

**The Long View**  
May 24, 2020  
Ann Kadlecek  
Readings and Reflection

**Opening Words:** *On the Other Side* by Lynn Ungar<sup>1</sup>

Through the looking glass,  
down the rabbit hole,  
into the wardrobe and out  
into the enchanted forest  
where animals talk  
and danger lurks and nothing  
works quite the way it did before,  
you have fallen into a new story.  
It is possible that you  
are much bigger—or smaller—  
than you thought.  
It is possible to drown  
in the ocean of your own tears.  
It is possible that mysterious friends  
have armed you with magical weapons  
you don't yet understand,  
but which you will need  
to save your own life and the world.  
Everything here is foreign.  
Nothing quite makes sense.  
That's how it works.  
Do not confuse the beginning  
of the story with the end.

**Story:** *The Almond Tree*, retold by Faye Mogensen<sup>2</sup> (adapted).

Talia's face was like a complicated map, full of ridges and wrinkles. Her back was bent over. And when she walked, she shuffled.

Still, she had a twinkle in her eye, and she always had a kind word for her neighbors, her children, her grandchildren and her great-grandchildren.

She spent most of her days in her rocking chair, looking out over her garden. If she had a visitor, she'd share memories of the old days. When she was alone, she'd remember to herself.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lynnungar.com/poems/on-the-other-side/>

<sup>2</sup> Faye Mogensen, *Ancient Stories for Modern Times* (Skinner House, 2016).

It was during one of those mornings alone that Talia surprised herself by making an ambitious decision. She made a phone call.

A few hours later, the doorbell rang. She directed the delivery man to carry the tall, skinny parcel to a bare corner of the garden. Then she paid him and waved him off.

Slowly, very slowly, she dug a big hole in the ground. It was hard work. Now and then she'd sit on a nearby lawn chair to take a break. But she got back up several times until eventually, the hole was just the right size.

Slowly, very slowly, she shuffled and rotated the bottom of the tall, skinny parcel into the hole. Then she sat back down to inspect it, and was satisfied.

Slowly, very slowly, she began to push the dirt back into the hole all around the bottom of the parcel. That too was hard work. Over and over again, when she got tired, she sat down on the lawn chair to take a break. Each time she got back up, until finally she was finished.

She unwrapped that tall, skinny parcel. And there it was. You've probably guessed – a beautiful sapling tree! She sat down once again to admire it.

About then, her neighbor arrived home and poked her head over the fence. She looked alarmed and said, "Talia, you be careful! What are you doing? Planting a tree? Someone your age? Is it an almond tree? It won't produce almonds for years?"

Talia laughed as she pointed at a very old tree in the opposite corner of her garden. Some of its branches were broken right off, others were bent with age. Most were bare, even though it was the middle of spring.

She said, "See that old almond tree? My great-grandmother planted it. I loved to climb it when I was a little girl. Its branches were strong. I felt safe there."

"Then, when I was a young woman, I picked some of its pink flowers and wore them in my hair. I think that's how my husband came to notice me."

"When I was a mother, I picked the almonds and roasted them for my family. When I was a grandmother, I rested in the shade of the almond tree."

"Now, I am a great-grandmother. I sit and remember, and mostly I am happy with my life. But a little while ago, I realized that I had never planted a tree. Never. It just didn't seem right. I have great-grandchildren. They need an almond tree."

"Of course!" said the neighbor, as she pledged to herself to do something for her great-grandchildren too, though she didn't yet have any.

I wonder what that will be. Perhaps she will plant a tree. As for Talia, after planting the tree, she returned to her rocking chair to look over her garden, and smile.

### **Reading:** Prophets of a Future Not Our Own<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> A prayer written for Cardinal Dearden by Fr. Ken Untener (later Bishop of Saginaw, MI) in 1979 on the occasion of the Mass for Deceased Priests, October 25, 1979. (abridged)). <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own.cfm>

by Fr. (later Bishop) Ken Untener

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent  
enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete. ...

This is what we are about.  
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an  
opportunity for grace to enter.  
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master  
builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

## Reflection

This is my last service in the first year of my internship with you. We're half-way through our time together. It started out pretty much as I expected – you all were doing normal congregation things – worship, faith formation, sharing circles, elder journey; you were supporting refugees and holding Black Lives Matter witnesses, making good coffee; and much more. And soon I was getting involved in lots of ways, learning from you, growing as a minister. I was on track, I was checking the boxes of all those denominational requirements for aspiring ministers. Things were unfolding pretty much as planned.

Well, now. So much for planning. My first sermon here, last September, I preached on “change” of all things. It was a very different world. This pandemic has upended our lives – there's so much new hardship, grief and stress; and anger about all the ways it didn't have to be this way. If you're a young person graduating now, you are entering a world that is so different from what you were led to expect. Being together, that simple joy I took for granted, is something we cannot do and it hurts. And planning? So many former plans (like my checklist) no longer make sense.

And today, we're approaching 100,000 people known to have died from this virus, in this country alone. A staggering number, almost certainly lower than the true number; almost certain to grow. A tragic number as we know that each of those people loved and was loved, and is grieved.

