

"10,000 Years of Light"
Delivered to UU Congregation of Marin
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Almost a year ago, my wife Stephanie and I were joined by a newborn son we named Henry. Knowing that he's hopefully going to be here until the end of this century adds a new perspective to all the news I see. I subscribe to the online newsletter from Harper's Magazine, and they try to distill each week's news down into about a single page's worth of reading. By the time I finish reading it, it always feels like, "Wow, this is the end of the world. This is some really weird... stuff." And yet I've been reading it for some time now, and the world keeps on going.

A few of the stories that made it to the news:

- Arizona has a new law essentially asking police officers to profile people who look like they might be from south of the border. I burned my forehead marching in San Francisco yesterday because I forgot to bring a hat.
- It's been revealed that Goldman Sachs knew that they would benefit if the market dive-bombed. "There will be very good opportunities as the market goes into what is likely to be even greater distress, and we want to be in position to take advantage of them."
- During the market crash, SEC employees were looking at significantly more pornography on office computers.
- And the big scary news this week: an offshore oil rig is leaking 200,000 gallons of unrefined crude oil daily, which is heading for the coast and may also get caught into the gulf stream, bringing the spill to Florida and the eastern seaboard.

These stories are tragedies, each in their own way. Yet each of them are a result of human action. These were not earthquakes or hurricanes, which are tragedies for which we can only try to prepare and to mitigate their effects. These were human constructions.

For the acts beyond our control, frequently there are preachers who try to say it is the wrath of God brought on by the abortionists, the LGBT folks, the feminists, or that the Haitians “made a deal with the devil,” which caused God to send an earthquake.

But many of the catastrophes humanity has brought on are much more glaring. Can there be a stronger example of a “deal with the devil” gone awry than the risky flirtation of erecting an oil rig out in the sea, drilling miles underground, and pulling liquified dinosaur bones up to the surface of the water, for the purpose of gaining riches? Yet eleven people are missing and presumed dead from the oil rig explosion, and that growing crude oil slick is likely to kill off wildlife in untold numbers. Humanity is taking chances with extinction-level events.

A part of the old-school Universalist theology is that God loves everybody, so everyone will be saved. I think that teaching was provisional, to counter the Calvinist thinking that some people were “elect” and others were damned, but it didn’t go far enough. A newer theology, for those who care about being saved in the here and now in this world, says there’s a radical uncertainty. We’re all in the same spherical blue and green boat, but from a humanist Universalist standpoint, neither us, nor our planet are automatically saved. And it’s important to note that many of today’s catastrophes adversely affect individuals or subgroups of the population. Part of being in true community with each other is that we are accountable such that none are left behind. In other words, the more we stand together as allies, the more security we will find, and the stronger our communities will be.

Yet it’s critical to avoid the tendency to see life as crisis management and risk avoidance. If we’re focusing our energy on trying to bring in money to keep the wolves from the door, and filling out tax statements, jury-duty summons, census data, bills, health insurance, car insurance, Roth IRA investments, junk-mail, spam, anti-virus software and such, we’re stuck fighting fires, and trapped in a “now” not of our own choosing.

This trap may have developed naturally, but at present is maintained by industries that are no longer the best way to do business. The trap exists for them to continue to exist and to earn money. Industries such as the military, prisons, fossil-fuel energy, for-profit insurance, banks, and monopolies impose themselves as important to our way of life, but offer us empty promises,

a poor return on investment. Our world would be better served were they dismantled and replaced with systems that put different principles in the forefront.

Sometimes the principles in operation are so all-encompassing that they're hard to even see, and sometimes we can hardly even bear to look at them for all that long. As novelist James Michener says, "An age is called 'dark,' not because the light fails to shine but because people refuse to see it." As Unitarian Universalists, our fourth principle, affirming "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning" – our fourth principle calls on us to see clearly the age we are in.

In this political environment, focused on an ever-growing economy, is it any wonder that life itself suffers? My Unitarian Universalist values have a hard time thriving in such a dog-eat-dog context. Life has a hard time thriving. Those who thrive best in this toxic environment have found ways to codify the rules to their advantage. According to 19th-century French economist Frederic Bastiat, "When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men in a society, over the course of time they create for themselves a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it."

Now, as ever, it is important for us each to look well beyond that corrupt moral code, to find the people it neglects, along with their dreams. As Unitarian Universalists, our seven principles are a solid base to start rebuilding from. When we rebuild, I believe it's important to do so from ground level—from the grassroots, and from systems of polity that value being together in communities based on mutual covenant. The corrupt system that authorizes plunder has a unidirectional "covenant" (otherwise known as imposed rules), created without the consensus of those that it serves least well or actively opposes. In other words, the plundering and the squelching of democracy go hand-in-hand. And when we do the work of transforming, it is incumbent upon us to develop and grow a mindset of full-speed-ahead building, rather than backpedaling while fighting fires. (And we know that those who thrive on a toxic environment will keep sending fires.)

