

## The Magic of Dawn<sup>1</sup>

Rev. Myke Johnson

October 23, 2011

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Readings: Holy the Firm Annie Dillard<sup>2</sup>

Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time. I worship each god, I praise each day splintered down, splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk, a husk of many colors spreading, at dawn fast over the mountains split.

I wake in a god. I wake in arms holding my quilt, holding me as best they can inside my quilt. Someone is kissing me - already. I wake, I cry "Oh," I rise from the pillow. Why should I open my eyes?

I open my eyes. The god lifts from the water. His head fills the bay. ...his breast rises from pastures, his fingers are firs; islands slide wet down his shoulders. Islands slip blue from his shoulders and glide over the water, the empty, lighted water like a stage.

Today's god rises, his long eyes flecked in clouds. He flings his arms, spreading colors; he arches, cupping sky in his belly. He vaults, vaulting and spread, holding all and spread on me like skin.

Why I Wake Early Mary Oliver<sup>3</sup>

Hello, sun in my face.

Hello, you who made the morning  
and spread it over the fields  
and into the faces of the tulips  
and the nodding morning glories,  
and into the windows of, even, the  
miserable and the crotchety -

best preacher that ever was,  
dear star, that just happens  
to be where you are in the universe  
to keep us from ever-darkness,  
to ease us with warm touching,  
to hold us in the great hands of light -  
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day  
in happiness, in kindness.

---

1 Copyright 2011 by Rev. Myke Johnson and Allen Avenue UU Church. Except for personal use, permission to reprint must be requested from office@a2u2.org.

2 *Holy the Firm*, 1977, p.11-12

3 From *Why I Wake Early*, 2004, p. 3.

### *Sermon*

The cardinal has been my favorite bird since the winter of 1985. It was a time of difficult transition for me. My marriage had ended at the close of 1984, and I was deep in grief about that loss. One winter afternoon, sunk in sadness, I heard a curious sound outside my window. When I looked out to investigate, I saw the bright red plumage of a male cardinal. Its song was uplifting and joyful, and its color shown brilliant against the gray Chicago snow. Ever since that moment, the cardinal has symbolized for me beauty and hope in the midst of suffering.

So you can imagine my chagrin when, early this past summer, Margy found a dead cardinal beneath one of the windows of our house. We always feel sad when a bird flies into a window—but this was a young female cardinal, and Margy knew I'd be very downhearted about it. I wondered what sort of message it was bringing, or what bad omen it might portend. I know that sounds superstitious, but when we have associated one of our fellow creatures with a sense of blessing, it is unnerving when something like this happens.

Just five days before, I had been sitting on a blanket in our screen tent in the back yard, honoring the earth and all her creatures, when during my prayers, a cardinal started singing, and came to perch on the ground near the tent. I felt so thankful for that visit. I had been pondering the big questions of my heart—it was time of the new moon, right at the beginning of my summer retreat.

I was asking—What is my greatest hope? And my heart answered, I hope that we find a way to live in harmony with all life on the earth, that our spirits wake up to experience the unity of all life, that we might join in that beautiful dance.

But I also asked, what is my greatest fear? My heart answered, I am afraid that the greedy and powerful will kill all the trees, pollute the oceans, and destroy the animals and the people. I am afraid that humankind is broken beyond restoration, so cut off that we cannot find our way back to the unity. And so my prayer was a prayer to find wholeness, to find joy. The singing cardinal reminded me of the magic of being outside, and the magic of waking up at dawn.

I first learned about the magic of dawn from my Wampanoag friend gkisedtanamoogk. He had told me that the eastern peoples, called the Wabanaki, believed that dawn was the most sacred time of the day—the name Wabanaki means people of the first light, the first light of the sky before the sun rises over the horizon. This time was considered the best time to pray, to commune with the earth and the spirits within the earth. It is also the time when many birds sing their most beautiful songs, they create together a dawn chorus. But, it is not so easy to wake up that early, at least in my schedule. I was pondering about trying to make a way to do that during the summer, when I had more free time.

