

  
**SEASON OF INCARNATION!**

**Growing a Sabbatical Heart**  
**Advent III: Joy**

Sunday, December 12, 2010, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

**Music for Gathering**

*Dianne Saichek, piano*

**Story for All Ages**

Raising the Sky,  
by Olga Loya

*Olga Loya*

**Reading I**

from “Hoping for Light When Darkness Descends,”

by Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker    *Norma Alicia López O’Connell*

Our first reading is by the Rev. Sylvia Stocker, from her article in this month’s *Quest*. In her article, titled “Hoping for Light when Darkness Descends,” she talks about the oppressive way our culture views “light” as “good” and “dark” as “bad,” but she also admits that “for most of [her] life [she has] failed to notice and to celebrate the power and healing [that] darkness itself brings.” Here is the story of how she came to have a new appreciation for the darkness of winter.

*Reading:*

In the heart of winter last year, I was professing my well-rehearsed lament about darkness to a friend of mine. Her response drew me up short: “I like the dark season,” she declared. “I like darkness. It invites me to spend time with myself. I’m always a little sad to see the darkness begin to recede. Darkness invites me into a quiet place,” she said.

A quiet place. In the midst of our confusing, fast-paced, noisy, insistent world—a quiet place.

Imagine . . . Imagine a place so quiet that one could actually *rest*. Imagine a night so dark that one could actually *dream*. I am coming to understand that light may invite us to see things as they are, uncovered, naked, exposed. But darkness invites us to dream things as they *could be*—healed, refreshed, renewed, changed, balanced. I am coming to see stars as the reminders of dreams we might have, given ample time to slow our pace, to sink into the dark and quiet, and to rest.

**Reading II**

from “Monkey Mind,” a blog by Rev. James Ford    *Frank Bosche*

*Intro:*

Our second reading comes from Rev. James Ford, who is ordained both as a Soto Zen priest and as a Unitarian Universalist minister, serving our large

congregation in Providence, Rhode Island. He writes a blog called “Monkey Mind,” and in his December 7 blog entry, he describes setting off with his wife Jan for a Zen Buddhist silent retreat, called a “sesshin,” where they will practice sitting Buddhist meditation, called “zazen.” This is what he says:

*Reading:*

A bit later today Jan & I will be leaving Auntie in charge of things (ably assisted, no doubt by the cats. The fish, I’m not so sure about) and off to our Boundless Way Rohatsu Sesshin ...

First, amidst all that is going on at church—which feels and, I believe, in a more or less objective way *is* important—it is no doubt good to recall that I am not the essential person, however much I might think so ...

Second, it is very good to stop, full stop, every once in a while. To, for just a breath or two, turn the heart and mind to the moment without the pulls of the hubbub of the regular flow of things. Not only clearing cobwebs, but recalling deeper perspectives ...

And, third, once one works through the hurt, physical and mental, that is hard zazen

the gates of heaven open.

At least [they do] every once in a while ...

**Sermon** Thanksgiving, Forgiveness, and Blessings:  
Sabbatical Wishes for All

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

Let me begin by making one thing very clear: I believe that *everyone* deserves and needs a sabbatical. For the health of individuals, of communities, and of society as a whole, our culture would be saner, more creative, and more productive if everyone were granted a sabbatical on a regular basis. A time to slow our pace and rest in a quiet place. A time to “turn the heart and mind to the moment” without the “hubbub” of our usual hectic schedules. A time to dream, to dream ourselves back into being, to dream how things *could be*. A time to discover and reconnect with our sources of healing, refreshment, renewal, change, and balance. A time for “recalling deeper perspectives” and for allowing “the gates of heaven to open,” if they will ...

