

## LIVING IN DANGEROUS TIMES : WHAT WOULD \*\*\*\*\* SAY?

### OPENING WORDS:

Black Elk said, "Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle." Examples: the earth's travel around the sun and the seasons of the year; the earth's 24-hour rotation bringing us day and night; the seasons of our lives from birth to death and then a new beginning, today's rain or today's service from beginning to middle to end. The Indigenous cultures use the four directions as cardinal points on the circle as a way to orient themselves in the day, the season, the year, their lives and the life of their tribe. Thus when I invite the four directions this morning, I am reminding us of our connection to the circle and all that it holds for us and for the world. When I call in the East, we are honoring the sunrise, the spring the place of birth and new beginnings, the place of inspiration, and the home of eagle – one of courage and vision. When I call in the South, we are honoring midday, the summer, childhood, the place of innocence and trust, and the home of little mouse –one of inscrutability. When I call in the West, we are honoring the sunset, the fall, adolescence, the place of the darkness and looking within, and the home of bear – one of power and independence. When I call in the North, we are honoring the night, the winter, adulthood, the ancestors and all those yet to be born, the time of bringing our gifts forward into community, and the home of snowy owl – one of wisdom. May the circle of all life come to hold this space in sacred time as we gather together.

### LIGHTING THE CANDLE

I light this candle for all lost in the darkness. May its light join with the others to offer hope in the face of despair, courage in the face of fear, and love in the face of hate.

### A STORY FOR ALL AGES: CLARA'S BIG SURPRISE

### WORDS FOR REFLECTION:

To live is to be willing to die over and over again. Pema Chodron

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We live in dangerous times. And if we give our attention to the media, it would be difficult not to believe that this is the **most** dangerous of times. If we are not mindful, the media can keep us in perpetual fear and we become blind to all the other things going on in the world and blind to our own purposes in being here in this time and place. When I actually stop and reflect back over my years, I cannot really remember a time when we were **not** living in dangerous times – wars; the Atomic Bomb; the "Red" scare; the nuclear arms race; assassinations, riots and bombings at home; the kidnapping of Americans by Iran; crime; the World Trade Center; more wars, and so on. Living in New Hampshire, we might fool ourselves into a sense of security. Yet a nuclear power plant is but few miles east and, on the

western border sits a decommissioned plant with its spent fuel stored on site for years to come. When we visit the cities or fly somewhere in the world, we are reminded first hand of our vulnerability. The world is a dangerous place and it always has been.

The question becomes, “How do I choose to live?” Do I live in fear and isolate? Do I live cavalierly as if there is nothing of which to be afraid? How do I balance vigilance with courage? These have always been the questions. These are not questions just for this time. And despite my or your best efforts to stay alive, the bald truth is that there are no guarantees. We are all vulnerable.

Half in jest I began to wonder what wisdom some of nature’s other creatures might have to offer about living in dangerous times. After all, survival is essential. My first thought was of self-protection and turtle came to mind. Surely its ability to pull its head and legs into a hard shell offers secure protection. Then my mind wandered to those among us who believe that withdrawing into isolation as a country or individual will keep one safe. I wondered what wisdom turtle might offer. Perhaps it is this: “Being vigilant and retreating into my shell in a moment of danger has saved my life. But I cannot remain forever in my shell. Sooner or later if I want to find food, to survive the weather, to mate, I will have to stick my head out and move!”

Then I remembered my encounter with a snapping turtle a few years ago. The turtle, intent on laying its eggs, was crossing Route 9 during the morning commute. With each approaching car or truck, it would retreat into its shell. Ever the rescuer, I pulled off the road, retrieved a scoop from the car trunk and approached the turtle. My intent was to help it on its journey across the road. To my complete surprise the turtle did not remain safely tucked in its shell. Instead, eyeing me, it stuck its head out and rose up on extended legs. I circled to its rear but it spun to face me and snapped its jaws shut with a sound that surely frightened. I tried again to circle to its rear and again it spun. We were locked in a circle dance in the middle of Route 9! Turtle saw me as a predator, was in survival mode, and was not going to go gently into the night. While I intended to save it, turtle was equally intent on saving itself from me!

I want to celebrate turtle’s courage in sticking its neck out for that is the very quality I desire in myself – knowing when to stick my neck out, when to speak up, when to act and not retreat. We all need that every day. Fear can cause us to hide inside our separate shells but, in so doing, we allow others to dictate who we are and who we can become.

