

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Practicing Imperfection

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**READING** *from Joe Paddock, Minnesota poet*

**We Cannot Hear**

We move within great guiding rhythms:  
 yahonking geese who know their way,  
 coiling vines that find the sun,  
 honey bees that dance for their hives, describing, point by point,  
 the way to flower-finds.  
 Most perfect guidance.

From everywhere in the universe,  
 the immense flight – energy and wisdom of the infinite –  
 continually swarms in on us,  
 but, fixed on glut, lean bellies and beautifully abstract breasts,  
 bushels, the market, bull and bear,  
*we cannot hear!*  
 Our sensitive ear has been jammed.

We could be guided,  
 continually corrected by the whole wondrous webbing  
*were we open..*

Through blood-tinted twilight,  
 shifting flights,  
 patterns elaborating wisdom winging steadily away.

**Practicing Imperfection**

I was sitting with a friend, having breakfast, commiserating with her about all the things that keep us up at night, things that seem so benign or at least non-toxic in the morning, in a coffee shop, in broad daylight, but which come stalking in the night so ominous, so relentless, so real. She had her own particular demons, I had mine, and we shared between us the regular roster of worries about health, family, money, work, and all our various sins of omission and commission, our recent failings and permanent flaws, the things that wake you up with an ice cold hand and keep you up, a long, long time. I told her all my tricks for getting back to sleep, none of which really work - reading the same paragraph in the same boring book over and over, making long written lists of all the things to get done in the morning, drinking warm milk, and then she said, out of the blue, “Well, yeah, but sometimes there’s just nothing left to do but pray.” This friend is not a religious person, at least she’s never mentioned it, and yet this seemed so matter-of-fact to her, so obvious. It felt strange to be talking about it right there in the restaurant, so I sort of whispered, *What do you mean?* She meant the most obvious, matter-of-fact thing: that when she was overwhelmed, weary and worn, weighted down with dread or remorse, when she was frightened or heartsick, and the dark waters of depression or old grief or recent regret started

rising, she would “offer them up,” she said. “To God?” I said, and she answered, “I *guess* so,” as if it almost didn’t matter. She gave her fears voice. She spoke sorrow out loud. She admitted her trespasses, owned up to her failings, asked for forgiveness, asked explicitly for rest, asked for quiet, for morning to come. She spoke her real and present need, asked for real help. She told me she’d sit in a chair with her hands open, eyes closed. It didn’t take too long. I’m telling it in the past tense, but this is an ongoing practice. “It doesn’t fix anything,” she says. Her worries all woke up with her. But almost always, she can fall back to sleep. Almost always, the morning comes with enough light to see clearly by, enough light to walk on.

I think what surprised me was that she would talk about it in a coffee shop, that she would talk about it at all. To me it felt like such tender ground, such private property, intimate. It’s hard to admit you are powerless, as any addict in recovery knows, and to admit it out loud is even harder. My own practice was to try to outwit or out-will or hide from those night demons; her way is to give them all names, acknowledge their enormous power, own them all, and ask for help. Ask God for help? That’s the part that wasn’t clear to me, and maybe not to her. It is the asking that matters, not the answer. It’s the action, the practice, the practice of imperfection. She wasn’t waiting for an answer.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish teacher, said in a passage that’s quoted in our hymnal, “Prayer cannot bring water to parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city, but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.” Prayer invites the holy to be present. This is petitionary prayer, the practice of asking for help.

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In the early mornings, I take our dog to a little patch of woods not far from here. It’s dark now when we go, and his eyesight is failing, so neither one of us can see. He walks alert and quietly, stopping to cock his head if there are owls or cracking branches, another dog barking way off in the distance. He’s listening. Sometimes he stops in the path and sits when there is no sound at all, attuned to the silence, to the sound of the stars going out before morning. He does exactly the right thing in the silent forest, at the end of the year on the edge of the solstice, under the stars and last week’s full moon. The threshold of night and the daylight is a good place to pause and to breathe and be reverent. But I say, “Come on Cocoa, we have to get going, get moving, we have to get back, get breakfast done, bags packed, lunches made, everybody off to school, off to work.” Every inch of him resists. He has mastered nonviolent passive resistance. A little thought bubble appears above his head, glowing in the dark. “Why?” he says. “Remind me again why we have to go. Shouldn’t we stay here, at least to watch the sun come up? Shouldn’t we pay attention, pay homage?” I tell him, “Yes, we should, and someday I promise you we’ll do that, but not today, not this week. And probably not next week. We’ve got 20 minutes scheduled for this walk, and we really need to go.” I show him the time on my cellphone.

It’s such a busy time, December. It’s always such a busy time, in this life. Even if you are not ostensibly busy, even if you don’t have a job right now - maybe you are retired or out of work, as so many people unexpectedly, unwillingly, are; even if you’re not in school yourself, or don’t have school-age children, we all live in a distracted, hectic, frantic and fragmented age. When is the last time you heard the forest breathing in the way Philip Simmons describes it?