And as a religious community, it is important to ask where is the divine in all this? For me, the divine lies in all that we've built that works to sustain life, and even more so in all that may be possible when we connect with our dreams and visions and begin to put them to work.

The title of today's sermon, 10,000 years of light, is an invitation to look up from tonight's dinner, this week's paycheck, the monthly or quarterly statement, or our next vacation and consider what our dreams might be, were we given the potential of 10,000 years to grow them into reality. I'll briefly share some of my dreams for what we can become in our individual persons, in our communities, and as a collective humanity.

My first dream is simply that humanity unites, and I really hope we come together quickly enough to enjoy at least 9900 of those 10,000 years together in unity. That unity means we learn the damage we've been doing when we see people as "other" based on race, class, gender-expression, sexuality, nationality, or other imposed categories, and we come to see one another's whole selves and celebrate our differences, rather than use them as cues for who is afforded privileges and access. That unity also means a world without borders, and a world where locks, gates, and fences are less necessary. Depending on which side of the privilege fence we're each on, this change can mean giving up an unfair advantage, and it might also mean gaining something immeasurable—right relationship. And individually then, we will feel good about ourselves and each other. When I ride on the BART each day to work, I see people hiding behind headphones and newspapers, perhaps distrustful of others, perhaps with low self-esteem from not connecting as they feel they ought in the world. In a world united, and operating in right-relationship, I can only imagine what a trip on the BART would be like.

My second dream is that everybody has adequate food, clothing, and shelter. This is a corollary to the first dream. Once we are in right relationship to each other, and do not honor distinctions between upper-class and lower-class people (only between high-class and low-class, if you get my meaning), then everybody gets firsts before anybody can lay claim to seconds. And even with population-growth as out of control as it presently is, there is still enough for everybody, it's just a question of distributing it equitably.

My first two dreams are only a matter of will, and re-identifying ourselves as spirits residing across bodies, instead of bodies each with a spirit.

And my third dream is more sci-fi, and hopefully not less far-fetched than the other two. I want to issue a challenge to humanity to terraform the moon to make it inhabitable, but I would be sad to see this being worked on before my first two dreams come to pass.

And there are so many other dreams that have already begun to arrive even amid an environment that seeks to gain profit from them. With the end of fossil fuels in a couple decades, a future that works for all of us will include homes, trains, buses, and cars, powered by electricity from renewable resources like solar, wind, tidal power, algae biofuel, and geothermal wells. Concurrent with this dream is the advent of programs encouraging green sanctuaries, green homes, and green businesses.

Another dream is arriving amid the recent bouts of racism and heterosexism being reinforced in this country--we are seeing an advance in human rights and a shift toward multicultural community. Sometimes the retrograde step of reinforcing old norms and values is important so they can be brought into closer view, examined, and diminished.

A final dream coming into fruition is our newfound ability to communicate and organize. In addition to being able to find a community of knitters who are also interested in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, we're able to use social networking sites to learn about each other in ways that were not possible only a decade ago. The information age is also bringing us new tools for recycling, reducing, and reusing: tools such as Craigslist, Shareable.net, Bay Area Community Exchange, and lending libraries. With weblogs, we also have the most democratic form of media yet, which is beginning to challenge the mainstream media as a source of information, because it allows for us to exchange trust and social capital with other like-minded people, instead of a unilateral dissemination of information.

So... where is our progressive Unitarian Universalist spirit at present, seeking to thrive? It seems to me that we will need to create the context we wish to come into, by developing and using language that retools the conversations we have in the United States and elsewhere. We will not do this alone. To be effective, our mission must work in partnership with a broad range of communities beyond the UU circle, in effect extending the range of the circle and creating permeable walls.

And I believe our theology is worth sharing. Even if they don't come to our congregations, it is essential that people know of us and our theology, because it is capable of transforming lives, and capable even of saving lives, and giving new direction. My own experience in coming to UU was that it took 10 years of searching before I stumbled onto this

well-kept secret. We shouldn't be hiding our light under a bushel basket. There is a big difference between proselytizing and evangelizing, yet I think Unitarian Universalists tend to steer entirely well clear of both. I say if you have a dynamic religious community that will welcome in any of those feeling outcast from other religious groups, there are people seeking, wanting to hear this good news.

Each time a new person joins Unitarian Universalism, if we're doing our job right, UU changes and becomes richer. I'll close with a question: If this movement lives up to its potential, welcoming of everyone, what will this movement, what would be like in 10,000 years? And what would the world be like after 10,000 years of that love, and that light shining like a beacon?

Whatever that could be, may it be so. Amen.