

PAST & FUTURE: HEARING VOICES

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon
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Sitting here this Sunday morning, we might just possibly wonder: Where *is* this hope of the nations that John Greenleaf Whittier's hymn had us singing about a few minutes ago? How on earth is all speech ever going to flow to music and all hearts beat as one? What is he talking about? What was this in the minds of several ages worth of prophets that yearns for better times — and even seems to *promise* it?

Here we gather in the midst of what feels like unending strife between a violent and barbaric religious fanaticism and a nationalistic American arrogance and we really wonder if there *is* any way out, while — at the very same time — we're witnessing the most massive folly humans have ever wandered into, the refusal to believe the scientists' warnings and stop pouring carbon into the atmosphere, and what seems to be an inexorable descent toward a point of no return and no recovery for the ecological balance that makes our lives and the lives of future generations possible. It's not much comfort to know that even as 190 nations are gathered at Bali to face the most serious threat to life on earth humanity has ever faced, it's our own nation that remains the single most intransigent obstacle to action and so many of us demonstrate by our actions and habits that we don't believe it's

THE READING

From Presence, a new book by Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers

Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence. An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*. New York: Currency/Doubleday/Random House, 2004, 79-82.

The first time I experienced this feeling, I was sixteen years old. I left for school one morning, and by the time I got home, everything had changed.

About halfway through the day, the principal called me out of my class and told me to go home. She didn't tell me why, but I noticed that her eyes were slightly red, as if she had been crying. I walked as quickly as I could to the train station, and from there I called home, but no one answered — the line was dead. I boarded the train, and after the usual forty-five minute ride, I took a cab rather than wait for the bus to take me the last few miles home. It was the first time I'd ever taken a cab.

Long before we arrived, I saw it. Huge gray-black clouds of smoke were rising into the air. The long chestnut-lined driveway that led to the farm was choked with hundreds of neighbors, firefighters, policemen, and gawkers. I jumped from the cab and ran the last half mile.

When I reached the courtyard, I couldn't believe my eyes. The huge 350-year-old farmhouse, where my family had lived for the past two hundred years and where I'd lived all my life, was gone. As we stood there, I saw that there was nothing — absolutely nothing — left but the smoldering ruins. As the reality of what was before my eyes sank in, I felt as if somebody had removed the ground from under my feet. The place of my birth, childhood, and youth was gone. Everything that I had was gone.

But then, as my gaze sank deeper into the flames, the flames also seemed to sink into me. I felt time slowing down. Only in that moment did I realize how attached I had been to all the things destroyed by the fire. Everything I was and had been intimately connected to had dissolved into nothing. But no — I realized not everything was gone: there was still a tiny element of myself that wasn't gone with the fire. I was still there watching — *I, the seer*. I suddenly realized that there was another whole dimension of my self that I hadn't been aware of, a dimension that didn't relate to my past, to the world that had just dis-

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happening —

So the human community is rent into warring camps, and our own nation is still in the grip of the interests of a powerful few — and wisdom, and vision certainly don't seem to reach the centers of power — so *where's the hope of the ages?*

And what about us? — in our own efforts, or in our life and work as a congregation — we ourselves may come to feel overstretched, overwhelmed, frustrated, strung out — and we may feel resentment and conflict beginning to rise in us; we may feel thwarted and dispirited.

Sometimes I sit with colleagues, ministers of Unitarian Universalist congregations, who pretty universally report a weariness, speak of congregations of people depressed by the state of the nation and the world, exhibiting a desire to find a cave in which to curl up and sleep for awhile.



Unless we can create space for people to participate in creating a different future, we're not going to be able to halt what now seems inevitable.¹ Can we create that space?



We sit here and we wonder, we have to wonder — what is it we are supposed to be doing? Where do we take hold? Is there no respite?

Questions that are vital to a congregation like this. We know that life can no longer be about going about whatever we have been doing with the certainty that the best we can do is what we have always done. And even what we have always done seems so very hard to sustain.

What in the past we have done may have been the best it could have been. But what we bring to the present and future is what we know, and what we know is mostly the past, *our* past. We know pretty well how to repeat it, but when we do, where's the life, where's the potency?



Last week was the first Sunday in Advent, this symbolic time in the liturgical year when, in a dark time, you wait for something that will come and bring relief, salvation, enlightenment, whatever you wish to call it. And the point of it is — you don't just wait. You see something, hear something. You see some kind of revelation, some enlightenment, and what you see and hear, you become, and what you become is what you do.

solved.

At the moment, time slowed to complete stillness and I felt drawn in a direction above my physical body and began watching the whole scene from that other place. I felt my mind expanding to a moment of unparalleled clarity of awareness. I realized that I was not the person I thought I was. My real self was not attached to the tons of stuff now smoldering inside the ruins. I suddenly knew that I, my true Self, was still alive — more alive, more awake, more acutely present than ever before. I now realized how much all the material things that I'd become attached to over the years, without ever noticing it, had weighed me down. At that moment, with everything gone, I suddenly felt released and free to encounter that other part of my self, the part that drew me into the future — into my future — and into a world that I might bring into reality with my life.

