

"Meditations on Winter"
Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County
Wooster, Ohio
December 8, 2019; 9:30 a.m.
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister
Sharon Delgadillo, Music Director
Sue Kandel, Accompanist
Steve Cook, Worship Associate

Opening words: from, *Groundhog Day*, by Danny Rubin (Steve)

"When Chekhov saw the long winter, he saw a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life. And standing here among the good people of Punxsutawney, and basking in the warmth of their hearths and hearts, I could not imagine a better fate than a long and lustrous winter."

Chalice Lighting Song #362 Rise up, O, Flame

Anthem: 'Til the Season Comes Round Again (the Choir)

Time for All Ages: The Snowy Day, by Erza Jack Keats

Singing the Children Out #413 Go, now, in Peace

Reading "The Winter of the Great Snows," by E.B. White (Steve)

This reading is E.B. White's essay, "The Winter of the Great Snows." E.B. White wrote many essays, and the children's books: *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. He is writing about an especially snowy winter when he lived in the State of Maine:

"Maine towns take winter seriously. They are ready with money and trucks and men and sand and salt. Derring-do is in good supply, and the roads stay open, no matter what. The things that do not stay open are the driveways of the people. Every new swipe of the plow hurls a gift of snow into the mouth of a driveway, so that, in effect, the plowmen, often working while we sleep snug in our beds, create a magnificent smooth, broad highway to which nobody can gain access with his automobile until he has passed a private miracle of snow removal. It is tantalizing to see a fine stretch of well-plowed public road just the other side of a six-foot barricade of private snow.

My scheme for town plowing would be to have each big plow attended by a small plow, as a big fish is sometimes attended by a small fish. There would be a pause at each driveway while the little plow removes the snow that the big plow has deposited. But I am just a dreamer. I have two plows of my own-- a big V on the pickup and a lift-blade on the little Cub tractor. Even with this equipment, we were licked a lot of the time this winter and had to call for help. It got so there was no place to put the snow even if you were able to push it around. On the day before Christmas, the storm was so great, the wind so high, people were marooned in my house and had to spend the night. And a couple of days later I had to hire a loader to lift the snow from the mouth of the driveway, scurry across the road with it, and drop it into the swamp."

Homily, Part One: "Ice Storm"

(Rev. Jennie)

In late summer of 1997, I moved to the campus of Bangor Theological Seminary, in Bangor, Maine, to begin a four-year program of their Master of Divinity degree. The seminary's student housing was modest; I lived in a tiny first-floor apartment with my cat. Undertaking the formation of a seminary student and candidate for Unitarian Universalist ministry was something I felt solidly called to do. I had discerned a sense that God, or the benevolent forces of the universe, supported me in this spiritual path, maybe even blessed it.

Early January of 1998 was when we were completing the papers and take-home exams of our first semester-- a mountain of work, but I felt I could complete it all, if I tackled it with focus and discipline. But on January 8th, North America was hit with the Great Ice Storm of 1998. That ice storm was debilitating to Central Maine, and to my spirit. Rarely have I felt so alienated from God. It wasn't that my belief in God was gone. Rather, I felt that God was busy somewhere else, attending to the needs of some other people, far from us on our theological campus under Winter's siege. I felt an anguished need for God to come help me, and all of us, where we lived and worked, studied and prayed. I questioned whether my decision to become a seminary student and minister was in fact right with God after all. I had no light, no heat, no way to cook, nowhere to buy a meal or coffee, no means to type my final papers, and no knowing when it would all end. In books and paintings of olden times, people work and read and write, contentedly and productively, by candlelight. In modern day life, that just doesn't work, no matter how many candles you try to find and set out and light. There just isn't enough illumination. I also had a severe pain in my neck, such that I could barely move my head and arm. What I wanted most was to take a hot bath. And there was no hot water. So I curled up in my bed, under all the blankets I owned. All I could think was that when the lights and heat came back on, then I would get up, but until the lights and heat came back on, I couldn't imagine getting up.

But the next morning, my classmate, Karl, banged loudly on my door. He didn't stop pounding until I got up and let him in. He said, "Get dressed; we're going out." "But it's so icy it's dangerous to even walk, much less drive!" I said. "We're going out to get some food and coffee," he said, "Get bundled up and come on." So I did. Driving along the ice-covered streets was like being on some other strange planet. The traffic lights weren't working, the only signs of life were electrical crews, and we heard the constant popping of the ice cracking branches, and even fully-grown trees, as if they were twigs. We avoided streets with power lines down across them. Karl was headed for one of his favorite diners and, amazingly, we found it was open. I remember eating toast and scrambled eggs and how rich the coffee tasted and smelled, there, in the midst of other dazed and grateful people from all walks of life. Their presence was as restorative to me as the meal was. When I got home, I put batteries in my tape player and found a local radio station. It had suspended its syndicated programming to be a vehicle for updates about the storm, and for people to call in. People in need of firewood, food, or other assistance told us where they were. Others went to their aid. And many people called in just to talk, to assuage their isolation, and mine. Eventually, electricity and heat were restored in the seminary's common room. We all got together with a motley assemblage of food, drink, movies, games, and stories to tell.

