

## The Darkness Inside

Sermon, Sunday, January 9, 2011  
Unitarian Universalist Church, Concord, NH  
Rev. Michael Leuchtenberger

### Reading - *A Visitor* by Mary Oliver

My father, for example,  
who was young once  
and blue-eyed,  
returns  
on the darkest of nights  
to the porch and knocks  
wildly at the door,  
and if I answer  
I must be prepared  
for his waxy face,  
for his lower lip  
swollen with bitterness.  
And so, for a long time,  
I did not answer,  
but slept fitfully  
between his hours of rapping.  
But finally there came the night  
when I rose out of my sheets  
and stumbled down the hall.  
The door fell open

and I knew I was saved  
and could bear him,  
pathetic and hollow,  
with even the least of his dreams  
frozen inside him,  
and the meanness gone.  
And I greeted him and asked him  
into the house,  
and lit the lamp,  
and looked into his blank eyes  
in which at last  
I saw what a child must love,  
I saw what love might have done  
had we loved in time.

### Sermon - The Darkness Inside

"I saw what love might have done, had we loved in time." I had tears in my eyes when I first read this poem.

Perhaps it was the image of the young, blue-eyed, hopeful father degenerating so completely, with even the least of his dreams frozen inside. I am a young and hopeful father.

Perhaps it was the imagine of the grown-up child so afraid to open the door because of what would happen if the father entered the home. I am a grown-up child.

Perhaps I had tears in my eyes because I cannot imagine to look into the eyes of a loved one and find them blank and devoid of the love I crave. I am a lover. It is love that brings light into my life.

We don't know the story behind the lower lip swollen with bitterness, leaving us wondering what regret, what disappointment, what loathing may be to blame.

We don't know why he is returning, returning on the darkest of nights knocking wildly at the door, leaving us to wonder where he is the rest of the time?

We don't know and, yet, many of us recognize that knock because we've heard it before, on our own dark nights, knocking on our own doors, causing us to lose sleep again and again as we try to ignore what cannot be ignored.

Here is a story about St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio based on a version by storyteller Bob Wilhelm.

The people of the little Italian town of Gubbio are understandably very proud of their beautiful home. Then one night a shadow comes out of the nearby woods and prowls the streets. In the morning the people of Gubbio find a mangled and gnawed dead body. This happens again and again. Finally an old woman says she has seen a wolf on the streets at night. The terrified people decide to ask a holy man who has a reputation for being able to talk to animals for his help. They send a delegation to get St. Francis.

They have very specific ideas on what St. Francis should tell the wolf. First, he should preach to him and remind him to obey the commandment against killing (and perhaps throw in a word about the inherent worth and dignity of every person) and to follow Christ's commandment about loving God and neighbors. And then, just in case, since a wolf is, after all, a wolf, he should tell the wolf to move to someone else's city.

Francis goes into the forest to meet the strange shadow, addressing it as "Brother Wolf." Then he returns to the town square. "My good people of Gubbio, the answer is very simple. You must feed your wolf." The people are furious, especially with the suggestion that this uninvited beast in their midst is somehow to be regarded as "their wolf." But they do feed it, and the killing stops.

Most of the stories we read to, or watch with our kids are stories of good versus bad. The pattern is quite predictable. Someone good is treated unfairly which results in a struggle of long odds between a group of good and bad characters. As the story unfolds, we are taken for an emotional rollercoaster ride as evil threatens to overpower good until, just before the end, we are emotionally released as good triumphs once again.

The world is back to how it should be, peaceful, governed by trustworthy and virtuous decision-makers. The wolf, or its equivalent, usually ends up dead, in prison, or in the zoo, safely away from us, the good people – until the release of the sequel.

I love those stories, and, as I have been told, seeing the world in black and white is entirely age appropriate – until about age twelve to fifteen. That's when our ability to understand multiple perspectives allows us to place our moral decisions in context. That's when our ability to understand multiple perspectives forces us to see that moral dilemmas create shades of grey and that the world is full of moral dilemmas.

Telling stories when we identify with more than one side of the story becomes more challenging, yet it also becomes more real. What is threatening about this way of telling our stories is that it brings us closer to the dark side, the side we are afraid or ashamed to acknowledge, the “wolf” we would prefer to move to someone else's city.