The next day my grandfather arrived. He was eighty-seven years old and had lived on the farm all his life. He had left the house a week before to go to the hospital for medical treatments.

Summoning all the energy he had left, my grandfather got out of the car and walked straight to where my father was still working on the cleanup. He didn't even turn his head toward the smoking ruins of the place where he'd spent his entire life. He simply went straight up to my father, took his hand, and said, "Keep your head up, my boy. Look forward."

Turning around, he walked directly back to the waiting car and left. A few days later, he died quietly.

It evoked a question in me that still remains: What does it take to connect to that other stream of time, the one that gently pulls me toward my future possibility?

That's a bit different from the traditional idea of Advent where you wait for a God to come and take care of matters. What other hands does the energy and intelligence of the Universe have? As the Hindu Upanishads repeat over and over, *Thou Art That. You're It.* That hope, that salvation, will have to be you, and can be you, and will be you.

How do we get there? What do we have to learn? How do we have to change?

Or, to put it in Otto Scharmer's terms: *What does it take to connect to that other stream of time, the one that gently pulls us toward our future possibility?*



One of the biblical stories associated with the Advent season pictures Jesus, head full of popular and customary assumptions, going to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist, a preacher of all the cherished popular and customary assumptions, proposing the old solutions, with a little bit of a new twist here and there, but really it was the old idea of what salvation would be: a Messiah comes and leads Israel back to its former glory as in the days of David and Solomon. Happy days are here again.

So let me take you there for a moment. Imagine the world of Jewish people living under a cruel Roman occupation. They cherished a hope: a Messiah who would restore the former golden age when the Kingdom of Solomon and David spread triumphantly through that ancient world.



The Advent story begins with some kind of holy discontent waiting for something more. So here is John the Baptist in the Wilderness.

The central symbol of Advent. Some kind of discontent took him to this barren, this wild place that the locals knew as a place of crumbling limestone and fine sand blown violently, constantly by incredible winds. There was no water there, only dry streams. There was no one there but a few wild beasts. And if you

know the story in the Gospel of Matthew, there's John the Baptist looking like a madman dressed in a getup made of camel's hair and dining on locusts served with wild honey.

John the Baptist lived in an era of thwarted hope, stifled human possibility. Cruel Roman occupation. He cherished the memory of Mattathias' guerrilla war 165 years earlier, those guerrillas who retook Jerusalem, purified and rededicated the Temple, rekindled the eternal light, the story celebrated by Chanukah. But we know that later generations had settled into greed and corruption. It was time for another liberation movement. There had been a series of failed Jewish uprisings against Rome. There was plenty of anger out there, just as there is right now. Bitterness, hatred.

His wilderness performance was a desperate act. The real John the Baptist was an apocalyptic messiah, the latest in a series of would-be messiahs who would gather a throng of people in the wilderness east of the Jordan River and then lead a mass movement back across the River into the Promised Land, reenacting the Exodus — at which moment John expected that God would show up and overthrow Rome and restore the sovereignty of the kingdom of Israel. The Romans got him first and he suffered the fate of many other would-be messiahs.

Apparently — so the scholars who dare to break with orthodoxy and say what they really think — those scholars say — Jesus may have begun as a follower of this messiah John the Baptist, and then changed his mind, broken with John, gone his own way. Because now Jesus had a different idea about what was to come. He preached a Commonwealth of God that doesn't come in the usual way with armies or miraculous divine interventions

The Commonwealth of God, he said, is here already, always, already. It's all about consciousness. *You* live in that Commonwealth of God *now*. *That* is how you *wait* and *create the future*. By making it real, living in

the new way, right here, right now, acting with the courage and vision that comes with that highly evolved state of consciousness — which alone can bring a new world.

The Galilean teacher Jesus began to teach an entirely different vision of what this Kingdom was that they were supposed to be waiting for.

This is a funny thing. This is not about the restoration of a former golden era. It never works. When things are tough, sometimes that is all we know how to do: wistfully to recall a better past.

We want to know why life has to be such a struggle anyway.

But if we learn anything from this Advent season, let it be this: that we can bless our discontent, and come to see that the vision we need and the inner transformation we need are born in us when things get bad enough that we stop trying to return to the past and stop trying to apply bandaids to the present, and fasten our seatbelts and move into that hope of the ages that we ourselves are creating as we go.

But the vision we need is probably going to come in the form of subtle voices you have to get very quiet and listen very carefully to hear. It happens in individual lives and it happens in communities of people, in contexts like, say, a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Here's how it happened in one individual human life. Jesus in the Wilderness, changing his conception of what it is that we're supposed to be waiting for and hoping for.

