

# And Call The Wolf Our Brother

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

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## CALL TO WORSHIP – Isaiah, Ch 60

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of God has dawned upon you. For behold, darkness covers the land; deep gloom enshrouds the peoples. But over you the light of God will rise, and God's glory will appear upon you. Your gates will always be open; by day or night, they will never be shut. Violence will no more be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders. You will call your walls *Salvation*, and all your gates *Praise*.

## COMMON PRAYER – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

O God, early in the morning I cry to you.  
Help me to pray  
And to concentrate my thoughts on you,  
I cannot do this alone.  
In me there is darkness,  
But with you there is light;  
I am lonely, but you do not leave me;  
I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;  
I am restless, but with you there is peace.  
In me there is bitterness, but with you there is patience;  
I do not understand your ways,  
But you know the way for me;  
Restore me to liberty,  
And enable me to live now  
That I may answer before you and before me.  
Lord, whatever this day may bring,  
Your name be praised.

## FIRST READING – Luke 9: 51-62

And it came to pass, when the days were come that he should be given up to the authorities, Jesus steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before him; and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. And the Samaritans did not receive Jesus, because his face was set on going to Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, will we bid fire to come down from heaven, and consume them?" But Jesus turned, and rebuked them.

And they went to another village. And as they went their way, a certain man said to him, I will follow you wheresoever you go. And Jesus said unto him, "The foxes have lairs, and the birds of the heaven have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

And Jesus said unto another, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury the dead; but go and preach the kingdom of God." And another also said, "I will follow you Lord; but first allow me to bid farewell to those that are at my house." But Jesus said unto him, "No man, having put his hand to the plough and then looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

## SECOND READING

### *The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me* – Delmore Schwartz

[Delmore Schwartz was a celebrated writer in mid-century America. He achieved huge success with his first book, “In Dreams Begin Responsibility.” But, it was also a bit of his undoing. Every book he wrote afterwards was greeted with “Oh, this good. But wasn’t his first book great?” He wandered from university to university. He had always been a little paranoid and it increased with age. He medicated himself with women, alcohol, amphetamines, and barbiturates. The teaching jobs disappeared and he went from one flop house to another in a downward spiral. When his heart finally gave out, he was living in a very cheap hotel in Times Square. He was 52. His body was in the morgue for two days before he was identified. The obituaries and tributes were fulsome. Saul Bellow wrote about him in a wonderful novel, “Humboldt’s Gift.” Lou Reed, who had studied with him, wrote a song about him. Strangest of all was one night when I was watching “Star Trek: The Next Generation” and an alien told Jean-Luc Picard, “They say, ‘time is the fire in which we burn.’” I turned to the cat on the couch beside me and said, “Hey, the aliens know Delmore Schwartz!”]

The heavy bear who goes with me,  
A manifold honey to smear his face,  
Clumsy and lumbering here and there,  
The central ton of every place,  
The hungry beating brutish one  
In love with candy, anger, and sleep,  
Crazy factotum, dishevelling all,  
Climbs the building, kicks the football,  
Boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city.

Breathing at my side, that heavy animal,  
That heavy bear who sleeps with me,  
Howls in his sleep for a world of sugar,  
A sweetness intimate as the water’s clasp,  
Howls in his sleep because the tight-rope  
Trembles and shows the darkness beneath.  
—The strutting show-off is terrified,  
Dressed in his dress-suit, bulging his pants,  
Trembles to think that his quivering meat  
Must finally wince to nothing at all.

That inescapable animal walks with me,  
Has followed me since the black womb held,  
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,  
A caricature, a swollen shadow,  
A stupid clown of the spirit’s motive,  
Perplexes and affronts with his own darkness,  
The secret life of belly and bone,  
Opaque, too near, my private, yet unknown,  
Stretches to embrace the very dear  
With whom I would walk without him near,  
Touches her grossly, although a word  
Would bare my heart and make me clear,  
Stumbles, flounders, and strives to be fed  
Dragging me with him in his mouthing care,  
Amid the hundred million of his kind,  
The scrimmage of appetite everywhere.

SERMON – Jay Lavelle

Once upon a time, a thousand years ago in China, there was a Zen master who meditated in an abandoned eagle's nest at the top of a very tall tree. He became quite famous. The poet Su Shi came to visit him and, standing on the ground and bending his head back so far he almost fell over, yelled up to the monk: "Roshi! Why do you live in that nest? It is so dangerous!" The monk looked down at the tiny, gesturing figure, and said, "Great poet! You live in a world that does not deal with loss, suffering, impermanence, or death. You are in a far more dangerous place than I am."

This service began — as services often do — in several places that I didn't know were connected. First there was the sermon I gave last fall, and what I felt was Rev. Sarah's lingering, and — to me — unanswered question of how I got to where I am today.

