

## **“The Darkness Which Has Nourished Us”**

**A Sermon Delivered to the Unitarian Society of Menomonie, April 8, 2007,**

**By Bob Bledsoe, Commissioned Lay Leader**

This won't mean anything to you, nor should it, but Alexxus Riza of Alvarado, Texas, was killed yesterday. She was nine months old and she died when the SUV her mother was driving, sometimes at speeds of 110 miles an hour, rolled and she was thrown from the vehicle. Someone had called the Somervel County Sherriff's Department to complain about an erratic driver in an SUV, which turned out to be Aimee Andrea Riza, and who refused to stop for deputies. Deputies used spikes to deflate the tires, blocked the road ahead of her, but nothing slowed her down until the SUV, riding by now on rims, struck a traffic light, and then a concrete barrier, and then rolled several times at an I-35 overpass. It was during this rolling that Alexxus was thrown from the vehicle and died on impact. Her mother, still fighting as she was removed from the SUV, was

charged with manslaughter, evading arrest, resisting arrest, and reckless driving. Trooper Dub Gillum of the Texas Department of Public Safety, described her as “combative,” and beyond that we know nothing more.

Oh no, another death. But this is no one any of us know, or at least no one I know. But sometimes I ask myself, What’s the point? It seems as if I’m always up here talking about death. Maybe that’s a professional hazard of work like this. I don’t know. But it certainly feels like I’m often thinking or talking about or reflecting on death, other peoples’ deaths or my own. Some days that strikes me as morbid and some days it strikes me as the best and most important activity I could take part in.

I hope it doesn’t sound a discordant note to you, this constant rehashing of death. After all, it’s not as if you’re unaware of your own incipient demise. If there is one thing UUs are good at, it’s recognizing our own mortality. But just as any chord, no matter how skillfully played, is without consonant when played out of rhythm, so the mention of death, a little girl’s or an old man’s, can seem jarring out of accompaniment. So let me provide one closer to home. Over the past few weeks I’ve been spending my Tuesdays with the husband of a friend of Jayne’s who died this past Thursday of blood disease. This won’t be a *Tuesdays with Morrie* type of moment, partly because, unlike Morrie Schwartz, Doug couldn’t talk much by the time I got to him, and partly because Doug was about my age, only 18 months older. It was a very common, very everyday sort of death; and while it dragged out longer than it probably should have—five years between diagnosis and termination—and while it was particularly unpleasant for his wife and son, for the rest of us around him it was almost easy to forget he could die at any moment. Or rather that, as he put it a few weeks ago, he “just wouldn’t die.”

Is it Doug's death that gets me thinking this way? Or was it Meagen's death a couple weeks ago? Meagen, of course, was the daughter of one of our congregation's families who was killed walking on a stretch of highway in Florida. Perhaps it was Alex's death. Alex was a young woman I worked with who died after a particularly painful bout of stomach cancer. Or it might have been Andi's death. Andi was a friend of mine from graduate school who died quite suddenly from systemic cancer. It could even have placed from Brian's death. Brian was also a friend from grad school killed in a motorcycle accident in the rain. In between there were aunts and uncles, grandparents and older cousins who died, but those are supposed to happen. There's something about the death of people my own age or younger that stings. It's easy to conflate them all. That's the thing about deaths, they start to kind of roll into one another after a while. I remember my first death, an old woman who lived next door, who died simply of having been old. I remember the first death of a pet and the first death of a relative and the first death of a child my age. You all have those memories too. It's a part of being alive, watching people die.

I've been intimately involved with both Doug's family and Meagen's family during this time, partly because that's my job, as a ministerial manqué it's what I do. But it's also what I do because this is what I can do. I'm the guy who does the thing. Maybe their deaths bring this thinking, this emphasis on death, to the fore for me, but I'm not entirely convinced. This time of year, thoughts of death often come unbidden and not just for me, perhaps because of our culture and its Christian emphasis, perhaps because now is the time the snows melt and we find the dead animals rotting underneath, perhaps because of the switch in seasons, the emphasis from grey to blue in the sky, far from

lightening our disposition, triggers something else instead, a reflection perhaps of our own mortality.

Death often takes place in darkness, but so does regeneration. On Good Friday this year I attended services with the Baptists and the pastor quoted a writer to the effect that the Christian practice of gathering together to sing and celebrate the horrible death of their savior is a practice unfound in other religions. He's probably right about that, but I'd point out that the practice of celebrating the dark side of religion is practiced among virtually every religion. It's probably most apt that I talk about death on Easter, which is devoted among Christians to the day when the Christ reappeared after three days of submersion in the dark before his triumphant return to life. In all four gospels the burial of Jesus is roughly consistent—Joseph of Arimethea requests the body after Jesus' death, it's wrapped in linen and anointed with spices, the way Jews were often buried, and then placed in a dark place variously described as being hewn from rock or being a cleft in the rock, and then a stone placed over the entrance.

