

**2005-1-30 Wintery Spirit**  
**Mark Belletini & Wendy Fish**

**Opening Words**

We are here  
***on a midwinter's day, to worship;***  
to link our lives to hope and humility;  
***to nurture the practice of kindness***  
toward others and to ourselves, also;  
***and to meditate on both what is,***  
and what might be. We begin by saying:

**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the  
beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon  
it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge,  
deeper compassion and hope of peace.**

**Sequence**

Miracle.

It just means *a wonder*. Or a something *powerful*, the biblical  
commentary tells me.

Nothing more than that.

Nothing less either.

Miracle. Wonder. Powerful.

And so I look upon the world, and suddenly the winter hours erupt  
in miracles, beyond my power to count.

The pearl of the full moon, falling through  
a glassful of dark night. A miracle.

The bunched needles of pine, drooping in the cold air, like the  
hand of a sleeping friend. A miracle.

The thirty-eight colors in the bark climbing

up a bare-branched oak tree, all playfully pretending to be brown.  
Thirty-eight miracles.

My breath floating like a cloud in the cold.

A miracle.

The memory of making a real igloo out of snow  
bricks when I was a child. Another miracle.

The quiet on the street when every birdsong  
is muffled by a blanket of snow. A silent miracle. The quiet in a  
warmed winter meeting house when the bellsound trails off into  
nothingness. A present miracle.

*Silence.*

Miracle. Wonder. Power. That we all live on this small planet at  
the edge of the void, within a thin envelope of moist air. Miracle.  
Wonder. Power. That we live to love, that we lose love and still  
survive, that we can remember and rejoice and join hands to  
celebrate life, and all those who are a part of our lives. Naming  
them in the sanctuary of our hearts, or whispering their names like  
a prayer in this common space, we celebrate the miracle, the  
wonder, the power that we are.

*naming*

The miracle of a composer long gone, living still  
in the music. The miracle of fingers on a key board. The miracle of  
breath shaped by a metal horn.

The wonder, the power, of cooperation. The miracle of  
performance and appreciation.

**The First Reading** *comes from the writings of Joyce Rupp, on  
prayer, Praying our Goodbyes,*

1988.

One winter morning I awoke to see magnificent lines of frost stretching across my window panes. They seemed to rise with the sunshine and bitter cold outside. They were little miracles that formed in the dark of night. I watched them in sheer amazement and marveled that such beautiful forms could be born during such a cold night. Yet, as I pondered them, I thought of how life is so like that. We live our long worn days in the shadows, in what often feels like barren, cold winter, so unaware of the miracles that are being created in our spirits. It takes the sudden daylight, some unexpected surprise of life, to notice a simple, stunning growth that has happened quietly inside us. Like frost designs on a winter window, they bring us beyond life's fragmentation and remind us that we are not nearly as lost as we thought we were, that all the time we thought we were dead inside, beautiful things were being born in us.

**The Second Reading** is a poem by Bai Juyi, a revered poet who lived, as we reckon the years here in the West, during the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The poem will be presented in Chinese, and then in modern English translation.

*Dong ri ping quan lu wan gui  
shan lu nan xing ri yi xia  
yan cun shuang shu yu qi ya  
Ye gui bu dao ying xian shi  
re yin san bei ji shi jia*

It's tough making my way  
along the mountain road  
with the sunlight slanting so sharply.  
Eventually, I come to a village  
wrapped in winter mist;

a crow lands on a frosted tree.  
I'll not be arriving before night falls;  
but what difference does that make?  
Once I've taken three cups of hot tea  
at the inn, I'll feel as if I'm home.

## **Sermon**

### **Mark:**

Those of you who have known me for the seven years I have been here will have little trouble remembering how my first Ohio winter affected me. My mouth was pretty much agape in disbelief for days, and the most I could say during my first January and February was, "*What* happened to the sun?"

Some people were even worried about me. I was overheard to constantly mumble about the icy snow under my breath and murmur about the lowering gray skies. I wondered aloud if the ancient Ohio mound-builders had simply built those huge earthwork domes just to cover themselves and sleep through the misery like hibernating bears. My dislike for winter bunched inside my heart like a knot.

But even ministers can grow spiritually now and then. And just maybe, just maybe, I'm coming along a bit. This morning, as what will come to some people as a perplexing surprise, I'd like to talk about the gift of winter.

