

**Spiritual Materialism**  
**Rev. Leslie Takahashi Morris**  
**Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**December 13, 2009**

**Meditation**

Let us take the time to feel the small glimmer of genuine hope stirring within us.

Let us, as we breathe in, take in a sense of invitation.

Let us, as we breathe out, release false expectations.

Let us, as we breathe in, take in encouragement.

Let us, as we breathe out, release frustrations.

Let us take in inspiration.

Let us release false ideals which get in the way of our seeing the world as it is.

Let us take in possibility.

Let us release frenzy and worry.

Let us take in a commitment to make the world a better place.

Let us release our need for any transformation to happen in a particular way.

Invite openness.

Release certainty.

Invite joy.

Release anxiety.

Let this be the rhythm of our breath.

Let this be the rhythm of our life.

**Drama: The Three Lords of Materialism written by Leslie Takahashi Morris**

(based on the teachings of Pema Chodron and Chögyam Trungpa) **Copyright 2009**

MINISTER: I wanted to take this opportunity to speak a little bit about our strong tradition of individual thought and also particular will address—

[Enter FORM] Oh hello.

[Enter SPEECH] And hello.

[Enter MIND] And hello. Do you—were you—invited to be part of the service?

MIND: Good to see you, don't you recognize us? My own spiritual practice is about acknowledging people and *I* never forget a face--

MINISTER: Of course I remember you. .your faces...can you remind me of your names, perhaps?

MIND: Of course! I'm the L---

SPEECH: Iksnay on the ordlay.

FORM: What?

MINISTER: Are you speaking Pig Latin? We have a low church liturgy here—no Latin of any sort.

SPEECH: Told you. As a connoisseur of words, I thought this was a place where the Lord thing wasn't going to go over well.

MINISTER: I'm still having a little problem with names here.

FORM: Oh, right. I'm the Lord of Form.

MINISTER: And that is —what—a joke?

SPEECH: If it is easier on you, you can think of it as the executive director of form.

MINISTER: Forms—on Sunday morning? Maybe I should listen to those folks who say we are getting too bureaucratic..

FORM: Form refers to the physical, the tangible, the material. Things, entities, knickknacks and status symbols, [looking tempting] re-li-gious objects.

SPEECH: Oh, I love the material—as long as it is green and socially conscious, of course. It is so solid and comfortable. I especially love my canoe and Uggs and my impeccably politically correct coffee.

MINISTER: Not me, I'm above all that.

FORM: Oh really, no liturgical baubles, sermon aides? How about a sexy flame-throwing chalice?

MINISTER: Oh well now...No...no...I don't think we really need those things though I wish..I mean...how far could it throw flames anyway?

SPEECH: Too bad you can't have it.

MINISTER: I can't?

SPEECH: No need to wallow in your disappointment though. I'll help you out. My specialty is words and ideas.

MINISTER: Words... words can't spit flames. And I am not sure I know you.

SPEECH: Words and ideas light people on fire. The Lord of Speech at your service: I offer you a chance to avoid the trap of base materialism.

FORM: Oh yeah, the Lord of Big Words.

MIND: And BIGGER ideas.

FORM: Form is what we eat, what keeps us warm, what clothes our bodies.

SPEECH: I offer food for thought. I'm the shaper of ideas. I'm your concept of yourself.

MINISTER: I'm pretty good with words if I do say so myself...

SPEECH: Oh, we know and we know *you* know.

MINISTER: Oh, so we have met before...

MIND: Don't let yourself get trapped by that sales pitch.

MINISTER: But I like thinking and analyzing and I *am* smarter than the average bear, even if I do say so myself.

SPEECH: And, of course, you do.

MIND: Step away from that temptation.

MINISTER: I am sure I do not know you.

MIND: Allow me to introduce myself, I am the Lord of Mind.

MINISTER: And what are you giving me to make me feel better? Something incendiary would be nice. Mind on fire, perhaps?

MIND: Spiritual teachings and timeless truths are precious gold that only proves how important you are and how much holier you are.

MINISTER: Yes, I am. Well, I'm okay with you unless you start wanting me to be humble or something because I'm not very good at that and it's not in my world view.

MIND: If you hang around with me, you will know the answers to the big questions—why do people die? Why do we have to suffer?

MINISTER: I would know a lot more than the average person, wouldn't I?

MIND: Absolutely.

SPEECH: And we know you already think you do. It is part of your core identity, in fact.

MINISTER: So you do know me, so we have met before?

FORM: Oh yes.

MINISTER: And what is my role.

SPEECH: Oh, you are a minister here. WE know you by your true name. We know your true nature.

MINISTER (looking proud): You do, well, you all are quite discerning.

MIND: We have that very special name for you.

FORM: In fact, you are the ruler over all of us.

MINISTER (getting excited and happy): I am? Wait a second, who do you think I am?

SPEECH: We like to call you by your true name.

MINISTER: Yes! YES!

MIND: We call you Ego.

MINISTER (deflated): Oh. You do?

FORM: Absolutely. Oh, don't be down, I can find some THING to make you feel better.

SPEECH: Yeah, remember how much you like your IDEA of yourself!

MIND: I've got a SPIRITUAL PRACTICE that can make you forget all of this real-world mess.

MINISTER: So many choices—are you sure you've met *me* before?

FORM: We are certain.

MINISTER: I don't know. I'm feeling a little overwhelmed.

SPEECH: We know, we know

MIND: So many traps, so little time.

## **Sermon**

Whether or not I like it or you like it, this is a season of hope. Explore our Jewish, Christian or pagan roots—work from a frame of freedom fighter or prophets, natural cycles or human sagas and what the stories of this season speak of is that small glimmer of promise. And in this year and in this particular time of this year, we are drawn towards its power.

We are pulled toward hope even when people we know and love are struggling with ill health, or have died and we are facing holidays without them. Even when more people we know and care about are struggling to keep their equilibrium as our economy recovers by the numbers –and by shedding ever more jobs. Even though we end the year without federal rights for all families or individuals who are bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender, even those serving in our armed

services. Even faced with a health care reform which most likely will have nothing like the public provisions we had thought were essential. And despite the plan out of one war, with more troops sent into another, we feel tragedy whether we see those troops as the triumph of moral responsibility or moral failure.

This is our real world and all the tinsel and lights, the cheese balls and gingerbread houses will not make it otherwise. So, in the face of all of this and so many other unnamed cares, a season of hope doesn't seem like such a bad thing. Hope can be that single candle showing us first the ugliness of where we are so we can make the decision to leave. And, in fact, the more I learn the more I am convinced that the celebration of these winter holidays is still relevant to our modern day Unitarian Universalist frame. We are a people of this world—we ground our belief in this world, and the holidays we celebrate in these coming weeks speak to a glimmering for this world. Whether it is the hope of finding a place to rest a head on a cold night for one who would see worth in those others saw as unworthy—or the hope of the oil of commemoration that burns longer than expected—or the hope found in the returning of light—each of these are rooted in a real sense of day-to-day struggles and challenges.

Our religious forebears helped establish Christmas in its present form. As Steven Nissenbaum explains in his book “The Battle for Christmas,” in the mid-1600s this holiday celebration was a great deal more about breaking down social conventions—through drunken revelry, so much so that the Puritans banned public celebrations of Christmas for several generations. The Universalists and to a lesser extent the Unitarians were among those who led in making it a church holiday and a time for domestic gift-giving.<sup>1</sup> A Unitarian brought the first Christmas tree to this nation too.

Still each year this season can be dangerous because hope is not certainty—hope is an opening, a promise, a doorway we can walk through if we choose to do so. It is not a gift handed to us, it is a springboard from which we can move into action. Did you know that, etymologically, hope has two roots? One at its core means “leaping with expectation” which is a wonderful image full of joy and forward movement. The other root and path translates “hope” as “lost band”<sup>1</sup>. If you dig farther into this second and more negative meaning, you find the band in question is a group of marauders—sailors or soldiers who ransack those in their path. And –when we think of it—hope can be like this as well.

“Hope is the thing with feathers That perches in the soul, And sings the tune--without the words, And never stops at all,” wrote Emily Dickinson. Hope is also the thing with teeth—we have to ask whether this hope is one that merely rekindles longing and makes us act toward what is good or whether it is one like an invading force that sweeps in like a regiment and obliterates the present before us.

Which is where I find the descriptions of the teaching on the Three Lords of Materialism<sup>2</sup> so helpful, to help think about the difference between hope and rampant expectations. Though it may seem odd to look to the Buddhist tradition to navigate a season of Christian, Jewish and pagan holidays, this is one of the gifts of our faith. We can follow the path of our Transcendentalist ancestors who mixed the alchemies of East and West more than a century ago.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1997, pp. 45-47 and 135.

<sup>2</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Boston: Shambala Dragon Editions, 1987.

Though I am not willing to give up on hope as some Buddhist teachers might advise, I do believe we can better navigate its water—and the presence of one or more of the Lords is a sure sign of rocks ahead.

In liberal religion, we are used to battling with the Lord of Form—the seducer of shiny objects. As with generations before us, we are engaged in a battle for the minds and hearts of our people, many of whom seek escape in objects and experiences that mask the real world around them. And though, as I mentioned, our religious ancestors were part of establishing Christmas in its current form as a religious and commercial holiday, by 1834, a prominent Unitarian was writing about the need for shoppers to “put themselves on their guard, to be resolved to be select from the tempting mass only what is useful and what may do good” which would be an interesting screen for our holiday lists today.

And yet because we have learned the ways of the Lord of Form, we think we have conquered materialism. We miss the ways we fall under the influence of the Lord of Speech, who can make icons out of the perfect idea or concept, out of our own sense of our identity, out of being stuck in one vision of what must be and unable to engage if anything else happens. We may cling to the idea that the holidays are all about commercialism so they offer nothing for us. We may get mired in one vision of what family gatherings are supposed to be like or what form presents should take. We may be fixed in a memory of another time and the idea that this one can never live up and so we miss the real openings for joy and peace that come our way.

And the Lord of Mind is also present—twisting the practices that are meant to help us find truth and meaning, elevating a false sense of peace that is about being overly self-conscious and turning it into a retreat from, instead of an engagement with the world, whether that world is the news you feel powerless to hear, the family members or friends you are inclined to tune out, or the need in the community that is around you which you fear will swamp you if you take note of it at all.

To see the power of hope, and its potential for going astray, let’s look to our national stage for a moment: the same hope which catapulted a formerly obscure Senator into the Presidency is the same hope that threatens to cripple his presidency. Perhaps one Lord or another suggested to us that we could instantly undo the decisions of years of disinvestment because one new leader was elected. Perhaps another one suggested that desire alone could get us easily out of realities messier than that. I’ve been a bit overwhelmed this last couple months and in that I have not been engaging as much with what is happening on our national stage. I read this week the texts of two of President Obama’s speeches related to war and peace and I found much of it troubling. I could hear who he has been hearing from and it is not people like me. If his supporters do not feel that they can let him know when they disagree with his policies, if they are stuck in a false hope that he was electable only as a perfectly informed and completely autonomous leader or as a two-dimensional metaphor for racial reconciliation, then we will fail to do our duty as co-creators.

As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann notes, “Hope is indeed a communal activity, for no one can fully hope alone.”<sup>3</sup> Politics, on the other hand, is the art of compromise and as much as I

---

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, p. 97.

sometimes fell into the false hope of believing we had given our president a mandate to be the new century's liberal dictator, my thinking mind knows that this would not be any better than the conservative near-one whose years worth of policies and bureaucracies are still the actual canvass new policies must be drawn upon. Amid some things I was less comfortable with in last week's Oslo speech, the President also acknowledged the whisperings of the Lords when he said this:

We are fallible. We make mistakes, and fall victim to the temptations of pride, and power, and sometimes evil. Even those of us with the best intentions will at times fail to right the wrongs before us. But we do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected. We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better place.<sup>4</sup>

Some among us are asking whether it is okay to speak out and name the fallibilities of this Administration or whether our support must be monolithic. I hope we will name our truths because policies crippled by compromise show that other voices are not shying away from naming theirs. A false advisor suggests that we should hold our anger until it comes out in personal and racial slurs, rather than offering perspective and opinion on the issues of the day. Maybe we all should write a special holiday letter to a few officials in our nation and our state this year and remind them that people who believe in justice and opportunity, in the sanctity and the promise of human life don't expect others to carry our hopes alone.

And we may need some truth-telling in our personal contexts as well. In these upcoming days, in so many ways, we will be asked to balance hope. Can we take courage from that single light if we do not believe in miracle cures for our dying or a better life in another place for our departed? Is it more important for us to hold onto our identities as enlightened people or can we still enjoy the company of those whose politics and spending habits and eating habits and entertainment habits are not ours? What would it be like to make it through the end of this year and into next with more acceptance and presence to what is, rather than falling victim to the marauding hopes that bludgeon us with impossible standards and unrealizable expectations?

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/11/world/europe/11prexy.text.html>

In the end, we need to let hope be an opening and not a mandate, we need to remain open to the real opportunities before us and disengage if a particular thing does not happen in a particular way. In the Buddhist tradition, after recognizing the need to stop dancing with the Lords, one has only one choice—to look at what is.

True hope is found in the ability to plant ourselves, one moment at a time, in the actual happenings of this life, to hold all that is real and all that is hard and all that is beautiful in this world and to hold them in close and creative tension. So let us look at this season of hope with eyes wide open. Let us leap into its promise. Let us invite it in, let us welcome it in our heart even if we are afraid or scared or disillusioned or grieving. Let us see the world before us from the light of that one candle. Let us remember that it is an opportunity, not a fulfillment, and let us use it to recommit ourselves to the tedious and painful, joyful and amazing work of rebuilding this, so imperfect, only known, and precious world. May we be the ones to make it so.

### **Benediction and Extinguishing the Chalice**

And now as the flame of our chalice is extinguished here, may it be rekindled in our hearts to be that single candle into hope which lets us recommit to this world that so needs our openness and our engagement. So may it be.

---

<sup>i</sup> Eric Partridge. *Origins. A Brief Etymological Dictionary.* MacMillain, 1958, pages