So what to make of a small dead cardinal? I talked to my friend Estelle, who knows about the feathers of birds. She said, death is a part of life—look for the blessing here. So I decided to keep a few of the pale orange feathers of this little bird, to see what they might teach me. I blessed her body with incense, and buried it in the composting leaves at the back of our yard. I thanked the cardinal for the joy her species had brought into my life, and wished her well in the great cycle of life. I decided to put hanging streamers around our windows, to help deter future bird accidents. I cleaned the feathers with borax, and waited to see what might unfold.

During this time, I had begun reading Leslie Marmon Silko's new book, *The Turquoise Ledge*. It was a memoir of her days walking the arroyos near her home in Nevada. A strange book, very quiet. She writes about going for walks, and the creatures around her house. I love her novels, but this book was so quiet it was almost boring. She talks about making peace with the creatures who live in the same place she lives—in her case, that included rattlesnakes and grasshoppers. Sometimes creatures died near her house, too, and she felt sad about it, like I felt about the cardinal. In our yard, we have chipmunks and birds and squirrels and toads. Sometimes deer or turkeys wander through, and neighbor cats. One has to slow down and be quiet to notice the creatures of the earth.

It seemed to me that the dead cardinal might be saying: Stop! Pray by stopping. Stop pushing, stop trying, stop doing, let go. Be still. Be outside. Listen. Everything is a blessing. Everyday you can go out among the trees right here.

A few days later, I woke early, and heard a cardinal singing outside my window. Its song said to me, "Come outside." So I went out again into our screen tent, bringing one of the cardinal feathers. First I set it on the kitchen table, and then forgot it was there, and it dropped it onto the floor—I felt like such a bumbler in my journey to re-connect with the earth and her creatures. But I picked it up and sat on my blanket and tried again to open my heart to the world all around me.

When I look at any writing in English, even the tag on the edge of the screen tent, I cannot help but read the writing there. Yet when I look at the plants or the mushrooms in our yard, I realize I do not know how to read the earth. I don't know the names of many plants or their characteristics. Our species has become so isolated, so alone in our own thoughts and works. I wish I had a guide to teach me how to read the earth.

I saw a small slug moving slowly through the grass. As I was watching it, I wondered what it was reading about the earth, what chemical messages it found in the small trails through the grass. It was on its way toward a mushroom. I took photos of its small golden body, tried to pay attention to its slowness and intention as it climbed the mushroom stem. Even a slug can be a teacher.

A few days later, I was outside again and writing in my journal and paying attention to the earth around me. A cardinal began to sing, and I was listening and holding the feather in my right hand. These words came into my heart: Use the feather to dispel sadness, awaken to beauty and joy. Whatever you do there is beauty in it: the work, the rest, the prayer, the play, the listening. Awaken to beauty, be present to it, the hidden beauty of the ordinary is like the muted beauty of the female cardinal. Dispel sadness, awaken to beauty and joy.

Mona Polacca, an indigenous elder of the Hopi and Havasupai people, spoke at Allen Avenue on July 20th. She talked about how we come into relationship with all the elements of the earth, with water, and air, and fire and earth. She blessed us with the feather of a water bird, and after her talk, I asked if she would bless my cardinal feather. I had found a little suede mirror case that was the same size as my feather, and decided to use it for a carrying case. Someone at the talk asked Mona what gave her hope. She said, hope comes with each new dawn.

Feeling blessed by her words, the next day, I woke up at 5 a.m. and went outside a few minutes later. It was already so light! The sunrise was to be about 5:18. The birds were all singing their morning songs. I could see the red orange sphere through the branches of the spruce tree. I felt anew the amazing power of the sun. The plants convert sunlight to energy, and animals eat the plants, and we eat the plants and animals and our bodies are formed of this. We are the sun. Every fiber of our being is created of sunlight. All the earth sings to this light, this star from which we are created.