Now, please, I am not going to romanticize the season. The flooded basements and frozen pipes are real, and no picnic. Branches rudely torn off trees by the ice storms do not usually improve the tree. People slip on ice and hurt themselves, and the poor suffer the indignities of poorly built shelters coupled with

colossal heating bills. And I am convinced that the winter depression that hits some people more than others is real.

And it makes no difference whether it's caused by the highly slanted, short-lived and often completely obscured sunlight; or whether, (as suggested in a Dispatch article this week,) it has to do with the emotional let down after all the festive December dinners and parties. Or even the breaking of most, if not all, of our new years resolutions, and the arrival of an Everest of post-Holiday bills in the mail.

No, I am not going to be romantic about winter. I know the realities of the season. And I am not going to tell you that I have suddenly taken up cross-country skiing, or can now do figure-eights backwards on skates, either. I know that those who like winter often speak of such activities, but no, none of that for me. I am certainly not suddenly fond of the bitter cold stinging my ears. And I still hate shoveling snow as much as ever. Or hitting snow-hidden potholes. Or crawling down Weisheimer when it is so icy it allows my car to spin like a propeller.

But I *have* come to realize that each season has its spirit, its own inner life, so to speak. And I have come to believe that I am called during each season to *relate* to that spirit honestly, to not resist it, or run from it. For to run from that is to run from life itself.

I used to feel that only the days of summer, late spring and so-called Indian summer were the scope of *real* life, and that winter was simply something to be endured. Summer was breathing, winter was holding my breath. Summer was the baseline, winter the eccentric.

But real life is not limited to five months out of the year. Real life, I have come to believe, is not waiting around until the hand we are dealt is filled with cards we would dearly like to play. I'm not saying that life is just a game, per se, but it does share some features with a game...you are given a hand you did not ask for, and you play the hand you were dealt. You play the hand as skillfully as you can. And, if you are rational at all, you don't spend any time stewing that you weren't dealt a better hand. And, you don't waste any time coming up with bitter cosmic theories to explain your particular lack of luck, as if Fate or Fortune had nothing better to do than to take from you what you are convinced you rightly deserve. The worth of our lives is intrinsic, our principles affirm, not earned, bought, or available only in certain seasons.

No, winter just comes. Like the sun appearing over the horizon in the morning. Like the moon arching above us at night. It is part of the natural scheme of things, like the tilting of the earth, and the orbit of the moon.

And it brings with it blessings, or gifts. Like summer brings gifts. Like autumn. And spring. The gift of warmth breezes in summer, the gift of red leaves in fall, the blessing of crocuses in spring...these are easier gifts to accept, I suppose, than most. You don't have to do any work to unwrap them. They just glow. They glow in stark contrast to the gray ice of winter, to be sure.

But I am not sure that the outer part of the natural world is the best place to notice the gifts of winter, unless, unlike me, you *are* an avid skier or skater. I think the gifts of winter, despite the clear beauty of sunlight through icy branches, or sunlight uncovering subtle colors in the bark of a threadbare tree, are found mostly in our inner nature, in our inner life.

What are these gifts? The list is surprisingly long.

The gift of slowing down. The gift of greater care in moving: while driving, while walking. The gift of vulnerability, of knowing how fragile our whole powerful city is to the far higher power of the weather systems crossing our nation. The gift of waiting. The gift of austerity in our vision. The gift of becoming more sensitive to lesser illuminations, of paying attention to things which only the darkness can bring to light. The gift of pace, so we can actually pay greater attention to our feelings, undistracted by outings and constant cheers of “Let’s go!”

These are all amazing gifts, for which I must say thank you.

## **Wendy**

On cold winter days, one gift many of us enjoy is to tune in to public radio and to listen to the distinctive voice of Garrison Keilor. He tells a wonderful story about a Lake Wobegon family that needs to learn something—and quickly—about Unitarian Universalism. This particular tale of his is about a large Catholic family, and their beloved youngest daughter who is preparing to be married to a “Unitarian” man, *his term*. They want to know what they can do to make him feel at home, in the wedding service, and in their family. But they have no idea whatsoever what he might believe, or what a Unitarian could possibly be.

So they decide to send one of their sons on a reconnaissance mission to the Unitarian church on Sunday morning. His job: to come back with a report on Unitarian belief and culture. When he returns home to the family, he looks befuddled, and a little dazed. The family gathers around him eagerly: What did he learn? He finally simply says, over and over again, in a monotone: Somewhere in the dark, a candle burns.

