

*A Great Song<sup>1</sup>*  
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*December 4, 2016*  
*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

*Opening Words*      *Book of Hours, I 2*      Rainer Maria Rilke

I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.

I may not complete this last one  
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.

I've been circling for thousands of years  
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,  
a storm, or a great song?

*Today we will explore together the great song that is our lives.*

*Reading In Three Parts, by Alan Watts*

*Part One:* “Existence, the physical universe, is basically playful. There is no necessity for it whatsoever. It isn't going anywhere. It doesn't have a destination that it ought to arrive at. But it is best understood by analogy with music, because music, as an art form, is essentially playful. We say you play the piano, you don't work the piano. Why? Music differs from, say, travel. When you travel you're trying to get somewhere... In music, though, one doesn't make the end of a composition the point of the composition. If so, the best conductors would be those who played fastest and there would be composers who only wrote finales. People would go to a concert just to hear one crackling chord because that's the end! Same way with dancing. You don't aim at a particular spot in the room because that's where you will arrive. The whole point of dancing is the dance.” *Musical interlude*

*Part Two:* But we don't see that as something brought by our education into our everyday conduct. We have a system of schooling which gives a completely different impression. It's all graded and what we do is put the child into the corridor of this grade system with a kind of, “Come on, kitty, kitty,” and you go to kindergarten and that's a great thing because when you finish that you get into first grade... then you've got high school, and it's revving up, the thing is coming, then you're going to go to college... and you go out to join the world. Then you get into some racket where you're selling insurance, and they've got that quota to make, and you're going to make that, and all the time the thing is coming, it's coming! It's coming! That great thing. The success you're working for. Then you wake up one day about 40 years old and you say, “My god, I've arrived. I'm there.” And you don't feel very different from what you've always felt and there's a slight letdown because you feel there's a hoax. And there was a hoax! A dreadful hoax. They made you miss everything by expectation. *Musical Interlude*

*Part Three:* We've cheated ourselves the whole way down the line. We thought of life by analogy with a journey, a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at the end and the thing was to get to that end, success or whatever it is, maybe heaven after you're dead. But we missed the point the whole way along. It was a musical thing and you were supposed to sing or to dance while the music was being played.”

*Anthem*      How Can I Keep from Singing?

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## *Sermon*

Life is like a great song. Or as Alan Watts says, “It was a musical thing and you were supposed to sing or to dance while the music was being played.” I heard those words several weeks ago, and they kept repeating in my mind and heart until I knew I needed to bring them to you, and repeat them to myself. What does it mean that life is a musical thing, that we are supposed to be singing or dancing our lives?

Such a different perspective from what we usually hear. Much of our world is oriented around goals and pursuits, epitomized in our national right to “the pursuit of happiness.” We can be happy if we finish this project, or get an academic degree, or get the job, or find the perfect spouse. Or, we can be happy when we buy this product, or have a bigger house, or a fancy new electric car. But maybe it's not about any of that.

It's paradoxical. December, in the Christian tradition, is the season of Advent, which is about anticipation and expectation—waiting for Christmas. In the secular Advent, people are focused on Christmas, too—intense preparation, shopping, decorating, everything to get ready for the big day. But then as soon as Christmas arrives, there are the post-Christmas sales, and the New Year's Eve party, and the decorations go up in stores for Valentine's Day. Rushing on to the next thing.

Maybe it's just the attitude we bring to it. Are we singing life right now, or are we rushing toward the next thing? I keep thinking of Annie Dillard's words:

Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time. I worship each god, I praise each day splintered down, splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk, a husk of many colors spreading at dawn fast over the mountains split.<sup>2</sup>

Every day is a god. Every day is a song. Can I appreciate each moment? Can I give thanks for each event? Can I pay attention to that moment called “now?” Can I find joy in what is now, rather than waiting for some future fulfillment, or worrying about some future catastrophe? Can I play at life as if it were a musical instrument?

Of course, it is easier to do when the day is rosy. It is easier to sing the day when I have shelter and food and can walk freely around the neighborhood as the sun is coming up. But not all songs are joyful. Some songs are mournful or lamenting. Some songs express a lot of pain. Are we meant to sing and dance the pain as well?

This question brings me to the anthem “How Can I Keep from Singing?” I thought it was a Quaker anthem—I think Pete Seeger shared that misinformation when he learned the song from Doris Plenn, who had learned it from her Quaker grandmother. Even our hymnal got it wrong. A search through the Internet revealed it to be written first by a Baptist minister in 1868. But Seeger adopted the almost forgotten song, and shared his revised version with a new generation in the 1950's.

My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation.  
I hear the real, though far-off hymn, that hails a new creation.

Again, a paradox. Life is a song, but the source of that song is not the day-to-day ups and down, the exultations and lamentations. The song is somehow deeper than the tumult and the strife of this

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<sup>2</sup> This is from Dillard's essay “Paganism” from *Holy the Firm*.

particular day or time. Indeed, the singer says, “What though the tempest round me roars, I hear the truth, it liveth... No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging. Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

Without some sort of anchor, some sort of inner balance, we can be tossed about by every new political or social upheaval. We might feel glad when some progress seems to be achieved and disheartened when set-backs are occurring. But the song talks about a deeper anchor that can hold steady through all of that, through prison cells, or dungeons, or even tyrants that cause us to tremble.