So, as we talk about my upcoming sabbatical, which begins on Christmas Day—I’m still with you through Christmas Eve!—as we talk today about my sabbatical, I invite you to imagine your own. What practical considerations would you need to attend to in order to make it possible? *[pause]* Then, spiritually, what would you need to *let go of* in order to create the space for a sabbatical heart to grow in you? *[pause]* And what would you want to explore, what paths would you want to wander, if you were given a time whose primary purpose is to reconnect with your self, to come to know again the Ground of Your Being? *[pause]*

Here are some of the practical considerations that have gone into the planning for my sabbatical:

While sabbaticals have been a tradition for professors and other academics for a long time, it is only in the last two or three decades that they have become “best practices” for ministers, too. Congregations now realize how much they gain when a minister comes back from sabbatical with her commitment to her vocation and capacities for ministry refreshed and renewed. Our own First Unitarian of San Jose has offered its ministers sabbaticals for several generations now, so the practical considerations about how to handle these sabbaticals are well in hand.

Every year, this congregation puts a small amount of our funds into the Sabbatical Reserve account, so that when Rev. Geoff’s or my sabbatical time rolls around, we already have the money needed to support the additional expenses that come with having one of our ministers away. One use of these funds during my sabbatical is to help bring some amazing ministers to our pulpit on Sunday mornings. I have, quite honestly,

handpicked a star-studded lineup of clergy both for who they *are* and for what kinds of messages they will bring to you. I have carefully balanced who is coming from far away and who lives right here, who is Unitarian Universalist and who comes from a neighboring faith, and I can say with certainty that you will be thrilled with worship during my sabbatical! Between the services offered by these guests and those planned by Rev. Geoff and our Multidisciplinary Worship Planning Teams, coming to worship on Sunday mornings will be like receiving a beautifully wrapped gift that you get to open each week and then carry with you into the days that follow.

Yet the worship calendar is just *one* aspect of the planning that has been going on behind the scenes for the past year. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, the ministries of the congregation are always collaborative and shared, so the sabbatical is a time when this congregation's own great strengths continue to grow. As James Ford recalls as he takes off for his seshin, the Senior Minister is really *not* the “essential person” in our communities—to which I say, Hallelujah! Led by remarkably wise and committed congregational leaders and fueled by your own generous volunteering and ownership of this congregation, you will be *ministering to each other*—oh, I'll say more about Rev. Geoff in a moment. Trust me: You are in the best of hands.

You can find all this information and more in the sabbatical brochure, which each household should have received (or will receive shortly) in the mail. We'll have extra copies here at the church throughout the coming months, and it will be on our website. This brochure tells you whom to contact when various issues arrive—and listen, these are the folks whom you *should be getting in touch with anyway, even when I'm here*, so you'll be establishing some great new habits. This brochure is also a wonderful thing to share with newcomers and visitors, because it describes how, true to our Unitarian Universalist theology, we really are a “spiritual cooperative.”

So what about the spiritual side of sabbaticals, and why they are so crucial for ministers?

We congregational ministers are called to be—or perhaps I should say, we're often *expected* to be—preachers and teachers, spiritual guides and pastoral caregivers. That's the most obvious layer. But we must also be (especially in a church this size) both leaders *and* managers; visionaries *and* administrators; philosophers, scholars, storytellers, poets, *and* practical organizers—a list requiring a range of gifts and skills that no one person can seriously embody. More than anything, though, we are called to be, and

*honored* to be, witnesses to the lives of the people and the community we serve, companions on our spiritual journeys, co-authors of the next chapters in the long and wonderful congregational story that is now in our trust.

In short, ministry is a 24/7 job, despite our combined best efforts to bring it down to 24/6. It wakes us ministers up at night; it occupies 90-95% of our waking thoughts; it both lifts and burdens our hearts; it stretches us to be better people than we could have imagined being. It is challenging, exhausting, very difficult for our friends and families—and it is filled on a daily basis with unexpected grace and beauty. I love it. I am grateful for it.