*[The sound of the pines] is finely sifted sound, a soft hiss through unnumbered needles. Stand by one as it takes the air, and you'll know how God breathes. Hear the accumulated sound of such trees coming at you over the miles, and you hear something like the breath of Being itself, the very sigh of our becoming and passing away. I hear this wind in its purest form only a handful of times each winter, yet when I do, I imagine it has been there always, back of everything else I thought I was doing with my life. Whenever I hear it, I think: surely this is the sound I heard as I was born, the sound I will hear as I die.*

When's the last time you listened to that sacred music, or remembered that music? When did you last listen to lake water lapping the shore in the middle of the night, when you're the only one awake, or the sound of the lake in deep winter when the ice is not cracking and there's no sound at all but the sound of your skis or your boots or your breath?

When's the last time you breathed the breath of life, and noticed you were doing so, and gave thanks for it, took a huge unseemly gulp of it, and marveled, appropriately, that this air comes into your body exhaled from trees, and will return to them again? You could take such a breath right now. This is contemplative prayer.

Philip Simmons writes:

*I recall boyhood nights when I went sledding by moonlight. This went best when several feet of snow had been followed by rain and then a freeze, forming an icy crust that was just hard enough to bear the weight of children and dogs. Grownups would punch through up to their thighs, so they couldn't follow us when after dinner we trooped out into a neighbor's field glowing with moonlight. We filled the night with our noise: boastful chatter, the dull booming of our molded plastic sleds held and struck like gongs. But there came a moment at the top of the field when we fell silent, looking down over that slope toward the dark woods at the bottom. We lined up our sleds, lay flat on our bellies, noses just inches above the snow. It was a sobering business, and that was how we wanted it. For me then—12 or 14 years old—the essence of good sledding was fear. Danger mattered, and anything that amplified the sense of it was welcome: darkness, cold, the absence of grownups, the waiting woods. Like all adolescent boys, we were in love with our own annihilation. There was no end to those woods, we knew. They sunk into swamp, rose over hills, and in our minds swept on forever into Canada and the frozen north. Our goal was to be swallowed up. We knew that on this icy crust, on sleds of hard plastic, we would quickly reach a terminal velocity of several hundred miles an hour. We knew that when we did bail out, we would continue sliding on our backs, watching the wall of the woods rise over us like a dark wave until we tore through the brambles at the field's edge, broke through alder and willow saplings, and carried on to our final appointment with a stone wall topped with barbed wire. This was good sledding.*

*When the run was over and I lay bruised and torn and unbearably happy, the silence would fall. And that's when I would hear it: the winter wind, breathing from the miles of forest at whose edge I lay, that chill spirit mingling with my own breath rising in plumes toward the brilliant moon, the cold stars. I would lie there a long time, feeling my whole body cool toward the temperature of snow, listening to that wind that was hardly a wind, that subtle non-sound. Lying*

*in the snow, I let my breath slow, my mind empty of thoughts. I was one with snow and stars, rooted as pine, imperturbable as stone.*

*Like good sledding, the slide toward emptiness can be scary. Emptiness is akin to nothingness, and our work in this world is all about its opposite, somethingness. We're told to make something of ourselves; we want to be somebody. These are the callings and warnings of ego, and they're not all bad: in responding to them we create something not only for ourselves but for our children and our communities. Emptiness, like silence, like love, is a gift: not something we choose, not something we reason our way into, but rather something into which we fall. The fall into emptiness, into silence, has the nature of an accident. We can't choose our accidents, but we can learn to make ourselves accident prone, to make ourselves available to grace.*

I read somewhere about a military chaplain who served in World War II in England, who recalled his conversations with young soldiers during the war. He remembered especially those who served in the Air Force or the Navy. When he asked them about fear, when he asked about loneliness and how they survived, they told of their long hours alone, watching infinite expanses of the sky or the sea at night. They seemed to him wise beyond their years, centered and calm. Their comrades in the Army, who were almost always busy on the ground, rarely spoke of such things to the chaplain, who remained intrigued all his life by the accidental assignment to a contemplative post, and the way some men had fallen, by grace, into the embrace of emptiness.

This is Sabbath-mind. Abraham Joshua Heschel, spoke of the Sabbath as a “great cathedral” in “the architecture of time.” He marked the old correspondence, in Latin, between *templar* (temple) and *tempus* (time). The Sabbath is a temple, a cathedral, made of time. “Six days a week,” he said,

*we live under the tyranny of things in space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.<sup>i</sup>*

It is a day, a period, an hour set aside, a dedication of some small, deliberate fraction of your time on earth.

Where is your contemplative station, the post from which you can gaze broadly out, where you can see so far that you begin to see your own life in perspective, not the center of creation, nor even the center of your own ultimate concern, but part and parcel of the general holiness of things?