But this image of darkness before life is repeated among other religions. Among all three Abrahamic religions of course there's the opening words of Genesis 1:1: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep...And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw that the light was good..." The Koran often uses lightning as the countermand of the dark, illuminating god amidst the darkness: Sura 30:24: "And one of [Allah's] signs is that he shows you the lightning for fear and for hope..." Lightning has very little resonance if it is beheld in a full sunshine.

Buddhists of course refer to enlightenment, Hindus to the Path of Light, and the god Shiva is the personification of darkness. Additionally, *tamas* or “darkness” is one of the three *gunas* or modalities constituting the primal nature from which the experiential universe evolves. Among native Polynesians, Hine, the first woman created from earth by Tane the god of light and forests, eventually became the goddess of darkness and of the underworld. We also have a historical period we call the Dark Ages, after which came the Age of Enlightenment. What each of these references have in common, some explicitly, some less so, is the necessity of the dark period before the light.

Many of us are gardeners and farmers and understand the necessity of dormancy. Most books about gardening reinforce this common sense, generally in their insistence on the requirement of its opposite, light. But we know the quiet, cold times are as important as the bright ones. Before spring there must be winter. Before wakefulness there must be sleep. Dormancy is an important part of what it takes to make things grow. Some wheat grains discovered buried in Egyptian sarcophagi for thousands of years have sprouted. Some firs and conifers remain dormant when everything around them is exploding with life, waiting for the touch of fire or the bite of frost to waken them.

It is no secret I am subject to times of depression. I can't say I suffer from it, although if you ask me when I'm in the midst of an episode I'd certainly say I was suffering, but I tolerate the episodes that strike me from time to time. It isn't one of those debilitating depressions in which I can't get out of bed or face people, but it is a strong session of looking beyond the current project to its ultimate folly and saying, “Why bother?” Now, don't misunderstand me: I am a poster boy for the wonders of Prozac without which I might never have even sought you people out, much less come to play a

leadership role. But it's not for nothing that Kathy Cronkite's 1994 book on depression is called *On the Edge of Darkness*, in which she expands on Winston Churchill's characterization of his own depression as "a black dog" following him for life. Nor is it surprising that John of the Cross titled his transformative work *The Dark Night of the Soul*. There is something about depression that lends itself to the ideas of darkness, blackness, shade. When I was first diagnosed in the mid-90s with depression, the therapist who noted its appearance in me described my look as having a shadow over my face.

Depression is certainly not my own disease of course, and it's not even endemic to the United States, although I would argue, like gout, it's a rich man's disease. Not wanting to minimize it because I certainly don't enjoy it, but it strikes me as incredibly presumptuous to get depressed because I don't have a teaching job at the moment—although even in the murkiest depths of depression I know this is only a temporary situation—while there are people surrounding me who have real things to worry about. Things like how they will feed themselves and how they will keep from dying for another day. These are things that would cause even those of us who don't have depression to be depressed.

March has been a hard month for me. For the first time in nearly twelve years I wasn't working; for the first time in seven I wasn't teaching. Meagen died. Doug died. Other people I know were ill. Several of our dogs and cats were ill and their treatments cost money that we gave up gladly, because you do that for the creatures that depend on you, but that we'd much rather have used for the mortgage and bills. I reached March 31<sup>st</sup> counting down the hours.

But that's selfish. It was a harder month for a lot of others. March was harder for Meagen's families, harder for Doug's families, harder for the students I wasn't teaching and who wrote me saying they miss me. It was harder for the families killed in Iraq and the families of those killed in Iraq, it was harder for the families of people who didn't die in March but got sicker and weaker, it was harder for the families of people killed in earthquakes and mudslides and victims of sudden, pointless violence. But this is the rich man's aspect of depression: it focuses all your attention on yourself. You are not only the center of the universe, you are the universe, and it's a sad but telling symptom that it is only other people's misery that can remind me that I'm not the universe.

I shouldn't kick. I have a good place to live, a wife who loves me, dogs and cats who inundate me with love, a congregation that loves me and appreciates my service. Still, there is that thing that rings in my brain, that shadow, that darkness, the *Hsuan Hseuh* "Dark Learning" of Wang Pi which holds that, in a mirror image of *tao* and *t'ai chi*, Non-Being is the source of all being. Its function can only be manifested through the intercession of *yu* "Being," somewhat like a *Star Trek* concept in which Matter and Anti-matter combine to make manifest something that requires both, or like an image which can only be seen when it's illuminated. In this idea, depression is caused by the lack of Being applied correctly.

That's almost comforting, that my darkness is a result of not enough light. Maybe if I light enough candles I can get over it. Probably not, however. Nothing is ever that easy.