We're holding all of this. It's big. It's very hard. It's scary.

Might it help, now and then, to step back and take a long view?

To lift our gaze, even for a moment, from its fixed stare at the tragic mess of our present, to reconnect to those who came before and those who are yet to come. To remember that our journey follows a path that was begun by our ancestors and will be continued by people who will call us ancestors; and that each of our lives matters, but we cannot control, or even know, how it all works out. To remember that we are not now - and never were - independent, or alone.

My first introduction to a long view was as a child, when my Dad would respond to my setbacks and frustrations by saying “50 million years from now, nobody’s going to care.” It worked about as well as you probably imagine, but feel free to try that at home – you can let me know how it goes for you. It wasn’t theologically inspiring for me at the time, but this placement of cares in a geological time frame did help instill an understanding – even in this very self-centered child – that there is always a story larger than mine.

Taking a long view is not a denial of what is hard and unacceptable. It’s not about devaluing any lives or encouraging suffering now with a promise of a future reward. It is about remembering that we are all prophets of a future not our own, connected across time to a much larger story, and that our liberation is found in the joyful planting of seeds that will bear fruit long after we’re gone.

The long view inspires the planting of almond trees. Or, closer to home, the transformation of a little plot of land with an old decrepit shed out behind the church into the All Souls peace garden. [image]

Spencer Johnson spearheaded that project (with help from many other Souls) back in 2015, using funds from the bequest of Jean Hanor. [image]

Jean knew that All Souls was important, and Spencer knew that little plot of land would matter for those to come, though I doubt very much that either imagined it would be a place of respite for socially distant conversations in a pandemic. Like the rest of us, Spencer and Jean did not know how things would work out. [image]

They simply did their part very well – joyfully planting seeds - prophets of a future not their own.

Now this is easy for me to say, I know. I have food in my cupboard and a roof over my head. Fruit that appears after we’re gone is small comfort when there isn’t enough food right now! A long view may not be helpful (or possible) for everyone, all the time. But for me, these days, when I can lift my gaze, I’m finding the long view pointing toward three truths.

The first is that it’s OK to not know what I’m doing. To not have a plan. To feel at sea in an unsteady world. That’s how it is. We are not responsible for creating any particular life for ourselves or anyone else. All that is asked of us is to live our piece of the story – a piece we did not choose or earn - with courage, integrity and great love. To let go of the pieces that are not ours to carry, to let go of comparisons to an ideal story of what should be, so that we can do our part – whatever that turns out to be - very well.

That is all we can do. That is the best that anyone has ever done. And it is enough.

Enough, but not easy, especially (I think) for those of us who are white and not poor, who grew up believing that we can have security, permanent solutions to problems, and the outcomes we deserve. But we can’t. The liberation we find in taking a long view might be from the despair that comes with insisting that our life is supposed to be a certain way, freeing us to attend to the life that is.

The second truth for me is that our ancestors have left us some work to do. We speak a lot about the challenges of this moment. As we should – the suffering is real. But it was also hard, for many, before. Before this pandemic, people were dying unexpectedly and alone, in a system that deemed them insignificant. Going to the grocery store was not an option for some, because of food deserts or poverty; violence made it risky for others. Plenty of people were isolated and afraid, separated from their families by our immigration and criminal justice systems. Many could not get healthcare. Threats to democracy and the planet loomed large. There was loneliness then, too, and fear. A long view reminds me that our biggest problems were not caused by a virus and will not be solved by a vaccine. The unfinished work of our ancestors calls us still.

The third truth is that we have the tools we need. Our ancestors have given us great gifts, magical weapons we may not fully understand, but that we need to save our own lives and the world. Bread-baking skills passed through the generations, perhaps recently rediscovered. Soap – our ancestors' commitment to washing our hands with soap has given us the closest thing we have right now to a miracle drug. Sometimes, our best tools for navigating a difficult world are the common wisdom and practices of our ancestors – precious gifts for life's hard times.

Our religious ancestors have given us gifts – gifts of wisdom and practices of worshipping, celebrating, mourning, forgiving, coming together and making meaning. Our Universalist ancestors taught us that all are loved, and that wherever we're going, we go together. Caring for the most vulnerable, for the Universalists, is a theological imperative.

Our ancestors could not have foreseen this exact moment, but they have nonetheless given us a faith for now – rooted in love, with a message of interconnected healing and hope. It's a theology that tells us that no, we cannot gather now in person, because it is the most vulnerable who will suffer if we do. It also tells us that our faith and our community are bigger than our physical coming together, bigger than this moment in history. Holding fast to our ancestors' wisdom, we know that we are essential, All Souls is essential, and the way forward is together, with care for all. And our ancient practices of being in community, though they look and feel different now - and will for some time to come - are still what we need to save our own lives and the world.

May we cherish these precious gifts and use them to do our part very well.

And, in the second half of my internship, the second half of our time together, may we joyfully take those unplanned next steps, whatever they may be, not with certainty, but with integrity and with trust in one another and the love that holds us all – together, as prophets of a future not our own.

Amen