

Reading **from “Winter Hours” by Mary Oliver** **Linda Rio Reichmann**

In the winter I am writing about, there was much darkness. Darkness of nature, darkness of event, darkness of the spirit. The sprawling darkness of *not knowing*. We speak of the light of reason. I would speak here of the darkness of the world, and the light of _____. But I don't know what to call it. Maybe hope. Maybe faith, but not a shaped faith – only, say, a gesture, or a continuum of gestures. But probably it is closer to hope, that is more active, and far messier than faith must be. Faith, as I imagine it, is tensile, and cool, and has not need of words. Hope, I know, is a fighter and a screamer. *Thus ends the reading.*

Message **Darkest Night** **Rev Pam Rumancik**

Our part of Illinois today will see only 9 hours, 7 minutes and 43 seconds of daylight. The sun rose at 7:15 a.m. and will set at 4:22 p.m. That's not a lot of time to get things done; to run errands, to visit friends, soak up enough vitamin D to feel rejuvenated and energized throughout the day.

This is the season of SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder – a condition where a recognizable portion of the population develops symptoms of depression during the winter months. The long nights and lack of sunshine can leave us sluggish, sleepy, lacking in energy and lacking even the will to accomplish the basics of life. There is an apathy toward the things that used to bring joy – a sense of hopelessness that life is even worth living. Energy drops to its lowest ebb.

But even beyond the seasonal depression related to the planetary tilt, there seems to be a larger more enveloping sense of gloom. The world seems to be in pretty dire straits. The morning drive time news is filled with disturbing stories from across the globe about ISIS executions, the Taliban killing school children, ongoing terrorist acts throughout the Middle East and around the globe. Suicide bombers and mass killings seems incomprehensible and thus terrifying.

And here at home our school systems seem to be descending further and further into a chaotic morass of testing and quantification while our students continue to sink farther behind the true goals of learning how to think.

We have 24 hour news cycles which pound irrelevant data and stories into our consciousness but take no time to reflect and evaluate on whether the latest 'solutions' have actually accomplished their goals.

The deep divide between left and right in this country has grown so entrenched that folks can barely even see above their own narrow troughs with the end result being a country frozen into immobility, where our leaders are defined by what they're against instead of what they believe in.

Economic inequality continues to approach pre-depression era levels with a bought and paid for congress that lacks the will or ability to do anything to reverse the tide. The middle class is slowly sinking; safety nets for the poor have been coiled up and hauled away. The extremely wealthy can buy the results they want in the country while the rest of us are left scrambling to not fall farther behind.

Health insurance premiums continue to rise at ridiculous rates – mine is going up 9 ½% in 2015 while hospital systems build ginormous gleaming cities of brass and glass which seem totally out of touch with the true needs of our communities. Obamacare has allowed more people coverage – but how long will they be able to afford it with rates continuing to rise?

Stories of injustice for people of color continue to arise all across the country in the wake of the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in New York. 50 years after the marches on Selma demanding justice for every person, we are faced with the fact of ongoing systemic injustice for large swaths of society.

Oh – and the planet's human induced climate is on the verge of being irreversible but we are too much in denial to make the enormous changes that would halt its course.

Talk about dark. It reminds me of a song from the old show called Hee Haw.

Gloom, despair and agony on me. Deep dark depression, excessive misery. If it weren't for bad luck we'd have no luck at all. Gloom despair and agony on me.

This is the darkest time of the year - maybe even of many years. The world is awash in violence, people are distracted by consumerism, Oh – and the Colbert Report just filmed its last show this week. We are obviously in some really terrible shape.

But...

Is this the deepest truth of our lives? Is this who we are – and what our lives are really about? Hasn't the world had some really dark passages in the past? There was the period known as the dark ages for one. And the Civil War, and the Great Depression. There was the cold war – with its doomsday clock – and 1968. The year that Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr and Bobby Kennedy were both assassinated – along with riots and the Vietnam War.

We humans have faced difficult places before – and out of those dark places have come some of our greatest innovations, greatest advances, greatest examples of courage and hope. Remember how the falling of the Berlin Wall took so much of the world by surprise – and how the cold war thawed despite so many predictions of the coming apocalypse?

Darkness and light are two sides of our spinning earth, two sides of our lives.

A common bit of wisdom reminds us that we can curse the darkness – or we can light a single candle of hope. But our prayer today brought up another truth. Sometimes it's helpful to pay attention to the darkness before lighting that candle. Sometimes there are valuable lessons to learn; sometimes the quiet space of deepening shadows offers a gift to bring back the light.