The important thing is that he goes to the Wilderness and once there he stays long enough, after John has finished and gone, hears different voices.

You won't find this wilderness in an atlas of maps. The four gospels were not written to be history; they are sermons exploring human depths. They're full of loaded words, like "wilderness." You'll remember the Exodus journeyings in the wilderness, or Jesus being

tempted in the wilderness.

The wilderness is a place of letting go, and waiting, and trusting the processes of life. Trusting that just as the universe itself was born out of emptiness, so new reality and new life is born out of emptiness and darkness and silence.

The first thing to note is something the Buddhists call *Cessation*. Full stop. The stuff whizzing around your head comes to a halt.

Next thing, he sees and hears things he's not accustomed to, from a different place. And he comes out of the Wilderness different, with a whole different understanding of his life, and the life of the world, and the future, and his own future possibility, and what it is he's supposed to do.



The authors of the quite brilliant recent book from which the reading came suggest where that place ought to be: we need to begin to see, not from outside of things, not from outside this aching world of possibility, but within this world of life, where we are. This whole aching world, so full of possibility, of which I am a part, we are a part. Hang back and observe, observe, observe — asking, What's really going on here? Where does my life, where does *our* life, belong in the making of this new earth? You can't rush it. *Observe . . . until . . . you see.*

When you see it, it commands your life.

Now you're not looking from the past you know so well — but from a future that has not yet happened.

This is the real religious work of prophecy. Sensing the unfolding future before it unfolds.

You see from within the strife, becoming one with the world you're observing, knowing that there is just one body of all life.

You retreat and you reflect, cease the habitual thought-patterns and suspend the habitual solutions, and see, hear.

And then there's hardly anything to decide. You see the highest future possibility that

connects your unfolding self with this whole struggling world of life. Our deeper identity comes clearer and may surprise us.

“I felt my mind expanding,” said Otto Scharmer, standing in front of the smoldering ruins at the age of 16. “I felt my mind expanding to a moment of unparalleled clarity of awareness. I realized that I was not the person I thought I was.”

But what person was that? The person he *thought* he was was a series of attachments and identifications. Well — I know about that. It all burned down. Now he was released from all that and free to meet that part of himself that drew him into the future — and into a world that he could bring into reality with his life.

But — what if the house had not burned?



There is a realm *from which* the future is emerging. Pretty much the whole of the mystical and visionary tradition everywhere — calls us to that realm, because in those moments, we can look back at the present where we sit today — and know very deeply how it is that we are linked to our highest future possibility and destiny.

Can we know that place? Can we sense, in some deep way, who we are as stewards and servants of what’s trying to come to birth in the world?

George Bernard Shaw talked about how, when this happens, it feels:

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose you consider a mighty one, the being a force of nature, rather than a feverish, selfish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.²



The authors — there are four of them — describe another scene. Two of them had been involved in the profound changes in South Africa; a third was deeply involved in Guatemala. In Guatemala, there was something called “Vision Guatemala” to try to see

beyond the 36-years of civil war and terror and death squads. They describe a session in which, one after another, some of those who had suffered the horrors of that time told their stories. After one particularly wrenching description of a massacre, more terrible than I want to describe to you, the room fell silent. Stayed silent for some time. When the silence ended, a genuine enlightenment had fully taken hold.

There was nothing, really, to left decide. They didn’t have to put their ideas together. They had heard the voice in the silence. They knew who they were and why they had come together. They heard what it was that wanted to happen and *that something* drew them in, committed them irretrievably to what they were about to do. They knew who they were and they knew something more of their own destiny. First, something had happened in the hearing of human voices, speaking the truth of their own lives and sufferings. Afterwards, in that silence, something greater and more profound had happened. Something had actually unfolded. Spontaneously and quite naturally, the new took hold; they began to act differently.



Now when the world’s on fire — may we see the possibility pictured by the Advent wilderness listening. We can be freed from our preformed assumptions and frameworks. We can enter the place that lowers the walls between us, shifts our intentions, and opens to us a vision from the heart of reality and not from the margins.

Sometimes, the greatest possibility reveals itself in the deepest calamity, when the world — or your world — is on fire. There is something Camus once wrote, at the end of “Create Dangerously,” that captures it:

Let us seek the respite where it is — in the very thick of the battle. For in my opinion, it is there. Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps

then, if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the uproar of empires and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope.

A profound opening of the mind and heart to something beyond, and in that something beyond you find your own being; — it is you, it is us, it is the whole, the all; — in that other stream of time, the one that gently pulls you

toward the future possibility, and enmeshed in that future possibility, in your own future possibility, the work that is given to you in this time —

Then the new earth can be born in us.

¹ Slightly paraphrased from *Presence*, 165

² Dedicatory Epistle, *Man and Superman*, 1950.