Sadly, part of what makes this story funny is that it does reflect something of the truth. We religious liberals can resort too easily and quickly to the purely abstract, to the merely metaphorical—it is easier, after all, than naming the unnamable, when we already know all names are inadequate. And yet...perhaps we should not so easily excuse ourselves. Somewhere in the dark, a candle burns. This is, in fact, true, and important...but we can't stop there. It leaves us with our own spiritual work to do. It leaves us with the important work of giving exact name and shape to the dark and to the candle out of the experience of our own lives.

I do have such a story myself.

Lately I've been thinking about my high school years, triggered by messages that come in the mail from my alma mater about my fortieth high school reunion that is fast approaching. What were the highlights of those years? What has shaped me from the many experiences with teachers, classmates and book learning in my high school years?

One particular story comes to mind.

My senior year was the pilot year for a program much like the *walkabouts* some of our young people engage in with Worthington Alternative High School. We each found a placement in the community and from the engagement with people in a particular field we learned something about ourselves and the world in which we're planted. I applied, and was accepted, as a volunteer at world-renowned Perkins School for the Blind. My placement was with residential preschool children who were both developmentally delayed and blind. My other assignment was to be on playground duty 5 days a week right after lunch. Perkins is located in Watertown, Massachusetts; and I suppose most of us heard



weather reports of the winter storm leaving 3 feet of snow in the Boston area last week. The winter of '65 was a cold and snowy one in its own right, and my recollection is that we were outside long enough to get wet and frozen right through.

Most winter days during this senior year, I chose to wear my aunt's old raccoon coat to brace myself from the biting winds and unrelenting cold. I suited up with thick woolen mittens so I could steady the frozen metal chains on the sides of the swings that were favorites with the children. My playground duty uniform included sunglasses to protect myself from the brightness of the sun on snow and boots so I could tromp around with the children in fresh snow.

My initial expectation was that I'd be sitting on a bench with a group of kids who wouldn't have much to do outside in terms of play. Boy, was I wrong! They played ball, the ball having been imbedded with bells. They rode tricycles, avoided the metal slide when it was too cold to be comfortable, but loved the swings that had bells to indicate how high they were pumping. While swinging, they called to one another, and laughed together. They played with jump ropes in games they invented anew each day, and ran quite freely in the protected space that they had come to know quite well. They played their version of hopscotch, and some kids enjoyed the free time to just talk quietly together.

I had a lot to learn about children with physical challenges. I had a lot to learn about myself and my assumptions about their abilities and disabilities. These kids were fully alive, standing strong against the storms of life. These children were full of creativity, delight and surprise. Although the after-lunch-time was designated as play time, for me it was soul-renewing time. Here they were, Ronnie and Susan and Jim and others, their song rising up like the wind, to use a line from the ingathering story this morning, engaging with the life that was before them. They stood bright

against the bleakness of barren branches on the trees, reminding me of the leaves on those branches already incubating in spite of the winter cold. Bearing witness to their life-giving behavior gave me a sense of connection to deeper things, seen and unseen, known and unknown.

This experience, and now the story of it, does sustain me when, in the depths of the dark, I try to remember the true, the real, the beautiful. Stories of winter weather, *inner* winter weather as well as crisp air and howling wind stories are, and can be, sustaining when we remember that the cold drives us back to what truly warms us.

One more such story.

There was once, let us say two hundred and fifty years ago, a minister in England who was much beloved by his congregation. He was a learned man, a theologian, an amateur chemist, and a gentle man—which is why his people forgave him when he periodically leveled the parsonage with strange explosions. And while his interests were diverse, you could say that even his scientific enterprise was essentially a pastoral one. You see, he had many experiments over the years, but his abiding obsession was with cucumbers. He reasoned that, as cucumbers require so much sun over the course of the summer, it should be possible to derive a means of extracting the sun from the cucumbers during the winter, thus bringing light and joy to the darkest times of his people's lives. He died, sadly, having never accomplished his goal of determining a chemical means of extracting sunlight from cucumbers. And yet, to this day, his people tell the story of the man who cared enough about them to try, a story which brightens their dismal days more than any cucumber ever could.

So how shall we live in these gray times of year? It is not enough to say only “a candle burns in the dark.” Nor, though, do we actually have to derive a means of extracting sunlight from cucumbers in order to survive. We have only to remember the connections and interconnections that have brightened our lives and remember to tell the story—and to tell it, best of all and most frequently, to our own selves.

I like the words of Joyce Rupp from the first reading. “Like frost designs on a winter window,” these stories, she says, “bring us beyond life’s fragmentation and remind us that we are not nearly as lost as we thought we were, that all the time we thought we were dead inside, beautiful things were being born in us.”

