country – in Maya Angelou's words – and you may wonder, in Dorothy Parker's words: "What fresh hell is this?"

About 25 Souls are gathering to study the wisdom of the great Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams. We are shoring up our strength and understanding so that we may claim what Adams calls a "tough faith" in these tough times. One of the criticisms liberal religion rightly receives is that we cannot come to terms with the nature and existence of evil. To the question, "What fresh hell is this?" a liberal religionist may blithely respond, "Oh, we don't believe in hell."

Yeah. Okay. Well.

We find it difficult to grapple with evil.

To which I would say, we best start grappling, Friends. The evil that is among us needs to be named so that it may be overwhelmed and put out by good.

The first step is admitting we have a problem, after all.

We need, in Adams' words:

"... a vitality that can break through old forms of behavior and create new patterns of community. But ... [it] is a much harder thing to accomplish than even the education of the mind; it is especially difficult among those who think they have found security."

How do people who understand themselves as secure break through old forms of behavior and create new patterns of community? What must we risk in order to do so?

We WON'T do it by sitting in front of the television, taking in hours of political conventions that by turns terrify and inspire, while smugly convinced that our way is the only and best way.

On this count, I plead guilty.

There's no way we're going to move through this time without mindfully maneuvering this desolate space.

The darkness is huge. The struggle is deep. But Ta-nehisi Coates (*Between the World & Me*) is convincing in his argument that struggle is even more important than is hope. As Easter does not come without Good Friday, hope does not come without struggle.

How do people who understand themselves as secure break through old forms of behavior and create new patterns of community? What must we risk in order to do so?

It's so delicate, the light.
And there's so little of it. The dark
is huge.
Just delicate needles, the light,
in an endless night.
And it has such a long way to go
through such desolate space.

And then the poet continues ...

So let's be gentle with it.
Cherish it.
So it will come again in the morning.
We hope.

How do people who understand themselves as secure break through old forms of behavior and create new patterns of community? What must we risk in order to do so?

As we sit in the long, desolate darkness, let's recall what we know of the light. Let's see what we remember in our mind's eye that we can then recreate.

Let's sit on porches and around tables and even at coffee hour with friends & family, and as importantly, with strangers, and share our stories.

Let's offer companionship to those who are ailing or lonely.

Let's be quiet and stare out windows and quell the temptation to speak at all.

Let's confront the demons we harbor that would have us rush to anger. The boorish, know-it-all, holier-than-thou, because-we-don't-believe-in-sin-or-evil-or-hell attitude when so many of our kin are living in hell on earth.

Let's listen for the still, small voice that would have us go out from this place and move through this time singing the songs we sing here together.

Let's move toward light.

Let's be gentle with it.
Cherish the light that travels though desolate space in unexpected ways and that helps keeps our hearts open.

Let's cherish each other.

Let's cherish the light.
So it will come again in the morning.

We hope.

But first: we struggle.

Amen.