But what too often gets lost in all this *doing*—especially in the first years of a minister’s settled calling—is the minister’s own *spiritual foundation*. As Kay Northcutt puts it—she is a preacher, teacher, and scholar herself—the “demand for the pastor’s attention effectively eviscerates time for solitude and play; for the reading, reflecting, and restorative leisure necessary to nourish the preacher’s most primary relationship,” which is a real intimacy with the Ground of One’s Being.

So we ministers need—sometimes we desperately need—in James Ford’s words, a “full stop” for “clearing cobwebs and deepening perspectives,” for reconnecting with our spiritual source(s). Now, being here with you today or in meetings this month or last, I don’t *feel* like I’ve completely reached the end of my spiritual rope or the bottom of my emotional and intellectual well—and yet, just the other day, I was with a group of beloved colleagues, and my friend *Beth* stood up to begin an intimate worship service, and she asked, “OK—is everyone here?” And I looked around our very small circle helpfully, and said, “Yes—no, wait: Where’s *Beth*?” (She was standing right in front of me!) And that’s just one example of my brain-weariness ... I can’t remember the others ... I guess I really do need a sabbatical.

Earlier I asked, what would you want to explore, what paths would you want to wander, if you were given a time whose primary purpose is to reconnect with your self? Maybe you’d like to hear some of my plans for this time of renewal and discovery. I will study preaching with Unitarian Universalist ministers at Asilomar, and meet with another a team of ministers to develop best practices around multicultural congregations—at the same time, you will have a team of lay leaders here who are paired with folks in Tulsa, Oklahoma, participating in this exciting new national initiative. I will go to church on most Sundays and taste other worship styles and remember what it is like to be a *congregant*. I may go to Mexico to study Spanish, and to New York City for another conference, and to North

Carolina for General Assembly next June. I'm excited about how all of these pursuits will enrich my ministry ...

Yet mostly I know I need to rest and relax. I want to be with Kevin, as we launch the next chapter in the Adventure that is our unique marriage. I want to remember how to play and how to be a really wonderful friend. I want to dance, and learn the whole form of Tai Chi, and to be more in my body than in my head. *And* I want to read: so many of my spiritual friends, like Rumi, spring whole-bodied to greet me from their words on the page. I want to go for long walks and memorize poems again, matching the rhythm of the words to my steps, letting them travel down the sinews into my bones. I want to renew my passionate acquaintance with our religious ancestors, Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists so that I can bring them to life for you here when I return. I want to write, and to dream ...

And if I "accomplish" nothing else, I hope to open myself simply to *being*, rather than measuring myself by *doing*. I want to remember how to be *receptive*, rather than *active*. This is how the Holy comes to us. *This* will make me a better person, and if I can bring these practices back with me, they will make me a far better minister, too.

I hope you hear something in all this that sings to your heart too—something that you might, in small moments, be able to explore. Even if some of us can't actually go on sabbatical, we can all still grow a sabbatical heart.

Which brings me to my hopes for you, Beloved Community, during this Season of Renewal! There are five:

First, for whatever lapses or failings or mistakes we have made with each other, I ask that we forgive ourselves and each other, and that we begin again in love. I especially ask for your forgiveness for all the balls I have dropped and for any disappointments you may have felt in these first years of our ministry together, so that I can lay down the burden of my self-criticism and be spiritually free in the coming months. And I ask for you, too, to forgive yourselves and each other, and to enter with fresh hearts and minds into this beautiful, messy, sometimes-challenging process of being a real community.

Second, with this newly freed spirit, I ask you to make time and space for having fun together! What a great time all of us had who came to the Mystery Dinner Theatre last month—what a joy it was to laugh together and to watch our friends blossom and preen and be flat-out silly onstage. More fun is already in the making: there will be lunches and concerts and auctions and teas and even a square dance in the coming months, to name just a few. I ask you to remember how to play together again—and as you do, to sit with

and dance with and talk with and play with folks you don't yet know well. There is a universal language in the spirit of play; our spoken languages need not be a barrier. Let laughter and lightness be woven into our lives together, for this will strengthen our connections when the going is rough.