So what is your story? What is your candle that burns in the dark? What beautiful crystal patterns are forming within you in this cold season? I challenge you to remember and recollect the stuff of your own life that stands in such stark and yet beautiful contrast to the equally beautiful bare branches against the gray skies.

### **Mark:**

Our Chinese poet, Bai Juyi, wrote about his winter journey over a thousand years ago. He talks about how the low sun made his journey more difficult. But, “Eventually, I come to a village” he writes, “wrapped in winter mist;” as “A crow lands on a frosted tree.” Then he muses thoughtfully:

*“I’ll not be arriving before night falls;  
but what difference does that make?  
Once I’ve taken three cups of hot tea*

*at the inn, I'll feel as if I'm home."*

I was taken by these lines. For many years, I've lived as if home was bright summer only, and that I could not feel at home in the winter.

Even though Wendy and I both grew up in snow-belt areas, Boston and Detroit respectively, both of us lived much of our adult lives in a climate where the seasons were less like Greek epics, as long as the Iliad and Odyssey, and more like those short Japanese poems called *haiku* or *tanka*, or even Bai Juyi's brief masterpiece. Wendy and I both knew roses in the winter, and tulips in January. The rain was cold, but only for a day or two.

But here, the longer, colder and grayer winter has pressed different questions in our hearts, and called us to look at this metaphor of "waiting for the invincible summer light to dawn before we begin living in earnest."

Is it not earnest to live slower and more paced? Isn't it an opportunity to find that the wayside inn is just as much home as the home I am used to claiming? Those three cups of tea made Bai Juyi feel that it was not important for him to get home before he felt at home.

He found plenty of real home on the journey. And he even began to realize, I suspect, that summer is no more a final home than winter is. For all seasons change at last.

I think his metaphor of finding home where he is, as opposed to where he is going is a profound one. A difficult metaphor, but spiritually profound. He is saying, I think, that you do not have to wait for everything to be perfect, right, established, or finished, in order to live, and live well. You do not have to wait for the perfect date, the perfect job, the perfect house, in order for you to love and live fully and without apology. You do not have to wait until your

body is flawless, your degrees are stacked higher than a mountain, or your therapy is finished, in order to thrive, and live with joy. I can live in the season that surrounds me just as I can live in the transitions which mark my life. For all of life, including summer, is a transition. Further-more, life can be slow and paced, not fast, and still be life. Neither perfection nor ease are the true signs of life...in fact, they actually may be truer signs of death than any real life. So, unlike Shakespeare, Wendy and I are suggesting that this is *not* “the winter of our discontent,” but rather, the season of our birthing and living. We still have to walk carefully on the ice, and drive carefully on the slippery streets, but we can turn toward winter the whole while, and not turn away. For the tea is poured; it is warm, and signs our homeward journey in the midst of winter. And we find in the end that the journey itself, every step and every season, is the life to which we were called from our very first day.

### **Offering**

To support the life of this community is a privilege for some, yes, and a noble duty for others. We come with differing philosophies, I suppose, about generosity and support, as we each like different music or different art, or are drawn to different sporting events, different foods, even different seasons. Yet each of us eats, and creates, and admires, and plays and appreciates. May we who are members and friends find some part of ourselves which we can give today...either in support of this church and its programs with financial gifts, or in reaching out to guests and visitors to welcome them with gladness.

### **Peace Prayers**

Here's the peace I'd like to see in my lifetime, O Love.  
I'm not just talking about bayonets rusting in the dirt, mind you, or rifles bent into hearts. I'm seeing a rooftop over the head of every child, a healthy meal in every belly. I am seeing both election days

and worship days, without any rituals of exclusion. I'm seeing hospital beds for anyone who needs one, and a bit of health care that costs less than the national debt of France, and doesn't require a PhD in the higher math to fill out forms. I am seeing a supply of medication for minds who have had to self-medicate on beer and crack. And lots of encouragement for the discouraged, and praise for the praise starved, too, and the cheerful omission of the word "deserve" in all subsequent dictionaries. Oh, and some basic education. For everyone. Nothing flashy...just plenty of books, some charts, drawing pads, a little soccer and a globe so that everyone can tell everyday that the world is round, and that when it's winter here it's summer someplace else. And some dance music, if people feel like it. Oh, and lots of time on cold winter nights, or warm summer porches, for poetry and singing too. That's the kind of peace that is not past my understanding.

I'd like to live in such a way so that I up the chances of seeing such peace before I join my ancestors.

### **Hymn: The Peace Not Past Our Understanding**