That is important for us right now. We know that the times ahead may be difficult—and for some much more than others. There may be troubles that we cannot anticipate. Now more than ever, we must know to what rock we are clinging. We must be clear about what helps us to keep our balance in the ups and downs. What convictions hold us steady in the face of storms and tempests?

I am thinking today, as I do every day, about the water protectors at Standing Rock. Today is another International Interfaith Day of Prayer for the water protectors. People at the camps are grounded in prayer and in the conviction that Water is Life. By standing up for that conviction, by standing up for the future generations, they have found an inner balance.

It is not dependent on whether or not they are fired upon with rubber bullets by the police, or with water cannons in sub-freezing weather. It is not dependent on the weather, or on the bright lights and loud sounds that continually harass the camps night and day. It is not dependent on whether they win or lose, though they have a firm goal to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline from crossing the Missouri River. It is not dependent on the response they receive from the mainstream society. Their equanimity is based on the day-to-day lived practice of following their spiritual convictions.

Journalist Sarah Kendzior wrote an article shortly after the election. In it, she looks ahead to the prospect of an authoritarian kleptocracy in the United States. She has been a student of authoritarian states for the last decade, and believes we cannot exaggerate the severity of the coming threat. It won't matter whom you voted for, she says, whether you are red or blue. The president-elect's stated goals and the goals of his chief strategist are to bring the whole system crashing down.

In the face of what is coming, she has a request. She says:

I want you to write about who you are, what you have experienced, and what you have endured.

Write down what you value; what standards you hold for yourself and for others. Write about your dreams for the future and your hopes for your children. Write about the struggle of your ancestors and how the hardship they overcame shaped the person you are today.

Write your biography, write down your memories. Because if you do not do it now, you may forget.

Write a list of things you would never do. Because it is possible that in the next year, you will do them.

Write a list of things you would never believe. Because it is possible that in the next year, you will either believe them or be forced to say you believe them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://thecorrespondent.com/5696/were-heading-into-dark-times-this-is-how-to-be-your-own-light-in-the-age-of-trump/1611114266432-e23ea1a6> November 18, 2016.

I was moved by this article. It brings us right back to the song. What rock will you hold onto, through tumult and strife? What truth will you keep hearing, no matter the outer tempest? How will you find and keep your inner balance?

I don't have the answer for *you*. For the Pete Seeger version of the anthem, the rock was love. Maybe that is your rock too. Some folks say, Love always wins in the end. So if love isn't winning, it is not the end. Others say, Whether it wins or loses, I must answer the call of love. If love is your rock, write about what that means to you. So you can look at it in a year, and remember the song.

Kendzior says: "...most of all, never lose sight of who you are and what you value. If you find yourself doing something that feels questionable or wrong a few months or years from now, find that essay you wrote on who you are and read it. Ask if that version of yourself would have done the same thing. And if the answer is no? Don't do it."

Remember the final line of the Seeger song—"When friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing?" Life is a song, but we have to know what song we mean to be singing.

Ann Tyndall writes: I am reminded that what will get us through times of rapid change, hard times, times of uncertainty, dangerous times will be our ability to be blessed and fed by abiding things:

the manifold blessings of the sun rising in the morning

the song of a bird heard as if for the first time

the stillness of the night

the smile of a baby offered to you as if she had been waiting for you

the faithfulness of lovers and friends;

the hand outstretched in reconciliation, trembling, touching through the barriers of estrangement

healing again and again

the persistence of Love

the persistence of Love

the persistence of Love

She prays:

In this [time]

May you know more blessings than curses.

May your hand reach out more than clench.

May you be claimed more by love than indifference,  
more by hope than by fear or cynicism.

May the creative power rise up in you, grounding you  
and guiding you to the border of what is yet possible  
for you, those close to you and the world. Amen.

*Meditation:* The Dine people have a word, "Hozho," which has been roughly translated into English as "Beauty." But it includes much more that is quite impossible to translate, the concept of balance and the nature of the universe, time and space, creation, growth, motion. Hozho is an expression for that deep inner balance that can stay with us through ups and downs, through birth and death, through happiness and suffering. I want to close our reflections with the closing prayer from the "Dine Way Blessing Ceremony," as translated into English at the Anasazi Museum at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

*Hózhóogo naasháa doo*

In beauty I walk  
With beauty before me I walk  
With beauty behind me I walk  
With beauty above me I walk  
With beauty around me I walk  
It has become beauty again

Today I will walk out, today everything unnecessary will leave me,  
I will be as I was before, I will have a cool breeze over my body.  
I will have a light body, I will be happy forever,  
nothing will hinder me.  
I walk with beauty before me.  
I walk with beauty behind me.  
I walk with beauty below me.  
I walk with beauty above me.  
I walk with beauty around me.  
My words will be beautiful.

In beauty all day long may I walk.  
Through the returning seasons, may I walk.  
On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.  
With dew about my feet, may I walk.

With beauty before me may I walk.  
With beauty behind me may I walk.  
With beauty below me may I walk.  
With beauty above me may I walk.  
With beauty all around me may I walk.

In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk.  
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.  
My words will be beautiful.

*Closing Words*

May your life be as a song  
resounding with the dawn to sing awake the light  
and softly serenade the stars  
ever dancing circles in the night.<sup>4</sup>

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,  
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

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4 From Singing the Journey #1059, words by Jim Scott.