And there was Delmore Schwartz's bear poem, which I had come across in an essay I had read.

Finally, there was a recording of a lecture by the British mystic and philosopher Alan Watts that contained this quote by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung:

*We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses. I am the oppressor of the person I condemn, not his friend and fellow-sufferer. Healing may be called a religious problem. In the sphere of social or national relations, the state of suffering may be civil war, and this state is to be cured by the virtue of forgiveness and love of one's enemies. That which we recommend as applicable to external situations, we must also apply inwardly in the treatment of neurosis. This is why modern man has heard enough about guilt and sin. He is sorely enough beset by his own bad conscience, and wants rather to know how he is to reconcile himself with his own nature — how he is to love the enemy in his own heart, and call the wolf his brother.*

And that, my friends, is how sermons are born.

And it does make sense that the origins are so involved. A sermon is a journey into the truth, and that is always difficult work — work we'd all rather avoid. But one of the truths we try to ignore is that that very avoidance leads to more problems.

We try to follow the obvious path — being attached to what we like and avoiding what we don't. However, we often find that we can't keep what's attractive and we can't avoid what's not. The plate breaks and we meticulously glue it back together and everything is fine until we turn it over and see the seam. As the poet W. H. Auden wrote, "The crack in the tea cup opens a lane that leads to the land of the dead."

So, as the Chinese poet was told, avoiding life's difficulties is not the path of happiness; it is — as the monk said — a dangerous way to live. If you want to have a full life, you have to get used to loss and to being upset. Jesus said that the truth will set us free — not make us happy.

This is not only a matter of focusing on our problems. What I'm getting at is beneath the problems, the underlying attitude of anxiety, fear, and narrow-mindedness that makes our lives fearful, small, and enclosed. The remainder left after all the self-improvement, all the therapy, all the medication.

And how do we do that? How do we deal with the heavy bear that is always by our side? And how exactly do we learn to call the wolf our brother?

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What I want to talk about today what helped me a great deal. It is a practice of Tibetan Buddhism called "Lojong" which is also known as "Seven-Point Mind Training". This consists of 59 short statements or slogans that are collected into 7

categories or “points” which, when followed, lead to a better life. It was compiled and written-down by several people in Tibet between 900 and 1200 AD, and is now considered a “root text” of Tibetan Buddhism. Some of the points deal with the two forms of meditation, some with checking on how you’re doing. The last, which is slyly appropriate for anyone who has made it through all of the slogans, is simply “Don’t expect applause”.

Now, we will not be going over all 59 today — no way! There are long books for that.

We will be looking at the six statements that make up Point Three, which is called *Transforming Bad Circumstances into the Way of Enlightenment*. This may sound like high talk from the Himalayans, but this does work.

**The first statement** is *When the world is filled with evil, transform all mishaps into the path of bodhi*. This is sometimes translated as “The obstacle is the Path to Enlightenment”. (The word “bodhi” means “enlightened” or “awaken”.) How do you do that? Why would you want to do that? Isn’t the Path the way that God has set for us? The life we are meant to lead? Going from the past to the future one step at a time?

When things go right we are ecstatic — we feel great and have no cares. But let one problem (large or small) occur and we fall into blackness (well, some of us do). The soufflé falls, the Sox lose, the girl says “no” — and we are crushed, we despair, we are lost in the dark wood without a map. The last thing we think of is taking this private hell onto the Path. We want to free of our torment, not carry it along with us.

So what are we supposed to do? How do we deal with torment? We need to be patient. Being patient is to endure, to bear up, to have faith. It is not worrying, it is not avoiding, it is not whining. If we can endure disappointment with strength, we are in charge. And what makes this possible? Patience makes this possible. When learning lojong, patience is the foremost virtue to have as you — hopefully — develop the others.

To practice patience is to notice things and be present with them (taking a breath or two helps; maybe taking three) rather than immediately reacting to them. Rev. Barbara Merritt used to say that for every year she meditated she gained two seconds of patience, and that eventually these seconds added up to something worthwhile. We have an instant to stop, analyze, and maybe change or reverse our course.

Yes, it does take training. We are talking about training the mind. Your mind can be trained. Once you have a single experience of reacting differently, you feel encouraged, and the next time it is more likely that you will step back. When something difficult happens, you stop saying, “Why did this have to happen?” and begin saying, “Yes, This is how it is. Let me turn toward it, Let me acknowledge it.” It is part of your practice.

**The second slogan** is: *Drive all blames into one*. Which means whatever happens, don’t ever blame anyone or anything else. There is no one to blame.