And we can see the sun. We have been fashioned in such a way that we can recognize this parent—all the creatures of the surface of the earth feel and see the sunlight. I felt joined together with that song of the earth, a prayer of thanksgiving to the sun. Thanks for life! I chimed in. Thanks for vision to experience the life all around me of which I am a part, and for hearing and smelling and tasting and touching. I remembered a little song I had sung for solstice rituals, and changed the words to fit the moment.

Celebrate the light of the sun. Show the way, Lifegiver.  
Dance the round in the magic of dawn. Blessed be the great circle.<sup>4</sup>

After such a magical moment, you might think that I would be awake every morning after that. But it wasn't so easy for me to actually get up at dawn. To sustain it I would have to go to bed much earlier than I was used to. That was part of the lesson too. The very next morning I had planned to sleep in, because I was up late the night before. But in the middle of my sleeping, I heard a banging sound.

---

<sup>4</sup> The original solstice chant, "Celebrate the light of the sun," was written by Kay Gardiner.

I stirred, and realized that one of the kittens was inside the closet, pushing against the sliding doors—they were only attached at the top, and the kittens had discovered they could get in and out by pushing on the bottom between the two doors. I grumbled at Billie, the black kitten, but the clock said 5:15 a.m., exactly five minutes before sunrise. Feeling duly summoned by forces greater than myself, I crawled out from under the sheets, pulled on my shoes, and went outside once more, while the red ball was just appearing in the east.

The next day, Margy and I traveled to Star Island. This UU conference center is an island off the coast of New Hampshire. It is a rather small island—you can see the water from almost every place on it. It turned out that the windows in our tiny room faced the east. The next morning, through my open window, I heard a cardinal singing before sunrise. "Come outside!" it seemed to say. Right beyond the door of our room was a porch facing east, with rocking chairs on it. I could crawl out of bed wrapped in a blanket, and sit in a rocking chair to watch the sun rise over the ocean. That day, the clouds formed variegated patterns of pink and orange, blazing up through the whole eastern sky. And the cardinals jumped from bush to bush close by to where I was rocking in my chair.

Watching the beauty of the sunrise during the next several days, I was again thinking about how the sun generates its own energy, how all the stars do that. We on earth are more like children, we are utterly dependent on this light-being for all our needs. All of the energy human beings generate and use all over the earth relies on the sun as its ultimate source. The whole sphere of life on earth is a child of the sun. Yet the sun is so personal too. We can feel its touch on our skin—it is as personal as the vitamin D that it creates through our skin.

The poet Hafiz said,  
Even after all this time  
The sun never says to earth:  
"You owe Me."  
Look what happens with  
A love like that.  
It lights the Whole Sky.<sup>5</sup>

One morning, I heard the cardinal at 4 a.m. Closer to first light. The waning crescent moon was hung over a deep pink rainbow of a skyline. I don't know how to adequately describe the colors—they went from deep pink to pale blue, with some yellow in between. I began to wonder why we don't always get up with the light. It is actually quite bright in the hour between dawn and sunrise.

---

5 From *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz*, Translations by Daniel Ladinsky.

Before this summer, I had used the words dawn and sunrise interchangeably, but I learned that "dawn" refers to the first light that comes before sunrise. There is so much of it. Enough to read and write in my journal. We could save a lot of electricity if we got up at first light, and went to bed earlier. Of course, that is the logic behind daylight savings time, where we set the clock ahead so that we wake up an hour earlier during the longer days.

But what would it be like if our world was oriented to the rising and setting of the sun? Then every day we'd rise a little later or earlier than the day before. Because the sunrise changes every day. We'd have long days in the summer, and short days in the winter. I did some research to learn about the time of sunrise through the year. The earliest sunrise in Maine comes in mid June, just before 5 a.m. daylight savings time. (That would be 4 a.m. Eastern Standard Time.) The latest sunrise would come about 7:15 at the end of December, except, because of time changes, it actually gets to 7:22 on November 5<sup>th</sup>, before we fall back with the changing of the clocks.