Every being on the planet battles to survive. My thoughts moved from turtle to caterpillar – those bright green ones that make their way to summer’s milkweed stalks. If you look closely you will notice small dots of color strategically placed down the sides of the caterpillar’s body. It has come to be known scientifically that the caterpillar experiences these dots as foreign to its being a caterpillar yet it must endure those spots just as we must endure those attributes or qualities about ourselves with which we are not comfortable. Soon, by nature, the caterpillar is compelled to spin its cocoon. Once spun and enclosed, the caterpillar dissolves into an ooze. Now those little spots come into play for they carry the very substance necessary to transform the brown ooze into the Monarch butterfly.

I think about the wisdom of this story for me as an individual. I think of all the ways I try to ignore, diminish, or eliminate those personal qualities I possess yet wish to disown – anger, judgment, fear, hate to name just a few. I believe most of us try to deny these qualities or project them onto another. I wonder what each of us would find on the other side if we were to meet our anger, our judgment, our hatred, and our fear. So I wondered what wisdom the caterpillar had to offer. Perhaps it is this:

“Though I was so afraid, something within took me into the darkness of the cocoon. There I found rejected parts of me that helped me to become the butterfly. Without those I would never have gotten to know the freedom of flight.” What might we become if each of us were willing to embrace our full humanness? To find the light and freedom of the butterfly, the caterpillar had to go into the darkness. I invite each of us to venture into our own darkness to discover the light of our being.

Next in my musings I thought about family and whether in times of danger, there might be a creature willing to speak about something larger than the self. I turned to Mother Sea Bear. The polar bears are increasingly endangered as the polar ice cap continues to melt and break apart. Dependent upon ring-neck seals for their survival, the sea bears and their offspring must often swim extreme distances from one ice floe to another in order to survive. Though the will to survive is strong, many are lost to the ocean along the way. What wisdom might Mother Sea Bear have for us? I imagine this is what she might say. “I am part of a long legacy of sea bears. All who have gone before swim with me and I bring into the world those who will follow me. There has always been danger in my world but I will do what I must do to go forward and to protect my young ones. To surrender to fear would be to lose faith in my destiny and to betray my ancestors.”

So this is the wisdom of Sea Bear: Ultimately, each of us must care about a world we will not live to see. Each of us must do his or her part in creating a world of hope, faith, and love.

Lastly, I turn to buffalo for I sense buffalo has something to teach us about roles and living in community. This story comes to us from the Plains Indians for whom the buffalo was a life source and wisdom teacher. Whenever the buffalo stampeded, the Indians noticed that the oldest and boldest buffalo formed a protective outer circle around the herd. In protecting the herd, they were also most likely to be the ones injured or killed. The next inner circle held the younger and stronger males whom one day would move to the outer circle. Next came the females, those who would birth succeeding generations. And in the center would be the young. When the hunt was over and the herd came to rest, the old, tired, and injured buffalo would be moved to the center of the circle to be allowed to rest and recover. The Plains Indians honored their warriors in similar fashion. When they returned from battle, the warriors were welcomed into the center of the community. Here their wounds were tended, here they were invited to tell their stories, and here they were honored for their sacrifice in protecting the tribe.

So what wisdom will buffalo leave with us? Perhaps this: “Yes, the world is a dangerous place, it has always been a dangerous place. Surviving and thriving lies in community. Each of us – old and young, male and female has a gift to bring. There are those willing to sacrifice in order to protect, there are those that bring life and nurture into the world, and there are those who will grow and carry the legacy of those who have gone before. This is how it has always been.”

In today’s world we need those who are willing to sacrifice their lives so that we may carry on with ours. That sacrifice brings with it both physical and spiritual pain. Both the buffalo and Plains Indians knew and honored that. While our warriors –whether military, police or fire - are giving life to us, their life force is being challenged. When they return to our communities we must be willing to listen to their stories, to honor their sacrifice, and welcome them home. The very health and future of our communities depends upon that for these warriors carry the pain and suffering of destruction and death. Their stories are necessary to all of us if we are ever to find common ground.

So this is what I ask we take with us today:

1. Like the turtle we must know when to “pull our heads in” and when to dare to “stick out our necks” in order to speak up, be seen, and act.
2. Like the caterpillar we must be willing to go into the darkness to find our light.
3. Like the sea bear, each of us is here to fulfill both a legacy left to us by our ancestors and an implied promise to those yet to come; and
4. Like the buffalo, we need to honor the roles of all but especially to honor and hold those willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to keep the community safe.

#### CLOSING THOUGHT

I would like to close with three quotes this morning:

“Life only demands from the strength you possess. Only one feat is possible – not to run away.” Dag Hammarskjöld

“All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy, for what we leave behind is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter another.” Anatole France

“The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit.” Nelson Henderson

So as we leave this morning, may we carry with us the wisdom of others in daring to go forward, in letting go of what no longer serves us, in honoring the sacrifice of all, and in knowing that we each have a legacy to fulfill and a promise to keep. Go in peace.