The first thing that ice storm taught me is what it feels like when someone is beset by clinical depression. I learned that there are times a person simply cannot rally themselves into a state of activity and cheer. And I learned that I was at seminary not just to help others and to create community, but also to ask for and accept help from others and to take part in fellowship they created. Theologically, I was humbled to realize that the ice storm was not all about me and what I needed and wanted. A natural disaster afflicts a body of people indiscriminately. That ice storm harmed many people far worse than it did me, south to Waterville and Augusta, also in New York State, and devastatingly in Canada. And eventually I learned how many people were not aware of our peril at the time, and had never experienced an ice storm in their lives. Later that winter, the seminary held a theological conference called Convocation. People from all over the United States came to attend it. Worship and prayer were led by the Rev. Daniel Romero, who had spent most of his life in Southern California, Mexico, and Latin America. One morning he said to us, "Please know that I mean no disrespect, and have every compassion for the hardship you have endured this month. But I have to say this: Never in my life have I seen anything as beautiful and magical as these ice-covered trees, and the sunlight radiating from them."

Responsive Reading #543 "Winter"

Homily, Part Two: "A Holy Trinity: Ice, Water, and Steam"

When I was a little girl, we lived beside a body of water called Buckmaster Pond, but we all always called it The Reservoir. I and many other kids played together by its banks in warm weather, and ice skated on it in the winter. My house was on one side of it, and my elementary school was on the other. Because my house was a distance just short of what school buses were provided for, I walked to school. I was supposed to walk around the reservoir, along the sidewalks. But I have always been a very pragmatic person. And at some point during the winter when I was seven years old, it occurred to me that walking across the frozen reservoir was, frankly, shorter. I am not encouraging young children to try such a daring journey! Certainly not alone, as I was, not even having told anyone beforehand that I would be walking to school via the "road less travelled by!" When I look back on it now, I don't know what I was thinking. I don't remember embarking onto the ice from the shore, nor disembarking onto solid ground on the other side. I remember the crossing. I remember being in the middle of that vast circle of space, under the dome of the friendly sky, creating a path, my own path, over as yet untrodden snow. I did not feel cold, nor beset by strong wind, nor any reason for fear. I felt gently held and called and led. I undertook that marvelous crossing enough times that I remember it clearly to this day. But the place I grew up was a small town in more ways than one. Someone saw what I was doing and told my mother. She scolded me in no uncertain terms. Crossing the reservoir was very dangerous and I must not do that again! Do not stray from the sidewalks! I think her seriousness sunk in, and I stuck to land from then on. Thinking about what a risk I had taken back then, I wondered if I had caused my mother great anxiety, fear, or even terror, once she found me out. So I called my mother up and asked her, "It's okay if you don't recall this at all-- But I think that, when I was little, to walk to school in the winter, I remember walking across the reservoir-- And you found out and scolded me. Did that really scare you? Do you remember this at all?" She laughed a little and said, "Oh, I knew that you kids did that sometimes-- All the parents knew. So I just tried to tell you that it was dangerous. Even when the center of the water is frozen thick, I was worried that there can be underwater springs by the edges, that are flowing, and that the ice is thinner there, and you could fall through." What struck me in her reply was that she said "kids." Where had my older brother been that winter? Why was I walking to school alone? My mother and I figured out that was the year that my school was being renovated, so my brother's grade was bused to a different school than mine. That's why I walked to school alone. "Well I'm sorry if I worried you back then; [I said to my mother] it never occurred to me that I shouldn't, it never occurred to me that I couldn't, cross the frozen reservoir." "Of course you didn't think of it as dangerous," my mother said, "you were just a kid."

I still love walking across an open field or space, the first footsteps on which are mine. Even though I was just a little kid, crossing that reservoir was a spiritual experience for me, I would even say existentially so. I felt a heightened awareness of myself as a distinct being in the world, and also connected to all other beings, the land, water, and sky, and to strains of truth and goodness in beauty, melody, and brotherhood. What was that love that made me feel so held and called and led? Once a Unitarian Universalist told me that he thinks he is a Trinitarian Unitarian. "That is a perfectly fine thing to be [I replied]; there are ways I am Trinitarian, myself." To him, the Holy Trinity is like Ice, Water, and Steam [he told me]. Delighted by this creative imagery, I asked him, "So do you mean that, to you, the Father is like Ice, Jesus is the Water, and the Holy Spirit is like Steam?" I could hear in his voice his rejection of any explanation that simplistic when he said, "You just can't distinguish the elements that clearly, can you? They bounce around, they meld together, there are aspects they all have in common, don't they?" "Yes [I said] they sure do." Out there in the middle of that frozen pond, at only seven years old, I felt held and called and led by a whole chorus of vibrant things. The folk songs of Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Pete Seeger; "Blowin' in the Wind" and "If I Had a Hammer" were like songs written for children, to my ear and mind. Those singers were, to me, like voices of angels calling me, and all of us, to do our part to make the world more loving and fair. The Kennedy Administration, as well, was urging young people to join the Peace Corps, and talking about putting a man on the moon. And I was also influenced by the then brand new television series whose mission was "to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life; and new civilizations; to boldly go where no man had gone before." All these visions and visionaries, dreamers and dreams, harmonies and commands, were in and around me as I sought my new frontier. I felt strong and brave and warmed by brotherly love. A "Holy Host of Others" held me up, and we knew the way.

*Closing Hymn #55 "Dark of Winter"

*Parting Words

"Don't let Winter get the best of us-- May Winter bring out the best in us, individually, and as a people-- In the words of Estella Reeder: 'It is in going through the fire that the steel is hardened.' An easy life is not necessarily a good life." [Go in Peace.]