So, people might say that it wouldn't be practical, in our world, to plan our day according to the sun. We plan our lives according to the clock. But what do we lose by that? While I was trying to discover the natural rhythm of dawn, I could feel how disconnected I was from all natural rhythms. Rising at dawn is a way to deepen my relationship with the seasons of the earth, and to the sun, and to the birds. But it makes me wonder, "Why do we try to shape the earth to our demands? Why don't we try to shape ourselves to the rhythms of the earth?" And what might happen if we changed that pattern?

Cultures and religions the world over have honored the sacredness of dawn, the sacredness of the sun. Our word "sun" comes from the Old English, "sunne," which was related to the Germanic sun goddess, "Sunna." It shows up in our everyday language—the day of our worship is called Sunday. During Ramadan, devout Muslims are fasting from first light until sunset. I read a blog that described a woman and her husband getting up at 2:30 a.m. to eat the *suhir*, which is the pre-dawn meal, since dawn arrived at 3:15.<sup>6</sup> They might go back to sleep then for a few hours, ready for abstaining from all water and food until sunset at 8:30 p.m. Their spiritual practice attunes them to the rising and setting of the sun.

Christian monks, and Hindu priests rise at dawn; Indigenous peoples across many cultures. There is something in our human life which wants to be attuned to the life of the earth, which looks for beauty and joy in these simple rhythms. But of course, it is not for everyone. I understand that we each have our own circadian rhythms. Scientists have found that individual rhythms have a genetic basis and are incredibly difficult to change. Some people naturally rise early, they call them the larks, while others are tuned to a later cycle, they call them the owls.<sup>7</sup>

---

6 <http://nhslocal.nhs.uk/blogs/Tazneem%20Anwar>

7 <http://alertatwork.com/main/media/the-crow-of-the-early-bird/>

So I am not suggesting that everyone should start rising at dawn. I am still not even sure if I can shape my life in that way. But what I notice is that whenever I take some small step toward attuning myself with the larger earth, I feel blessed by it—I feel more beauty and joy.

And yet, for each small step, I also feel challenged—aware of how broken off I am. Aware of how broken off we are as a people from this earth that is our whole life. I have to believe that awakening to this beauty and brokenness is the essence of the spiritual journey. We cannot have one without the other. My greatest hopes trigger my greatest fears. My greatest fears call forth my greatest hopes. I believe that when we enter that place between our greatest fears and our greatest hopes—when we encounter our own vulnerability, and call out for help, something can rise in us like the dawn... and this is the place where god lives.

I am still on the journey. The days are shorter now, the dawn comes later. It is too cold to go sit outside like I sat outside during the summer. So I am not sure what comes next. For a few weeks I was walking outside at dawn, but then I got bursitis in my knee, and couldn't take my walk. Sometimes I sit by the window and watch the dawn from the comfy chair in my room, a tiny black cat curled up in my lap. Waiting for the next steps. Or waiting for the stillness.

Anne Sexton wrote<sup>8</sup>:

There is joy  
in all:  
in the hair I brush each morning,  
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,  
that I rub my body with each morning,  
in the chapel of eggs I cook  
each morning,  
in the outcry from the kettle  
that heats my coffee  
each morning,  
in the spoon and the chair  
that cry "hello there, Anne"  
each morning,  
in the godhead of the table  
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon  
each morning.

---

<sup>8</sup> Her poem called "Welcome Morning" in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*.

All this is God,  
right here in my pea-green house  
each morning  
and I mean,  
though often forget,  
to give thanks,  
to faint down by the kitchen table  
in a prayer of rejoicing  
as the holy birds at the kitchen window  
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,  
let me paint a thank-you on my palm  
for this God, this laughter of the morning,  
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,  
dies young.

May sadness be dispelled, may joy and beauty be awakened in us.

*Closing Words*

Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything that is beautiful;  
for beauty is God's handwriting - a wayside sacrament.  
Welcome it in every fair face, in every fair sky, in every fair flower,  
and thank God for it as a cup of blessing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson