

LIKE A STAR

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
December 3, 2017

Reading:

“Choose Something Like a Star”

By Robert Frost (1874 – 1963)

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says “I burn.”
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats’ Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

The 10th anniversary edition of *Lapham's Quarterly* just landed in my mailbox, and I couldn't be more pleased. *Lapham's Quarterly* is one of my favorite publications. Each quarter, Lewis Lapham – former longtime editor of Harper's Magazine – picks a topic – music, fear, home, or foreigners, to cite recent issues – and curates an anthology of thoughtful writing on the topic from the past several thousand years. This issue focuses on the relationship between human intelligence and artificial intelligence. It's titled "States of Mind."

In his introduction to this edition, Lewis Lapham points out the difference between these two states of mind. He writes:

We live in an age convinced that technology is the salvation of the human race, and over the past 50 years, we've learned to inhabit a world in which it is increasingly the thing that thinks and the [human is] reduced to the state of a thing. We have machines to scan the flesh and track the blood, game the stock market, manufacture our news and social media, tell us where to go, what to do, how to point a cruise missile or a toe shoe. Machines neither know nor care to know what or where is the human race, why or if something is to be deleted, sodomized, or saved.

Human beings, on the other hand, care deeply about the current and future fate of the human race. Lapham goes on to list what he describes as the "reefs of destruction" upon which the current assumption of infinite growth will inevitably run aground: "overpopulation, climate change, nuclear proliferation, unredeemable debt, extinction of species, wars of all against all." To which I would add the persistence of both personal and institutional forms of misogyny and racism, the rebound both at home and abroad of economic inequality, and the retreat of democracy almost everywhere.

Sixty-nine years ago next Sunday, delegates to the fledgling United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which had been drafted by a UN subcommittee chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. The UDHR declares that that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person. No one should be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country. Everyone has the right to education, to found a family, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable working conditions, to rest and leisure, to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their family. And so on. The UDHR is a masterpiece – one of the finest documents ever produced by human beings anywhere.

For the first half-century after the UDHR was adopted, one could reasonably argue that the nations of the world were marching steadily, if unevenly, toward embodying this admittedly-audacious vision. For the past decade or so, one could

reasonably argue that the march has mostly halted, and perhaps even in some ways and some places turned into a headlong retreat. Our state of mind these days reflects this abrupt reversal. We lament what we have lost and wonder if we will ever get it back. It's enough to make thoughtful people fretful, even fearful. In times like these, we need help — something to steady our minds and focus our resolve.

Robert Frost's poem, "Choose Something Like a Star" has long been one of my favorite poems and Randall Thompson's setting of the poem one of my favorite choral pieces. I'm deeply grateful to Alejandro, Trent, and the choir for their masterful and compelling performance of the piece as part of our worship service this morning.

Frost himself was no stranger to lamenting what had been lost and wondering what the future might hold. His father died of tuberculosis when Frost was 11 years old, prompting the rest of the family — Frost himself, along with his mother and sister, who was two years younger — to move from San Francisco to Massachusetts. After finishing high school, Frost studied at Dartmouth for two months and later spent two years at Harvard, but he never earned a college degree. He worked as a teacher, a shoemaker, a newspaper editor, and a factory worker, before trying his hand at farming, at which he failed.

Along the way, Frost's mother died of cancer when he was 26. Frost and his wife Elinor Miriam White, with whom he had been co-valedictorian in high school, eventually had six children. Two died as infants, and one died at age 8 of cholera.

Mental illness took its toll on the family as well. One of Frost's sons committed suicide at age 38, and both Frost's sister and one of his daughters were eventually committed to mental hospitals. "I have been one acquainted with the night," he wrote in one of his best-loved poems. "I have walked out in rain — and back in rain. I have outwalked the furthest city light."

Out of this crucible of suffering and pain emerged some of the finest poems ever written in English. By the 1920s, Frost was the most celebrated poet in America, and he went on to garner four Pulitzer Prizes. The power of his poetry has endured because Frost could see light in times of darkness. He knew that we can find a source of steadiness when turbulence holds sway. "We may choose something like a star to stay our minds on," he wrote, "and be staid."

The poem goes on to acknowledge that starlight can sometimes be difficult to see. Clouds that gather from time to time can obscure the light, but that doesn't mean the star has ceased shining. "To be holy taciturn in your reserve is not allowed," the poet writes. No matter how thick the clouds or how deep the darkness, the light keeps shining nonetheless.

The poem also indicates that we should choose to stay our minds not on a star but on something *like* a star — something that shines with star-like clarity, despite the darkness that surrounds us. In the mind of the poet at least, this light shines through the medium of language. "Say something!" the poet demands of the star. Say something that those of us who dwell in darkness can comprehend. Whatever this word from on high

turns out to be, the poet notes, it will ask something of us. It will ask of us a certain height — an ability to transcend the gloom of the present moment and bring a star-like clarity to bear upon the darkness that surrounds us.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent in the Christian calendar, a roughly four-week period of time that begins on the Sunday nearest November 30 and ends on Christmas Eve. Advent, which means “coming,” is a time when Christians prepare themselves to celebrate the birth of Jesus, whom they believe was the Messiah foretold by the ancient Hebrew prophets. This Messiah was prophesied to deliver the people of Israel from their Roman overlords and restore their former glory as a nation.

It had been an exceedingly dark time for the Jews, who had been brutally oppressed by the Romans. As the story came to be told in the decades after Jesus’ eventual death, his birth appeared like a beacon shining in the night. It was heralded by a star over his birthplace in Bethlehem, the story says, a celestial declaration that established him as a child of hope. “The people that walk in darkness have seen a great light,” the gospel story reports, echoing the ancient prophets. Jesus’ teaching would bring clarity and conviction to those who languished in the darkness of Roman oppression.

But the light that reportedly emanated from the ministry of Jesus wasn’t from him alone. The Hebrew prophets believed that the Messiah would be not just another prophet or political leader, but Emmanuel, which is the Hebrew word meaning “God with us.” On these terms, the Messiah is the presence of the divine with us and within us — present in each of us and flowing through all of us. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus said to his followers.

The poet William Blake once put the same insight into somewhat different form. He says:

For Mercy has a human heart, and Pity a human face;
And Love, the human form divine, and Peace, the human dress.
Then everyone, of every clime, that prays in deep distress,
Prays to the human form divine — Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

The work we are called to do in this world is divine work — saving work, redemptive work, transformative work. This work asks something of us: it asks us to rise to a certain level of clarity about our purpose and a certain level of commitment to our calling. In this sense, we have chosen something like the Christmas star to stay our minds on. We have chosen to respond to our calling to be the light of the world.

Lewis Lapham rightly insists that technology will not be the salvation of the human race. In fact, human imagination will be the salvation of the human race. Lapham closes his introduction by quoting Virginia Woolf, who speaks of the “common mind that binds the whole world together.” This common mind, I would add, is the product of our moral imagination as human beings. In times like these, as in those dark

days following the cataclysm of World War II, we need a moral imagination about what we have in common as human beings more than ever. We need to stay our mind on these things.

I have returned to Robert Frost's poetry many times over the years, and perhaps most often to "Choose Something like a Star." Each time, I seem to find a different word or phrase to stay my mind on. Today, I find myself repeating this line: "Dark is what brings out your light."

While these may not be the darkest of times in human history, there's darkness aplenty in our nation and our world. Especially during the holiday season, it's easy to let the darkness overtake us. It's easy to focus on tragedies past or travesties present, all the while forgetting the call of possibility. No matter how difficult the past may have been, nor how dire the present may seem to be, something more is possible — something more loving, something more merciful, something more peaceful.

Remember that dark is what brings out your light. Whenever you encounter the darkness of bigotry, that's when your light of love shines most brightly. Whenever you encounter the darkness of inequality, that's when your light of justice shines most brightly. Whenever you encounter the darkness of despair, that's when your light of hope shines most brightly. This holiday season and always, you are the light of the world.