Carl Jung gave us the concept of our shadow side – the side of our consciousness that we ignore and reject because it does not reflect the “goodness” we seek to be in the world. As a minister, my shadow side might be my need to be quiet and alone. To be a good minister I need to be able to relate to many persons, need to be friendly and engaged with a whole church full of people. Wanting to hurry home and hide on my couch after a Sunday morning could be seen as a fault or failing.

Or – that introverted shadow side could be the place where I recharge and allow all that I've learned to percolate and mellow. It could – and is – the place where I disengage from the bustle of community and find deeper patterns, deeper truths and observations which I can bring back to share and hopefully engage the entire community during the coming week. That one was kind of obvious. You get that ministers need alone time to be connected.

What other gifts can we gain from the shadows? We might claim a tendency to gossip as a desire to stay connected. We might notice the bossiness we declaim in someone else as leadership characteristics we are afraid to own in ourselves. Our shadow sides offer a space of richness and possibility if we take the time to explore and mine.

This dark time of the year can also offer that space. A space for dreaming, for resting, for inner exploration, for surrendering to possibilities not yet acknowledged.

I wrote this poem, called the “blessing of the dark trees” during a time of deep darkness in my life:

Walking thru the dark trees
they bless me.

Pulling my coat closer

I ward it off.

It is a blessing of pain.

Calling forth

from the depth of my bones

hurts that have no memory.

Marrow-deep anger.

Rejection.

Confusion.

Sadness.

Waves rack me

ebb, then flow, then ebb again.

Stop! I almost shout.

I will be washed away

by this blessing.

I will lose everything I've known

by this blessing.

Will lose me

by this blessing.

My bones – gaunt & whitewashed
still offer more.

That's it, I cry.

I've drawn the poison out.

But no,

this blessing is relentless.

It evokes toddler tears

& adolescent terrors of insecurity,

moans of a woman's ravaged heart

crushed and stomped beyond recognition –

still beating.

It calls to pain of generations past

to a world gone awry.

Awash in the limits of suffering, all

one soul can hold

one being can know

one body can stand.

Walking through the dark trees

They bless me

And I walk on.

This is a poem of incredible darkness – and yet there is hope. The hope that lives in the center of every human heart. Mary Oliver wrote “hope is a fighter and a screamer” it does not lie down quietly and accept the injustices, it struggles and sounds a siren call for the good. Hope calls us forward, out of darkness and into a path a purpose and meaning. It reminds us that we are not isolated beings but communal; that we live in relationship and thrive in community.

I was looking for stories of hope to share with you – and there are many, many stories. Stories of people reaching beyond the boundaries set by the world and creating new connections. My dad sent me a commercial going around the internet– telling a story from WWI of a Christmas truce. It’s a true story about finding a bit of hope in darkness.

It seems that a German soldier began singing “Silent Night” in German from his cold trench on Christmas eve, and that it was picked up, first by one voice and then by British soldiers singing it in English until all along the front lines on either side the song reverberated through the night. Can you imagine the courage it took – the raw desire for something more, for something powerful and hopeful, to sing a song of love and hope out onto a battlefield. The fear on the other side that it was just a ruse – and then the kindled hope in the person who was brave enough to answer back his own song of hope?

It emboldened the men to call a truce, to allow them to bury their dead, but it spread even beyond that. Some of the soldiers shared pictures of loved ones from back home – and a few games of soccer even broke out.

Courage, a willingness to see a new possibility in the darkness, created a space of hope; a space for remembering that we share much more in common, that the differences which divide us are not the deepest truth of who we are. How many other stories of hope can you remember? Stories of ordinary people, facing incredible odds, who not only survived, but claimed their deeper humanity and made the world a little better by remembering that we are in this together.

This is the time for those stories. I invite you right now to remember a story that has given light to your life. It made you cry – right? Hold onto that story – and as

we head into coffee hour share your stories with one another. Share why it touched you – why you still hold it close – how it informs who you are in the world. Hope arises in the human heart – but it only grows when we share it with one another.

UU theologian Rebecca Parker writes:

Hope rises. It rises from the heart of life, here and now. Beating with joy and sorrow. Hope longs. It longs for good to be affirmed, for justice and love to prevail, for suffering to be alleviated, and for life to flourish in peace. Hope remembers the dreams of those who have gone before and reaches for connection with them across the boundary of death.

This is a season of darkness but it is also a season of hope. A season of remembering that even though each of our individual candles may go out – there is always someone to rekindle our light. It's the season to remember that there are treasures and gifts to be found in our deep mines of self, and that we are blessed and made whole when we share those treasures with the people around us.

Tonight will bring the longest night of the year – but the world continues to turn, continues to tilt and spin and roll its way through the cosmos and tomorrow there will be a little more light. Hold onto that light – and share it with the world.

You are the light this world needs – celebrate with laughter, with bells and horns and songs of joy. Sing your light into the world.

Amen & Blessed be.