One of the great poets of our age, Lou Reed, points me in the right direction often. When I was living the life I refer to on occasion, the one in which drugs and petty crimes

and homelessness play a part, I rarely felt depressed. There wasn't any time to. I used to ask myself, on a daily basis, what would Lou Reed do in a given situation? Now, this really wasn't the smartest thing to ask myself back then, because invariably Lou would do the most dangerous or self-destructive of whatever options I faced. But in the middle of all this Lou released one of his best albums, *New York*, and on there he had a song called "There is No Time." "This is no time for optimism," he sang, "This is no time for endless thought... This is no time for circumlocution, this is no time for learned speech, this is no time to count your blessings, this is no time for private gain. This is a time to put up or shut up... This is no time to swallow anger, this is no time to ignore hate... This is no time to not know who you are. Self-knowledge is a dangerous thing. The freedom of who you are." Pressed for a definition I'd say that's what depression is, or my depression at least—not knowing who I am, lack of self-knowledge, not feeling the freedom of what I am, at my best, capable of being. Oddly, I'm often at my best when things are at their worst. When I'm faced with an emergency like a death or an illness, I forget my depression and become wholly and resolutely there. I'm a good person in a crisis because it's at that time that I can keep my head. It isn't always life or death—just this morning as I was finishing the final draft of this sermon Jayne's nervous voice called up that a bird was stuck on the porch. We have an open dog door and sometimes birds fly through it and can't find their way out. I open the big door and follow them around until they either find the open door on their own or I can gently cup them in my hands. It's a powerful thing, to hold a small, frightened, frantically beating heart in your grip, feeling its pulse against your own, and then lifting it up in the sun and feeling it use the tips of your fingers to launch itself into what's a great unknown but still a greater

comfort. It's an honor to be allowed to do these things. It's an honor to be with people when they're dying. It's the peaceful times I have trouble with.

The most difficult thing I've had to wrap my head around in my struggle first in my studies to become a Commissioned Lay Leader, and now in starting the road to ordination, is the shift, subtle but important, from thinking "I" to thinking "we." That's got an awful lot of power and responsibility, because the minister is not just an individual but is a moral force in the world. A minister can't think of herself as alone or as an island. We need to look at everyone and everything with the same eye, holding off judgment, holding off condemnation, holding off our own feelings that say, "I don't want to have anything to do with him, I don't want to live with those people." I'm often stunned at the self-identification among the Methodists, for example, that their whole congregation is identified as the minister because what that suggests is they are an entire community no longer able to think only of themselves. They are a community devoted to their community. That's pretty heady stuff.

But I'm reminded of the bumper sticker I used to see every day in the parking lot at UW-EC that said "God is always good." What struck me then and strikes me now is the incredible hubris of that statement, not only in its flat-out declaration that everything is for the best, but in its blanket implicit claim that "Whatever you're going through, it's happening for a reason, so shut your cryhole." And this, I hasten to point out, is not just or even predominantly a Christian belief or even only a deist statement—substitute for "god" any absolute you want. "Money." "Power." "Pain." "Love." The sentiment strikes me as even more selfish than what's admittedly my own selfish depression, since

what it also implies is “don’t tell me about your problems. You’ve got what you deserve. Don’t harsh my mellow.”

This is darkness, darkness within and without. And yet. And yet without darkness light is just glare. Without dormancy there is no growth. Without rest there is no action. The darkness nourishes us. The shadow comforts us. The shade brings us peace.

This is also the time of *Pesach* “Passover,” the *chagim* or “festival” celebrating the Jews’ exodus from slavery in Egypt. This is the time of matzoh and bitter herbs, of salt and tears and reflection. We reflect at this time not only on our own misfortunes but on those of others, and if we’re lucky, our own misfortunes look petty in comparison with theirs. This is the time traditionally when UUs notice and celebrate the change of seasons, the predominance of dark becoming light. But it is also as importantly a time of reflection, a time to look at the changes brought about during the months of dormancy and determining, not if they’re good or bad because that’s all wind, but what they mean. I love this time of year, the sudden shifts of wind and the play of sun against my face. Why do I look forward to the coming season? Is it the promise of resurrection and redemption symbolized by Jesus? Wow, I really wish it was. It would be so much easier to look up at the body that rolled away the stone and lets me stick my hand in his side and who says, “It’s okay, Bob, it all gets better.” Is it the tulips and crocuses poking up out of the ground, pushing aside the rocks to get at the sun? I wish it was that too. It would be so easy to say, “Look, they make it and I can too.” Is it the fact that my immediate family dodged the bullet yet another month, none of my immediate family dead?

Perhaps finally, that's it: Again, a selfish thing but there it is. Where there's life there's hope.

As with so much else in the world, it's not as simple as any single thing. It's the risen Jesus and it's the crocuses and it's the dodged bullets and it's the bird on the porch. It's also the death and the darkness and the cold and the fear. All these things are what remind us we are alive. That death and life have no meaning beyond this: We are still here and we can make things better or worse, but we can make them ourselves. The light feeds us, the darkness nourishes us, and we go on. In the words of Sara Campbell, we push away our own stone. We are the Christ, we are the crocus. We are the patient hands as well as the frantic bird. We are who we're waiting for.