Driving all blames into one means that you can’t blame anyone for what happens. Now, this has nothing to do with who’s at fault — either in a legal or a moral sense. Even if it’s someone’s fault, you can’t blame them. Something happened, and now it is done, and there is nothing else to be done but to make use of it. Everything that happens, bad as it may be and no matter whose fault it is, has a potential benefit, and your job is to have to find it. Drive all blames into one means that you are taking full responsibility for everything that arises in your life.

We are constantly thinking, This is very bad, this is not what I wanted, this will bring many other problems. When the soufflé falls, you begin thinking, “What will my guests eat?” Then “My guests will think I’m incompetent.” Then “They will begin laughing at me as soon as they leave” and so forth. But it has happened and it is not going to change. You don’t have a time machine — you can’t go back and re-do the soufflé. The questions you need to be asking are: What are you going to do with the pain? What can I learn from it? How can I use of it for the Path?

And, you can answer these questions; we have the strength and the capacity. Drive all blames into one is a way of cutting through the long, long habit of complaining and whining, and finding the strength to turn every situation into the path.

Or, more simply, Here you are. This is it. Go forward onto the next step on the path.

The third slogan is *Be grateful to everyone*. This is very simple but very profound. Consider this. Did you grow the food you ate this morning? Did you build the car you drove to church? Make your clothing from the wool you spun after shearing the sheep you own? Did you build your own house with lumber you milled from trees you felled?

You need others every single moment of your life. Without others, you have nothing. Or, to look it a different way, Everything you have is a gift. Everything.

Where do “we” come from? Our parents’ genes and their support, of course, but there are all the conditions and circumstances that makes us who we are. Our thoughts and feelings? Our emotions and beliefs? The very words we use? Where do they come from? Without all these and more, we wouldn’t be here as we are.

There is no such thing as an independent person — there are only persons who have co-created one another over the long history of our species. This includes our inmost sense of identity. Our consciousness is never independent of others.

This is what “emptiness” means in Buddhist teaching: that there is no such thing as an isolated individual, or an independent action.

Literally every thought in our minds, every emotion that we feel, every word that comes out of our mouth, every material object that we need to get through the day, comes through the kindness of, and the interaction with, others. It is simply the fact of the matter. Unhappiness and gratitude simply cannot exist in the same moment. If you feel grateful, you are happy. If you feel grateful for what is possible for you in this moment, no matter what challenges you are facing, then you are alive.

The fourth slogan is: *Seeing confusion as the four kayas is unsurpassable shunyata protection* which requires some explanation.

What sort of confusion? What are the kayas and why are there four of them? What, exactly, is shunyata, and why does it protect us? If, unlike in the second slogan, life does not make us angry, it often confuses us. Like most of you are confused about the kayas. The kayas are the various aspects (or bodies) of the Buddha that are independent and coexistent. The first aspect is uncertainty. The second is focus, the third is unity, and the fourth is an immediate experience of the presence. So, our work with confusion is similar to what we’ve hear before: be patient and examine — however briefly — what is happening to us. And this leads to the “unsurpassable shunyata protection” which we can simply call “letting go.” There is nothing to own, nothing to protect.

Seeing confusion as the four kayas is unsurpassable shunyata protection simply means that we put ourselves in a different place with respect to ordinary human confusion, resistance, and fear. Rather than hoping these feelings will go away, we need to look more deeply at them; examine their reality.

Here’s an example. What happens when we get upset? Remember the fallen soufflé from slogan two? If we could step outside of ourself and look back, what would we see? We would see time passing. We would see things changing. We would see life arising and passing away, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. Moment by moment, time seems to slip away and things change. Somehow, the present becomes both the past and the future. Yet right now, in this moment, there is no past or future. As soon as we examine “anything,” it is gone. And we do not know where it goes.

Slogan Five is more mundane and down-to earth. It is *Four practices are the best of methods*. If spiritual teachings are to really transform our lives, they need to move between two levels, the sacred and the mundane. If our practice is too high and lofty, it’s for no good. We can’t relate to the people and the problems of ordinary life. This is the moment when the teacher whacks us with a stick and says, “Wash your bowls!!”

On the other hand, if practice is too mundane, if we become too interested in the details of how we and others feel and

what we or they need or want, then the natural loftiness of our hearts and soul will not be accessible to us, and we will sink under the weight of obligations, details, and the ordinary.

There is a Zen saying; “If you have a staff, I will give you a staff; if you need a staff, I will take it away.” We need both religious philosophy and practical tools for successful daily living. This double need seems to go with being human. The fourth slogan we just discussed dealt with contemplating reality as a Buddha might. Now it’s time to get down to earth.

The first practice is *do good*. Say hello to people, smile at them, tell them happy birthday, I am sorry for your loss, is there something I can do to help? These things are normal social graces, and people say them all the time. But to practice them is to work at actually meaning them. Genuinely try to be helpful and kind and thoughtful in as many ways as you can every day.

