

**A Low Threshold**  
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer  
Sunday, October 29, 2017

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
Rochester, Minnesota

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**READINGS**

*All Souls by May Sarton*

*The Day of the Dead by Janice Gould*

*Grandfather by Andrei Guriianu*

*My Dead by Tim Nolan*

## HOMILY

I wouldn't have been able to find it on a map, until years later;  
or have any idea of how to get back there.

What I know was that the open, blue sky, filled with autumn light,  
and the sometimes gentle and sometimes strong wind of the prairie  
held us in that countryside church graveyard near Marshall, MN.

I was young, only beginning to hold memories  
that would last longer than a few weeks...

But I remember being at my parents' side.  
I remember large trees towering above me,  
and faces that I knew as happy and joyful  
were now filled with both joy and sadness – all with tears.

My Great-Grandmother, Lydia Royer, had died;  
the first death of a family member I can remember.  
And, almost out of an old-time movie,  
we gathered at the graveside, shoveling in the dirt.

I remember, perhaps most vividly, my grandfather,  
who had just lost her mother –  
a veteran, a plumber, hands covered in dirt,  
tears streaming down his face  
saying goodbye.

And something happened, in that moment –  
as they were trying to remember the lyrics to “Will The Circle Be Unbroken”...

It was as if we were listening to the ancestors;  
wrapped and cloaked in the air of their breath and being.

And I saw his heart break open without breaking apart,  
because the heart is a field,  
and grief is the plow which breaks the dirt of the heart open,  
watered with tears of memory – of both joy and pain;

and out of the dark, rich soil of the heart came forth new life:  
compassion and love and grace and hope and laughter and joy  
springing like wheat arising green.

And somehow,  
as tears watered the graveyard dirt,  
and a child of earth and sky and God and mystery  
returned to the dust from whence she came,  
I swear that the holding of hands  
the sharing of story  
the shedding of tears  
the hearts broken open  
and the strength of the prairie  
opened that grave,  
and for a few shining moments  
let light shine through with new life.

Up from the grave, filtered through his heart,  
shed through his tears and into my heart,  
death came to life again;  
as if we were, together,  
practicing resurrection  
as if she had risen from the grave.

That's how it tends to happen, doesn't it?  
Some threshold moment,  
some moment where the world outside  
seems to be moving by in slow motion, stalled and stilled,  
as everything within the reach of your heart  
slows to a halt – and you're moving and living and breathing  
different air – the air of grief, and memory –  
the air of ancestors.

I remember growing up, and spending time at church during the week.  
One Tuesday afternoon,  
as I walked through the lobby,  
I looked into the Sanctuary –  
and there was Joel, our Custodian –  
he had removed the red-colored eternal flame –  
which is a candle that is constantly lit, world without end –  
and Joel took out the old one, and replace it with a new candle.  
Struck the match,  
and lit again the presence of the holy  
in the red glass behind the altar.

I was scandalized –  
I assumed, like any good church kid  
that the flame was somehow magical,  
mystical – something where the flame was kept lit  
for generations and generations,  
but that day  
the veil was pulled back  
and I realized –  
it wasn't the holy spirit lighting the candle –  
it was Joel – at 1:30 on a Tuesday afternoon.

And you know what –  
it's okay.

Because the mystery, the magic, the miracle of it all –  
life and death and making meaning as we go –  
the miracle of it  
is that we have to light the candles for each other.  
We need to light candles  
of memory and of grief and of joy  
to remember –  
remember how those we have loved and lost  
still live –  
in the way we talk or the phrases we use  
the way our nose is shaped or the attunement of our heart  
to music or cooking or compassion.

We have to light candles for each other  
lest we forget all who have come before us –  
all who have lived and died and loved  
and given their best self to the making and re-making of this world –  
we have to light a candle for them, for ourselves, for us all –  
not that lighting the candle creates any magic or miracle –  
but the act of lighting it –  
the reality of coming together –

how the spirit and soul of a person  
lives on in a thousand ways we can name and cannot know –  
the lighting of the candle creates nothing new  
but ignites the elements, the spirit, the souls  
that are already there –  
surrounding us  
in hallowed light –  
these souls – these every-day, common, ordinary saints –  
like you and me.

In these days of late autumn,  
where the air itself holds mystery and wonder,  
and the bright colors of the land shine forth –  
so to do our memories –  
in our minds, but mostly, memories of the heart –  
remind us of what strands  
spanning generations and story and identity  
make up the fabric of who we are.

*Swing Low*, says the spiritual,  
perhaps not for the chariot to come down and pick us up to bring us somewhere  
*out there*  
but *Swing Low* the threshold,  
*Swing Low* the barriers  
between the saints of earth and the saints of light  
*Swing Low, to this plain of life, on this, our, level, our ground –*  
*bring down to earth*  
the memories and feelings and moments of connection  
with those who have gone before

*Swing Low, sweet chariot*  
and stop here, stay here awhile,  
with all the saints, all souls,  
spilling right out of that chariot  
and filling our hearts, our streets, our homes  
with blessed memory and sacred stories that hold us;  
don't send us promises of some other home in the hereafter –  
remind us we are surround by home, by saints, by all souls  
in the here and now.

All around, and within us – yet its only at times we notice.

We must light the candles ourselves  
to remember that there is miracle and mystery enough right here –  
and that heaven isn't *out there* somewhere,  
but it is right now, right here  
as we call down all the common, ordinary, every-day saints and souls  
to the hallowed threshold of our own hearts –  
so that we might notice they have never left.

Swing Low, sweet chariot,  
as we light their way.