

## Let Yourself Become Living Poetry

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

December 6, 2009

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Sports fans are the most hopeful people in the world. For some their other vices perhaps, we can surely say that sports fans have this one virtue. Hope springs eternal at the beginning of every season. A few years back they had one of my favorite Super Bowl commercials. It showed all of these famous football players and coaches who had not made it to the Super Bowl that year, relaxing on the beach, playing golf, hanging out at home. Only all of them were singing “The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow!” And at the end of this sequence of this big, tough guys singing a song from the musical Annie, the text would come up, “Tomorrow we are all undefeated.” That is a message of hope and anticipation if ever there was one.

My team is the Michigan Wolverines. Although they did better than expected this season, it was not a good year for my alma mater. Some Ohio State alumni let me know it too. And not just here at church either. I put up a few Michigan signs around the exterior of my house when the season started. I am one of the hopeful ones. One day this guy

came up to my house and starting cutting down Michigan right to my face. “Michigan is awful; they are no good this year.” He tells me that he is from Ohio, went to Ohio State and had graduated *magna cum laude*. He had a Ph.D. from Ohio State. He just went on and on about how terrible the University of Michigan football team was this season. Finally I had just had it. I said, “Look buddy, enough is enough. Here is your money. Just give me my pizza and be on your way!” Humor belongs to the losers, my friends.

Of course football season is not the only time to hope. In fact we are in the midst of the season of hope *par excellance*; Advent. Interestingly, there are some Buddhist teachers I have read who are rather down on the idea of hope. Hope they tell us, takes us out of the present moment because it is forward looking. Hope implies a dissatisfaction of the present moment and a distraction toward possible future events. Furthermore, hoping you will get a particular present for Christmas or hoping your pumpkin pie will finally out do Aunt Myrtle’s this year, creates attachment to the material world that ultimately leads to suffering. Some of these Zen Masters are rather down on hope, and Christmas by implication.

Now I should emphasize that this is only the opinion of a few, not all, Buddhists. Most Buddhists don’t really care if you celebrate Christmas or not. Yet others embrace it. When I lived in Nebraska I would attend the Nebraska Zen Center in Omaha. They had a tradition

that every Christmas Eve they would meet at the Center and from there go Christmas caroling in the neighborhood. That's right; Buddhists going Christmas caroling! Sadly I never went because I always had to lead the services at the Unitarian church. Too bad, I was always very curious as to how that worked out.

John Taylor says in this morning's reading that if we did not have advent we would have to invent it. Advent is the time for hope and anticipation. Taylor has a very radically different interpretation of hope from the humbug Zen teachers. To him hope is the essence of optimism. Life is about daring choices or it is nothing, quipped Helen Keller. Hope is not so much a dissatisfaction with the present moment as much as it is a vision for a better world. That vision can inspire people, like Dr. King's vision of a country that judged people for the content of their character not the color of their skin. A vision that inspires hope moves us out of our complacency and into a place where we are willing to take risks for the common good. No one would work for a better world if there was not some hope, no matter how forlorn it might appear, that their work would make a difference somehow. So in a way, hope is not merely future oriented. It has an impact on the present too, because when we have hope for tomorrow we make today better too. Cornel West, one of my favorite contemporary philosophers, calls this "pragmatic hope." It is hope for tomorrow that motivates us to act, and thereby makes the present better as well.

In many ways this is a very American concept. We have a sense in this country that we can always get better; there is always room for improvement. Taylor is a Unitarian minister and a Humanist who believes in the progress of humanity onward and upward forever. There is always going to be some next level we can evolve into. It is that creative energy that hope instills in us, that we celebrate as part of Advent. That is why he says we would need to invent it. We need that optimism about ourselves and our situation in history to push us over the summit and move on to the next peak.

I believe everything that Taylor says about hope. Hope is a very important religious value in Unitarian Universalism. It is featured prominently in our church's Unison Affirmation. I truly believe it. Unfortunately I sometimes have a hard time experiencing the unabashedly optimistic hope for the future that Advent represents to Taylor. Quite frankly, this time of year I find the image of Grinch to be more appealing. Everyone else getting into Christmas, and yet it takes me a while to get into the holiday spirit. But I am better now than what I used to be.

I began dating my wife Sharon during the build up to Christmas. When she first saw my apartment, she was shocked by the lack of holiday decorations. There was no tree, and there were no lights. I did exchange presents with people, but I think I waited until the last possible minute to do any shopping. I had just moved to town and didn't really

know too many people anyway. It hadn't even occurred to me to decorate the place for Christmas. I used to really not like Christmas. I had adopted the grumpy Zen-like attitude toward the holiday.

This attitude went something like this: Christmas is a big let down. Oh, they hype it up for months, earlier and earlier each year it seemed, but it's not so great—it's just another day. Let me demonstrate. Imagine that it is about four o'clock in the afternoon on Christmas day. Since most radio stations have been playing Christmas Carols since the day after Labor Day it seems, you are utterly sick to death of Christmas music. All the stockings have been emptied, all of the presents are open, the food has been eaten and maybe dessert too. You are probably watching a football game that your team is not even playing in. If Advent and hope represent the optimistic start of the football season, then Christmas represents the all-too-real end of the season blues. That perfect Christmas that you had dreamed of is now replaced with the actual Christmas you just had. Often there is a dissonance between the two; to put it mildly. Christmas is over; that's it. There is nothing left to look forward to for another 365 days.

That is how the Grinch in me sees Christmas—as an inevitable disappointment. Why even try? But as the Grinch himself comes to realize, this is a mistaken view. The Grinch initially sees Christmas only in its outer form; the food, the presents, the decorations, and he misses the spirit of the holiday. That is to open your heart and connect to other

people. That is the true spirit of Christmas. Of course it is the outer trappings that keep the American economy humming along, and so that is what we all get inundated with. But it has taken me a long time, and I admit I still struggle with this some years, to find that shining optimism of hope that Taylor correctly names as the essence of Advent.

I sympathize with the wise mayor in the story that Duncan Littlefair shared. He saw this attitude prevalent among the townspeople. A sort of Christmas malaise had set in. Instead of being inspired by a vision of hope, they were dismayed by the mountain of expectations they placed upon themselves and each other around the holidays. So he came up with a spiritual practice, if you will, of lighting candles at Advent. This reminded people of that all-too-quiet message of hope and love that gets drowned out at Christmas by the intense volume of the consumerist message. We need to ground our beliefs in spiritual practices more often than we would probably care to admit.

Christmas is about connecting to other people. When I think about the most special Christmases of my childhood, they rarely include the actual presents I got. Some do, sure. Mostly I remember the emotions; the rush of about to get something as if by magic. How it was even more special because it only happened once a year. Mostly though I remember my maternal Grandmother at Christmas. She was for a person who gave unconditional love. Although we had Sunday dinner at her house every week, it was still a thrill to run into her house. I can

remember her decorated living room just as if I had seen it yesterday. My grandparents lived on a lake in southern Michigan, and at Christmas time it would ice over and you could see the lights from across the lake. It was beautiful. But mostly I just remember her and singing Christmas carols into Christmas evening. Back then the radio stations waited until after the fourth of July to start playing carols so you weren't sick of them by the time Christmas actually rolled around. It made the waiting of Advent much more pleasant. In fact it felt like all was right with the world.

That is, I think, the feeling I am hoping to have every year at Christmas time. Perhaps I need to trust Advent more; that time of hoping and preparing. That feeling has to do with connecting with the people I love and care about more than it does anything I buy or any dish that I prepare. I strive to have a Christmas that is more about people than objects. It is not easy; particularly with small children. But it is not impossible either. The other night the four of us watched Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer; a childhood tradition for both Sharon and me. It was nice to have just the four of us there sharing that moment. It was Matthew's first time seeing it. I am sure he didn't care, but it mattered to the rest of us. That was a perfect moment.

Odd isn't it how often we chase those perfect moments with contrived events and presents. I say we all put Martha Stewart out of business this year by not caring a whit about the perfect table setting or

the perfect roast turkey. Although I have nothing against her personally, I don't like how she sells people an unattainable ideal of perfection. This contributes to the Grinch-like disappointment I used to feel at the holidays. It also proves the Christmas hating Zen teachers to be right. The hope for perfection is an illusion. It might be a useful illusion sometimes, as in the case of Cornel West's example of pragmatic hope, but an illusion it remains. We need another way. How can we get there?

Enter an unlikely voice: our old friend the Sufi poet Rumi. He admonishes us to "Eat the grapes. Do not keep talking about the garden. Eat the grapes." I think Rumi must have written this line for Unitarian Universalists! How often do we become enamored with the intellectualization of life rather than life itself, just as it is? Or to bring it back to Advent, how often do we build up Christmas into some grand event of pure ecstasy and joy such that Martha Stewart herself would be jealous? Our dreams of intricate table designs, and organic recipes recreating the first Christmas celebrated in the Jamestown colonies, or a family that looks like a Norman Rockwell painting; all of them are just that—dreams. Granted there is some pragmatic hope here, you are more likely to have a better Christmas than I did living in my Spartan apartment in Omaha with no decorations at all. Yet our dreams of the perfect Christmas can become too much, like the villagers whose mayor had them light Advent candles. As Dumbledore once said to his mentee Harry Potter, "It does not do to dwell in dreams and forget to live."

Instead we need to let our dreams and visions and hopes about Christmas inspire us, and warm our hearts with memories of Christmases past. But we should hold these lightly, for we must also remember to eat the grape. Connect with people around you right now. We need to appreciate each day for itself. This includes every day of Advent, the time of hope and looking forward. It is a paradox that the only way we really appreciate the build up to Christmas is to really be present to this very day and the people in it. Then when Christmas comes, we can appreciate it as well; because we have appreciated every day before and after it.

At the end of the poem Rumi even admonishes himself as a poet. The poet looks at life and paints images with words. Rumi is the master of that. Yet poetry is a reflective process. It involves the poet looking at life from the outside. The poem becomes a kind of commentary; a beautiful commentary, but it is still a step removed from life itself. Thus he writes, “Be silent now. Say fewer and fewer praise poems. Let yourself become living poetry.” Do not live your life one step removed from yourself. As the Zen teachers would tell us, hoping can have that unintended consequence. But it can also open us up to connect with other people in a way we might never have done, through parties and potlucks and singing. Make your life a living poem every day without any commentary or mental narrative explaining it all to you. Just live.

Enjoy these days and weeks leading up to Christmas. They are good in and of themselves precisely because they lead up to Christmas.

As we get deeper into the holiday season, keep alive hope that we will pierce through the cacophony of consumerism and the soul-crushing mountain of unmet expectations and journey our way to a day that is just a day, and yet every day is as precious to our finite life as Christmas day is. Try this: meet each day of Advent as if you were a Chicago Cubs fan on the opening day of the season. The Chicago Cubs have not won the World Series since 1908; the longest drought in baseball and perhaps all of sports. Yet you can't get a seat in Wrigley Field during the season; it's packed. Without fail, when April rolls around all the Cub fans say, "This is our year!" Despite the fact that for over one hundred years it has not been does not deter them in the slightest. Perhaps one year will be their year. That is hope. May that hope be yours this month as you savor the holidays. Amen Blessed Be.