The second practice is *avoid evil*. This means to pay close attention to actions of body, speech, and mind, noticing when we do, say, or think things that are harmful or unkind. Part of practicing patience is watching what you say before you say it. In the past we might have said to ourselves, “I only said that because she really needs straightening out. If she hadn’t done that to me, I wouldn’t have said that to her. It really was her fault.” Now we see that this was only a way of ignoring the pain of the situation and dealing with that.

The last two practices in this slogan are *Appreciate your craziness* and *Pray for help*.

Traditionally they have to do with making offerings to two kinds of creatures: demons (the *dons* — beings who are keeping you from your practice) and dharma protectors (the *dharmapalas* — beings who are helping you to be true to your practice). But for our purposes, it is better to see these practices more broadly.

We can understand making offerings to demons as “appreciate your craziness.” Make a bow to your own resistance, your weakness, or your craziness. Appreciate it and treat it with compassion. Be amazed at how confused, lazy, and resentful you are. We manifest our flaws at every turn. When we make offerings to the demons inside us and develop a sense of appreciation for our own flaws and faults, we can laugh at ourselves and everyone else.

In making offerings to dharma protectors, we pray to whatever forces we believe in for help. We can reach out beyond ourselves and beyond anything we can depict and ask a loving God for assistance and strength for our spiritual work. We can do this in prayer or meditation, with silent or spoken words, both are powerful practices. We are asking for help and for strength to do what we know we must do, with the understanding that, though we must do our best, whatever goodness comes our way is not our accomplishment. It comes from a wider place than we cannot control. In fact, it is counter-productive to conceive of spiritual practice as a task that we are going to accomplish on our own. Haven’t we talked about being grateful to everyone? Haven’t we learned that there is no way to do anything alone? We are training, after all, in spiritual practice, not personal self-help. So not only does it make sense to pray for help, not only does it feel right and good to do so, it is also important to do this so that we remember we are not alone and we can’t do it by ourselves.

The sixth and final slogan is: *Whatever you meet unexpectedly, join with meditation*.

This slogan is simply “Whatever you encounter is part of the path”. It sums up the other five: whatever happens, good or bad, it is part of your spiritual practice. Spiritual practice is our whole life, there are no days off. St Paul tells us we are to pray “without ceasing”. We are always doing spiritual practice, whether we know it or not. Now, you may think that you have lost your practice, that you were going along OK and then life got complicated and you lost track of what you were doing. But this is just what you think; it’s not what’s really going on.

Once you begin practice, you just keep going forward, because everything is practice. Once your hand is on the plow, as Jesus said in the first reading, you cannot look back. And all so gradually you learn it’s impossible to be lost. You are constantly being found, whether you know it or not. Not only does your practice make you deal with life better, it re-

connects you with all of creation.

To practice this last slogan is to know that no matter what is happening — no matter how distracted you think you are, no matter how much you feel like a lazy incompetent who has lost track of their good intentions and is now hopelessly astray — you have the ability to take all the negativity, bad circumstances, and difficulty and turn it into the path.

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So there we are. A very brief introduction to the six steps that lead to enlightenment. Some of the ideas are very straightforward – obvious to any of us who have ever been in a Sunday school or opened a fortune cookie. Others are more subtle and complex – requiring time and reflection to understand.

The Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan wrote, *“What is the best way for a person to understand his life’s purpose?’ If one is intuitive and mystical, it is easier because then one is continually told what is the purpose of one’s life. For nature has such a perfection of wisdom. One sees that the insects are given the sense to make their little houses and to protect themselves and make a store of their food. The bees, who have the gift of making honey, are taught how to make honey. So nature has taught every soul to seek its purpose. It has made every soul for that purpose, and it is continually calling that soul to see that purpose. If the soul does not hear the call and sleeps, it is not the fault of nature, which is continually calling. Therefore, if I were to say in a few words, how to find one’s purpose, I would say: by waking from sleep.”*

These six slogans are an alarm, a subtle alarm clock to rouse us from the sleep we are in. The writer and minister Marianne Williamson is fond of saying that in Genesis we read that God put Adam into a deep sleep, but nowhere do we read of him waking up.

Lojong is a way of waking up, a way of becoming aware of what we overlook. A way that makes our walls become salvation and our gates become praise. A way to become truly awake to the glory that is creation.

Please join with me in prayer: Creator of the Universe, help us to awaken to the wonder of your creation. Help us be patient and grateful; help us to do good, avoid evil, and be compassionate to ourselves; help us understand that you are in all aspects of creation; that we are never alone, and we have no reason to fear. Amen.