For some, for many here, the contemplative post is outside, in wildness, or even in some scruffy little park right in town, with dogs at dawn, and owls and deer. For some it's the garden, even the winter garden gone to seed beneath frost. For others it's in church, not a place so much as a moment in the service, perhaps when the choir is singing, or that other moment, right after they stop, when the music still hangs in the silence, not shattered by clapping, with no rush to next spoken thing.

For some it's the church on any day but Sunday, when the sanctuary is empty and beckoning, filled with the presence that stays when we all go away. Others have a quiet corner in their house, an altar in the world, or maybe just a chair. For others it's an easel with paints, or a journal, or a certain kind of book that leads the mind back to the spirit, the head back to the heart, the will back to asking for help.

We are driven to distraction by ten thousand large and small things, demanding things and enticing things, exciting, seductive, mind-numbing, dutiful things, work things, play things, electronic things. It takes such discipline to be still, to be quiet, to listen. To be non-productive, ineffective, inefficient, slothful, prayerful, reverent. To point our sleds on purpose toward the dangerous, nurturing emptiness below.

*When the house is clean*, we say. When my desk is clear, bills paid, accounts balanced, my inbox empty, emails answered, the decomposing jack o'lantern removed from its puddle on the porch, the Christmas presents purchased, wrapped, hidden or mailed, once I stop eating, start exercising, stop working, start working, then I will listen to the forest, and stick around till sunlight. Then I will take my post and take a conscious breath. Then I will give thanks. Or make amends. Or forgive somebody's trespasses, maybe starting with my own. Then I will tell my children, my parents, my friend, how I love them. When everything's in order, in perfect order, I will begin. When everything's under control, my own control, I will be ready. The only trouble is, you may be very old by then, or dead.

*In the most common form of Buddhist meditation*, says Phillip Simmons, *one sits silently, often for long periods, continually returning the awareness to the breath, to this wind of our origin and of our passing away. Our word "spirit" comes from the Latin spiritus, or "breath"; in returning to the breath, we return to spirit, we hear the winter wind, we allow ourselves to cool into winter mind, we prepare for the fall into emptiness. And in touching emptiness we touch the source, the spring, the creative power out of which the universe flows at every moment. That source has many names, but I call it "God."*

Whenever I read his beautiful book, I'm chastened. He died of Lou Gehrig's disease a few years ago, still in his forties. He did all that writing, and all that listening, watching, noticing, loving the world, while he was wasting away. Which is what all of us are doing, at various velocities. The trick is to let go and pay attention, however long life lasts. When exactly is the right time to schedule contemplative wonder, or exuberance commensurate with the beauty of the world? When do you "keep your appointment with mystery," as one mystic says? To remember who and what you are, which is not perfect, but wholly human ("wholly," meaning entirely, but also maybe meaning "holy.") Not perfect but blessed, beloved and worthy. The whole motion of Advent now in the Christian calendar as the world goes dark is toward remembering and waiting, not just for a single exceptional, magical child, but for the quiet realization, the quiet conviction, silent confession by every ordinary child, every ordinary human person, that each life within all life is a gift. Each life, including one's own. To get to that point of confession, you have to wait a long time in the dark.

*We move within great guiding rhythms*, says Joe Paddock, Minnesota poet.

*yahonking geese who know their way,  
coiling vines that find the sun,  
honey bees that dance for their hives, describing, point by point,  
the way to flower-finds.  
Most perfect guidance.*

*From everywhere in the universe,  
...wisdom of the infinite ...continually swarms in on us,  
but, fixed on glut, lean bellies and beautifully abstract breasts,  
bushels, the market, bull and bear,  
we cannot hear!  
Our sensitive ear has been jammed.*

*We could be guided,  
continually corrected by the whole wondrous webbing,  
were we open..*

*... [old] patterns elaborating wisdom [are] winging steadily away.*

This is not a new suggestion. I think of another poet, seeking the same wisdom in a different, distracted century:

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.<sup>ii</sup>*

Now is the time, there's no other time, for listening, waiting, wondering, remembering old wisdom, old patterns, old rhythms. Now is the time, the perfect time, to relinquish perfection, all hopes of perfection, all attachment to it, all allegiance. To find a sled or a dog or a chair in the dark, to open your hands and let go whatever it is you're clenching so tightly. It will surely be waiting for you in the morning. To let it rest, to rest yourself, to draw your breath, may be the most responsible, diligent, impressive work you've ever done. Open your hands and let go, and let come, all that is beyond your control, and call it what you will.

*Prayer cannot bring water to parched land, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city,  
but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.*

For a few moments, we'll be silent together.

∞    *silence*    ∞

*Like the empty sky, it has no boundaries.  
Yet it is right in this place, ever profound and clear.  
When you seek to know it, you cannot see it.  
You cannot take hold of it, but you cannot lose it.  
When you are silent, it speaks. When you speak, it is silent.  
The great gate is wide open to bestow alms,  
And no crowd is blocking the way.  
- Cheng-tao Ke, Zen Buddhist*

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<sup>i</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1951)

<sup>ii</sup> William Wordsworth, "The World is Too Much With Us," 1807