Third, whether the going is rough in your life right now or filled with hope, I ask you to make a special effort to be here together, in worship on Sunday mornings. I ask you to show up, to look around in the sanctuary and during Social Hour and to reach out to someone, anyone, who may be having a hard time. If you are that someone having a hard time, reach out, ask for someone simply to listen. I ask you to offer every one of our sabbatical worship leaders your warm welcome and lively responsiveness. In short, I ask you to come together each Sunday morning to receive that beautifully wrapped present, to open here and carry with you through the week.

Fourth, with that gift of community in hand, I ask you to stay connected to and active in our wider world. This fall we have renewed relationships with InnVision and the Julian Street Inn, we have brought food and financial support to the Second Harvest Food Bank, we have worked for the DREAM Act and called folks to repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell, and our PACT committee is creating relationships with other faiths working for immigration reform.

And fifth, I ask you to recognize the amazing volunteers and lay leaders, our wonderful Office Manager Susan Burke-Diquisto, and the truly great minister we have in Rev. Geoff. All of them help to keep this place running; all of them deserve your appreciation, your direct and helpful communication, and your participation, so that you and they continue to grow in your shared ministries.

So: forgiveness, fun, worship, justice, and leadership. These are the spiritual foundations of Beloved Community that I hope you will explore during this Season of Renewal.

Last but far from least, I want to honor the great gift that we have in our Sabbatical Lead Minister, Rev. Geoff. Geoff, could you join me here, please?

In the long life of Geoff's ministry, this is the *fourth time* he has served as Lead Minister while his partner-minister has been on sabbatical. Geoff, you know the ropes, and you have the gifts. Yet you will also have your hands full, with the Coming of Age program and your ongoing work to revitalize our Lifespan Faith Development programs, in addition to all the delicious and ample projects I am bequeathing you for these next six

months. So I want to offer just a few ministerial aids, each of them particularly dear to me. There are five of them:

First, a supply of very smelly dry-erase markers, to help you keep meetings on track ... and an eraser, because someone will always come up with an even better idea than the last one ...

Second, this stack of papers from my office: I'm sure there's something really valuable and important in here, and I hope you'll let me know when I get back if you find it ...

Third, this bottle of Tums, Extra-Strength—I never leave home without them ...

Fourth, these Zumba sticks—because you, a faithful gym rat, model for us all the value of an embodied spiritual practice. I ask you to keep up your practice so that you keep up your physical and spiritual strength—and to hold onto these for me, so that I too will make such a practice a top priority when I return.

And fifth, I ask you to hold this piece of my heart in safekeeping, for it belongs to this congregation and to you, dear colleague, in the ministry that we share.

Thank you!!

### **Keeping the Light On**

*Rev. Nancy and Sabbatical Steering Committee*

#### **Claire:**

Nancy, like a “spiritual Motel 6,” we’re going to keep a light on for you while you are away, and we ask you to keep a light on for us, too, no matter where you may be on your sabbatical. So, from the flame of our Chalice, we light these matching candles, one of which will stay here and be quietly kept burning every Sunday morning while you are away. And the other you will take with you, to represent the flame you will keep alive for us in your heart. Thank you for your ministry with us. Thank you for sharing in our “fire of commitment.”

And that sounds like a song! Let’s sing # 1028 in the blue hymnal, “The Fire of Commitment”!

**\*Singing** (blue)      # 1028 The Fire of Commitment

#### **\*Benediction**

*Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones*

May you feel held in the great arms of this community and by all that is holy and good, now and in the coming months. May the Spirit of Life sing in your hearts, stir your compassion, and help you to give life the shape of

justice. May our roots hold us close, and wings set us free, as Carolyn McDade's great anthem says. And to that may we all add: Amen. Shalom. Salaam. And Blessed Be.