

## **“Meditation and Mushrooms”**

Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister

UU Church of Minnetonka

December 9, 2007

### **Call to Worship**

#### **Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister**

During this Holiday season, this season of advertised good cheer and happiness, I invite us all to look below the surface of things to a deeper season, the season of darkness. We say this is a season of joy, of enlightenment. We say that in these dark times we need a candle or a fire to give us hope, and if we are Christian, to find a renewal of hope in the traditional celebration of the one we worship. I do not quarrel with those who find truth in candlelight or Jesus. I also sometimes need the enlightenment symbolized by our Unitarian Universalist flaming chalice, and the truth I find in some of the words attributed to Jesus. Joy and light will come, certainly. That will be in a few weeks when the solstice is past and the days grow longer. But for now, I invite us to pause for a while, opening ourselves and possibly even praising, the truth of the season around us: darkness, death, and the composting that simmers in the muck of earth beneath the humus of fallen leaves. In the bleak midwinter, in this world of pain, we need darkness and solitude so that we may grow and heal. What we do with our growth and health once we attain it is a conversation for another day. For now, this morning, let us rest for a few moments and allow our hearts to feel the healing of darkness. Welcome.

### **Chalice Lighting**

#### **Hymn #244**

**“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”**

### **Life Passages**

#### **Story**

#### **Song #241**

**“In the Bleak Midwinter”**

### **Readings of the Season – Winter and Darkness**

**Read by Kent Hemmen Saleska and Michael Holt**

#### **From *Anne’s House of Dreams***

**By L.M. Montgomery** (author of “Anne of Green Gables” novel series)

They walked on in silence for a little while. Presently Anne said, “Do you know, Captain Jim, I never like walking with a lantern. I have always the strangest feeling that just outside the circle of light, just over its edge in the darkness, I am surrounded by a ring of furtive, sinister things, watching me from the shadow with hostile eyes. I’ve had that feeling from childhood. What is the reason? I never feel like that when I’m really in the darkness – when it is close all around me – I’m not the least frightened.”

“I’ve something of that feeling myself,” admitted Captain Jim. “I reckon when the darkness is close to us it is a friend. But when we sorter push it away from us – divorce ourselves from it, so to speak, with the lantern light – it becomes an enemy. But the fog is lifting. There’s a smart west wind rising, if you notice. The stars will be out when you get home.”

**When Death Comes**  
**By Mary Oliver**

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;  
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse  
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;  
when death comes  
like the measles-pox;

when death comes  
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:  
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything  
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,  
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,  
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

*Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*

By Wendell Berry

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.  
And you will have a window in your head.  
Not even your future will be a mystery  
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
and shut away in a little drawer.  
When they want you to buy something  
they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.  
So, friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.  
Denounce the government and embrace  
the flag. Hope to live in that free  
republic for which it stands.  
Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed.  
Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.  
Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.  
Listen to carrion – put your ear  
close, and hear the faint chattering  
of the songs that are to come.  
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.  
So long as women do not go cheap  
for power, please women more than men.  
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy  
a woman satisfied to bear a child?  
Will this disturb the sleep  
of a woman near to giving birth?  
Go with your love to the fields.  
Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head  
in her lap. Swear allegiance  
to what is nighest your thoughts.  
As soon as the generals and politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.

## Offering

### Readings of the Season – Winter and Darkness

Read by Kent Hemmen Saleska and Michael Holt

#### **In Praise of Winter**

**By Greta Crosby**

Lest us not wish away the winter. It is a season in itself, not simply the way to spring. When trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light, they let in sky and trace themselves delicately against dawns and sunsets.

The clarity and brilliance of the winter sky delight. The loom of fog softens edges, lulls the eyes and ears of the quiet, awakens by risk the unquiet. A low dark sky can snow, emblem of individuality, liberality, and aggregate power. Snow invites to contemplation and to sport.

Winter is a table set with ice and starlight.

Winter dark tends to warm light, fire and candle; winter cold to hugs and huddles; winter want to gifts and sharing; winter danger to visions, plans, and common endeavoring – and the zest of narrow escapes; winter tedium to merrymaking.

Let us therefore praise winter, rich in beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities.

#### **Congregational Unison Reading #615**

“The Work of Christmas” – by Howard Thurman

When the song of angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
    to find the lost,  
    to heal the broken,  
    to feed the hungry,  
    to release the prisoner,  
    to rebuild the nations,  
    to bring peace among humans,  
    to make music in the heart.

**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**  
**By Robert Frost**

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

**Song #256    “Winter Night”**

**Homily**

**“Meditation and Mushrooms”**

Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka  
Sunday, December 9, 2007

You know the story. Caesar Augustus sent out a decree that all should be taxed, and all went to be taxed. And so it was that Mary and Joseph returned to Bethlehem to subject themselves to the census of the Roman Emperor. Mary was pregnant, and what with all the people arriving for the census, there was no room for them in town. The only place they could stay was in a barn out behind one of the hotels. There in the hay, amidst the farm animals, Mary had her baby.