I remember watching a documentary in the mid-1980s about a person who had graduated in a decade before from the same German high school I was attending at the time. He was the son of a school teacher, well-liked, bright, a student leader, deeply concerned about injustice and exploitation, interested in politics, history and philosophy. The more I heard about this person, the more I felt a kinship. I imagined we would have been friends had we attended our school at the same time. I felt we were on the same trajectory in life.

I was watching this documentary, because this potential friend of mine was now one of the top terrorists threatening the safety of the West German establishment. His group, the Red Army Fraction, had been involved in the killing and kidnapping of a number of high level officials and industrialists. His name was Christian Klar, and he had just been sentenced to life in prison.

Somewhere along the way our trajectories did diverge. He was just paroled after 26 years in prison. I became a minister. What made the difference? I can try and laugh this off as a silly question. Yet I do know that seeing the documentary frightened me for the mirror it held up of the potential within me and my friends. Growing up in Germany, I was keenly aware that few are truly immune to the possibility of evil action.

Yet, for most, the darkness inside does not show itself in the temptation of terrorist acts, genocide, mass murder, or torture. The darkness inside shows up as a result of much more everyday activities.

And most likely, it is mixed with plenty of light, so much so that we may not even notice the shadows claiming their spaces here and there.

Perhaps we ate more than our share of chocolates, or perhaps we had more than our share of liquor before getting into our car. Perhaps we spent another evening or weekend at the office, yet again, or we spent the money we did not have on something we did not need. Perhaps we told a lie to cover our lack of dependability, or perhaps we depended on our ability to manipulate a spouse or a friend.

The shadows appear when we cause harm, and the shadows appear when we act in ways that contradict our values. Our values shape our identity and who we think we are.

I like to think of myself as someone who would never hit a child. Hitting a child would add a shadow. The darkness inside would spread.

I like to think that I would grieve the death of my mother or father. Not grieving would add a shadow.

I like to think of myself as someone who would take care of his body knowing its physical abuse would impact others. Being careless with my body would add a shadow.

Our values shape who we are, yet our values can come into conflict. Living true to one value may force us to compromise another value. For religious liberals, this is a tension we have to be willing to embrace. Good and bad are not independent forces engaged in a cosmic struggle for control. Good and bad grow out of the same, singular life force. We each have the capacity for both.

This means, we will make mistakes, we will cause harm, we will contradict ourselves, and we will feel the darkness inside.

And this means, we will do good, we will bring joy, and we will feel the light inside. There is a balance to life. Our charge is to do what we can to tip that balance, to nudge it in the direction of goodness and light.

Forgiving ourselves and each other when mistakes have been made is one way to tip that balance. And it appears that we are biologically hardwired with the ability to forgive. Michael McCullough is a professor of psychology at the University of Miami in Florida. On the NPR program "Speaking of Faith," he explained our capacity for forgiveness as an essential evolutionary trait in species that depend on cooperation for survival. In his words:

"You can't get organisms that are willing to hang in there with each other through thick and thin and make good things happen despite the roadblocks and the bumps along the way if they aren't willing to tolerate each other's mistakes. Sometimes if we're cooperatively hunting — let's say we're some sort of animal [...] that works together to

hunt — sometimes I'm going to let you down. And maybe it's not even intentional, but I'm going to get distracted and I'm going to make a mistake.

And if you take each of those mistakes as the last word about my cooperative disposition, you might just give up and so no cooperation gets done. So, really, our ability, [...] to cooperate with each other and make things happen that [we] can't do on [our] own is undergirded by an ability to forgive each other for occasional defections and mistakes.”

He does not mean to imply that forgiveness is easy or always possible. It can take time and it can take intentional preparation. We have to be willing to see the humanity in the other person. We have to be able to see the world from more than a single perspective. Seeing the world in black and white is not helpful here. There is always more than one story, more than one way to tell the story, more than one way to hear the story.

And this is true whether the story involves two friends, a family, a church community, a nation, or one, singular person struggling to reconcile his or her conflicting actions and desires. Forgiveness does not make our mistakes go away, yet forgiveness opens the door for us to begin again, and begin again in love.

“I saw what love might have done had we loved in time.” Let us open our doors and our hearts while we have the time.