

Shining Light  
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UUMSB  
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Readings: Melanie DeMore's song "Shine on Me: [www.vimeo.com/456583064](http://www.vimeo.com/456583064) - learn more about Melanie's music and activism at [www.melaniedemore.com](http://www.melaniedemore.com)

Row On: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsAvyff890w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsAvyff890w) - The text of this song is in Gale Huntington's *Songs The Whalemens Sang*, from the logbook of the whaleship *Three Brothers*, Nantucket, 1846. The English singer Tim Laycock gave it a tune. Arranged by Nicholas Williams (Quebec). Performed by a number of folks from a music camp in Vermont (see credits)

Sermon:

Do you remember how old you were when you realized that the stars were always up there, but that we couldn't always see them? Sometimes I still forget. I think of them as rising and falling like the sun and moon. There are so many stars, and while we might move through space and see particular ones, like Mars that has been so bright lately (I know Mars isn't a star...), there are always billions and billions of stars, we just can't see them. When I heard Melanie's song and her words, "all you have to do is ask, the light is always there," I thought of that line from Wendell Berry in "The Peace of Wild Things," "I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light." Just like day-blind stars, the light is always there. Love is always there.

Sometimes that can be hard to remember. Sometimes when I am feeling overwhelmed, or down, I forget about the wonder, the mystery, that pulsing connection of life that connects us, and it can be little things that remind me. Mars overhead shining out. The spectacular foliage this year has been a vibrant reminder of the cycle of life and death, and the beauty of this place. Unitarian Universalists have many metaphors and names for the ineffable. Our experience of the natural world and our relationships with one another are perhaps the closest we come to the shared image expressed in our principle honoring the interdependent web of life of which we are all a part. Fr. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and author on mysticism, theology, and contemplative practice wrote:

"All language about God is necessarily symbolic and figurative. Actually all language is metaphorical. Words are never the thing itself; they can only point toward the thing ...

When it comes to comprehending God and the great mysteries of love and death, knowing has to be balanced by unknowing. Words can only point a finger toward the moon; they are not the moon or even its light. They are that by which we *begin* to see the moon and its light."<sup>1</sup>

Our interdependence and connection to all that is, is something that can be felt in any and every moment, but we are not always attentive to it. Without attention, it can be easy to feel disconnected. Before covid, depending on your experience, where you live, and the demands on your time, it could be a challenge to hold our connection with the web of life and all that is. And now, it is different. In quarantine, many have connected more closely with the natural world, but our relationships with people are more complicated than ever. It feels like most everything takes longer to accomplish, and we are making decisions every day that impact not only ourselves, but

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cac.org/all-language-is-metaphor-2017-01-11/>

our communities at large. It can be exhausting. Our attention, where we direct it, our practices are what help us remember to look up to the sky to remember the light is always there. Melanie's song petitions, "Let the light from the lighthouse, shine on me." Lighthouses help sailors find their way home, and avoid the rocks. They are beacons, focusing light and sending it into the night.

What are our lighthouses? Let's go back to our story with Taylor.<sup>2</sup> What was common in the responses of the critters when Taylor was upset? [conversation? - tried to fix things, did all the talking, etc.] And then what did the rabbit do? The rabbit listened. And what happened when the rabbit sat with Taylor? Many of the emotions and actions that the other critters had suggested came up, those same things that the other critters had thought of, but on Taylor's terms. The rabbit paid attention in a different way to Taylor and was present to Taylor's experience. The rabbit was a lighthouse, reflecting light back to Taylor. What are some lighthouses in our lives? Guideposts and reminders of our connection to all that is... [sharing]

Last Sunday Rich Hayes reflected on time and the power and importance of being in the present. When the present is hard, one of the tools we have is to look toward the future, and imagine what that might be, and to consider what we can do in the present to move toward that vision. This is how we do our work for justice. It is also part of the song we heard from the Nantucket sailors, "Row On" from our meditation today. Those words, were written by folks at sea for five years<sup>3</sup>, without enough of most of the basics of life: food, rest, and water. We don't know much about the men who wrote it, other than that they sailed from Nantucket, and ate salty fish for breakfast each day (we have the log book of meals from a later voyage)<sup>4</sup>, but we have these words they sang:

Bear where thou goest the words of love  
Say all that words can say  
Changeless affection, strength to prove  
But speed upon the way.

I think this means, take love with you wherever you go, and share that love in words, though they are limited, as Richard Rohr said as well. Love is eternal and strong, and yet, keep moving as quick as you can through this work. And later:

But yet a star shines constant still  
Through yonder cloudy sky  
And hope as bright my heart does fill  
From faith that cannot die.

These whalers would have used the stars to guide their voyage, and I head in this verse, the North Star is always here, even through cloudy skies. The power of that light is in my heart, because I have faith.

Row on, row on, another day  
May shine with brighter light  
Ply, ply the oars and pull away  
There's dawn beyond the night.

And so, we move forward, working toward the next day, that it may be brighter, and knowing that for every night there is a dawn.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Rabbit Listened*, by Cori Doerrfeld

<sup>3</sup> <https://whalinghistory.org/?s=AV13944>

<sup>4</sup> <https://n-magazine.com/three-years-on-a-whaleship-and-all-i-got-was-scurvy/>

I find this song so compelling, in part because of these images of love and light. Of the power of the group, the team, to get everyone safely home, and to tend to their hope and hearts in a time of challenge. There is a reason Nicholas brought this song to be recorded this summer by musicians missing a chance to be together, the themes certainly resonate today. “Row On” is not a sea shanty about missing someone back home, which are also fun, but about tending hope and attention to our connection with nature that can challenge us and remind us of what is possible. It is also so hopeful. “Row on, row on, another day, may shine with brighter light, Ply, ply the oars and pull away, There’s dawn beyond the night.”

What is the light that is always there for you? How do you remember that it’s there? Melanie reminds us, “All you have to do is ask, the light is always there.” All you have to do is ask. That might be literal, calling someone and seeking connection, or heading outside to connect with nature. It might also be as simple as opening up our attention, to be present in the light, in the power of connection, in the transcendent. Looking again to Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things” speaks to the power of attention and presence, which is probably why I preach from it so often. But here is that poem again...

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

As we face whatever storms and challenges are with us today, and tomorrow, may we remember that we are not alone. We may not have all we need. We may struggle, but we are not alone. And we have strength, rowing together. All you have to do is ask, the light is always there.

So may it be.  
Amen.