This is a tale we may hear every year about the birth of the savior of humanity. This is a story of how light came into the world, how the eternal Word of God became flesh so that all people might come to know God. But this is not always the way the story was told. The first mention of Jesus being born on December 25 was in the year 336 A.D. Originally the birth of

Jesus was not celebrated because no one knew when it was, or cared. The fact is that the celebration of birthdays – *all* birthdays – were looked upon as pagan rituals. From the Christian perspective, pagan rituals were not acceptable. Only bad characters in the Bible, like King Herod and the Egyptian Pharaoh, celebrated their birthdays.

When that particular Christian bias waned and people grew in their desire to celebrate the birth of the one they worshipped, the next task was to figure out which day the birth should be celebrated. Many dates in spring were originally selected, in part because that is also the rebirth of nature, but eventually the early Christians decided upon December 25. They chose this day because it was the same day the Romans celebrated *Natalis Invicti*, the “birthday of the Unconquered God.” The symbol of this “Unconquered God” is, not surprisingly, the sun itself, the giver of all life on earth. During the darkest days of the year, amidst seeming defeat, the Unconquered God suddenly rose to triumph, and renewal began. The Christians, being the wise innovators that they were in their centuries of work replacing the Roman Empire with the Christian Empire, shifted worship from the sun itself toward worship of the one who created the sun.

This is a fascinating story of cultural and religious evolution, one that in my mind does not decrease in any way the moral teachings of Jesus. But my interest this morning goes deeper, into more primal humanity. Before Christmas there was *Natalis Invicti*, and before that was Saturnalia, and before Saturnalia, long before the first Christians entered Britain, the pagans there celebrated “Mother Night,” and before “Mother Night,” as far back as history can be traced, the Celts and Germanic tribes celebrated the new year between December 25 and January 6 on the Julian calendar, and before that were tribes of acute observers of the natural world who celebrated a midwinter festival, and before there were acute observers, there was simply a planetary hunk of rock circling a minor star on the edge of a galaxy once every 365 days. Nature planted, nature cultivated, and nature harvested. Nature cycled in its own time, in the way it had always done for eons, alternating periods of light with periods of darkness, slowly evolving a warm home in the vast dark ocean of the universe.

Following ancient pagan rituals and deep human yearnings, this is the season we cry out for light – in earlier times with bonfires and now with colored lights in our yards, through our trees, and on our gutters. But what of darkness? What is it we want to keep away? We humans used to be afraid of wild animals at night, and at the winter solstice we were afraid the sun would never return. Are we now merely following ancient habit and ritual, or does something about darkness still scares us? Why is it we so often seem to cram every waking moment with light and busy-ness? What drives us away from solitude, quiet, and darkness?

We need darkness. We need rest. In the Northern Hemisphere, winter is the season the earth uses to remain fallow, regenerating itself for another go ‘round in spring. Sleep each night is the way humans regenerate to engage the next day. Without sleep night after night, where would we be? After having gone through seminary, with all the papers and finals, I can attest to the worthless state of human consciousness after several nights in a row with hardly any sleep! Organic life needs darkness. Life maintains and rebuilds itself by using darkness, recycling and turnover.

What I’m talking about is fungus. OK, not necessarily fungus, but how fungus works and grows. Particularly mushrooms. Mushrooms lack the ability to use energy from the sun. They are not green plants because they do not have chlorophyll. Rather than use the sun, mushrooms take their nutrition from the rich medium of decaying, organic matter vegetation. They benefit the environment by recycling the waste materials of other organic life.

Or consider the Poinsettia. A friend of mine who is a landscape designer says that in order for it to develop into the beautiful red plant we love to see in the middle of winter, the Poinsettia begins to form its flowers only when the days are a certain length, or, more accurately, when the nights are long enough. In a paper about the Poinsettia, my friend wrote: "The light actually isn't the stimuli to promote blooming; rather it is a hormone that induces the sensing system. The sensing system is a pigment called photochrome...During the dark hours the...light that accrued during daylight now starts changing to a [photochrome red] hormone...which stimulates the bloom." I learned from my friend that without long nights, the Poinsettia will continue to produce leaves and will grow but will never flower. Even light from a street lamp can stop flowering. The plant requires 12-18 hours of darkness per day for up to three months in order to bloom!

So often in our lives, in this modern Western world, we are not allowed to sit in darkness. We are prompted to turn on the lights, turn on the radio, turn on the television, to turn on the car and go out shopping. Darkness is seen as something to avoid, something to be afraid of, something to deny or ignore at all costs. And in the midst of this, in the midst of this frenzied season of crowded highways, crowded malls, and crowded parties, I remember pain and I remember uncertainty and I remember darkness. But I also remember mushrooms, meditation, and poinsettias. I remember that we cannot hurry growth, and we cannot rush enlightenment, so it is important not to rush through darkness. To understand any light we discover, we first need to stand outside our den like an old bear and face the creeping darkness. To experience the light of revelation, we first need to experience the darkness of uncertainty.

Proverbs 17:22 says, "A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones." I am open to living a little more in the gray areas. Sometimes we require a downcast spirit. Sometimes, like the mushroom, we need to take our nourishment from decay. Sometimes, like the poinsettia, we require darkness in order to bloom.

### **Benediction**

From poet T.S. Eliot

"In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must first go by a way which is the way of ignorance;  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession;  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not."

### **Hymn #391 "Voice Still and Small"**

### **Postlude**