

The Hidden Meanings of the Rain

July 18th, 2021

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Good morning. A good friend of mine once asked me an interesting question. It set my mind to thinking something new. He asked, “What is the first drop of rain dreaming of?” I haven’t known how to answer him. What I do know is that Rain always begins with a series of complicated structures, complex harmonies and quiet rhythms. Let’s take a listen...

0:44:39 of <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGWBuFZbRtA>

This is Rain by a wonderful artist that I once knew named Geri Allen, one of the strongest and most creative voices on the piano. Through her, I learn what I can about the hidden meanings of the rain.

At almost 6:00 on Friday evening, Mary Blanton and I became concerned about the weather forecast. It predicted rain for Sunday morning. So, we rearranged our schedules. This is what often happens when it rains. We changed things up...which, of course, presented its challenges. This time, it was fun. We were lucky...which is not always the case, unfortunately. So, we’ve done our best. We put this service together—a service of music and poetry—to try to find the hidden meanings of the rain. We tried to make use of a song I wrote, an old recording that I made before Christmas, when rain was hardly possible in Vermont. It all had to be pretty last-minute but we’ve done our best. Let’s see how things turned out.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister here at North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, Vermont. Today is Sunday, July 18th and the title of this morning's reflection is The Hidden Meanings of the Rain. This is a rainy day service, if you will. Dan Fraser was scheduled to be with us this morning but due to the probability of rain, a probability that has informed our topic this morning, the Worship Committee has chosen to move Dan to next week so he can address you face-to-face in the outback of North Chapel, if you will...now that we've had some experience with doing an outside service. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

From the bedroom window of my apartment in Holyoke, I could look out. There was a clearing. Across the street, there was a park and a playing field...in pretty good shaping. The drummers would gather on weekends in the summer and play music and people would dance around on the infield, dancing up the best of their good hearts. Baseball had nothing to do with their rejoicing, even though that what playing field was for...why it was made. Sometimes the purpose of a thing ends up having little to do with the joy that it brings into our lives.

Rainy days are like that. They repurpose me. Rainy days cancel the plans I make in life. Rainy days make some extra reading possible. Rainy days rearrange all my good intentions...to mow the lawn, to weed the garden, to play shortstop in the baseball game. Everything changes when it rains, it seems to me. It seems to be the time when we switch things up and swop things out and postpone things away from inclement weather.

Almost everything changes when it rains...not dancing, though. If you're of the mind to do so—if you're up for it and have the tenacity—it's possible to dance right through the rain. It's possible to dance because of it.

From my bedroom window, I could look out across the clearing to where the drummers would gather in the summer...to where the people would dance...calling down the gentle rain from heaven, calling us the spirits from the earth....and I really need that spirit sometimes.

I don't know why this is—and I don't think I like what it says about me—but the sound of buzzing flies drives me insane. It's not an elegant thing about me. I am not proud of myself here. I would like to think that I have the patience, the openness of spirit, the gentleness of heart not to want to swat them when they buzz around me. Diving at my forehead. Buzzing in my ears. Buzzing flies and the whine of mosquitoes. It does me in. I become an absolute catastrophe, utterly obsessed. It isn't pretty. You don't to see me when I get like this. Like I said, I don't think I like what it says about me but its true. I can't stand that sound. It triggers me. I don't know. Maybe it's a past-life thing. Maybe, it's epigenetic...like my birth grandmother, the mother my mother did not know, was attacked by a team of giant, buzzing flies when she was pregnant, when my own mother was inside the womb. All of the eggs that woman ever has are there with her at birth. Women, during the later stages of pregnancy, carry within them the seeds of their own grandchildren. It's trippy. So, when we talk about having generational consciousness, maybe part of it is becoming aware of this...becoming aware that the woman who is my mother was carried as a seed of unlimited potential in the belly of her grandmother and that my mother's daughter, my sister, if she, too, had had a daughter, the same would have been true for that child!

I first became interested in this kind of thing on a rainy day, a year or two ago. There were a series of talks at Stanford that I found online. I was dizzy and dismayed at first. The high academic language was bewildering to me but slowly, over time, I adjusted. Same thing happened when I started to study

Hamlet. The language was a real barrier. New King Claudius spoke in such a twisted way...and he seemed mean and callous and unfeeling—right?—after his brother died mysteriously in the orchard that night. Queen Gertrude was inconsolable but Claudius was there for her. Constantly. Unfailingly. He stood by her. He was steadfast until she recovered...and then, he married her...which just about blew Prince Hamlet's young mind. His father, who he absolutely revered, was suddenly gone and his uncle, Claudius, was marrying his mother...too soon, too soon...and Prince Hamlet was inconsolable. Claudius tried to rouse him, tried to pull him out of his despair...with such complex and complicated language...over-long. Claudius said,

Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, To give these mourning duties to your father: But, you must know, your father lost a father; That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound In filial obligation for some term To do obsequious sorrow: but to persevere In obstinate condolment is a course Of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief; It shows a will most incorrect to heaven, A heart unfortified, a mind impatient, An understanding simple and unschool'd: For what we know must be and is as common As any the most vulgar thing to sense, Why should we in our peevish opposition Take it to heart? Fie! 'tis a fault to heaven,

Really, who would be consoled upon hearing this? Consoled, no. Confounded maybe. I mean, you can kind of get it at first, when Claudius says “you must know, your father lost a father and that that father lost, lost his” but he losses me after that.

That's how I felt when I started listening to the Stanford lectures on DNA structures and the wonders of epigenetics. But, you know, if you listen to Hamlet repeatedly, it ceases to be impenetrable. It softens. It opens. It blossoms like a flower but you have to really engage with it. You have to work it until it sings.

Now, given the option of running outside, of safely crossing the street at the corner...given the option of running across the clearing and into the park and onto the playing field to where the drummers were drumming and to where the people were dancing, calling down the down the rain and calling up the spirit from places far beyond us...given the choice of playing in a field of sunshine and fighting it out with Shakespeare...forgive me and I'm sorry but Shakespeare loses...every time...until you get...until you realize that reading Shakespeare and running in the sunshine is the very same thing. We sing,

To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep; No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep; To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause...

This is dancing! This raining running out into a field of sunshine...and more profoundly, it's running out and into the rain. It's wading into the water figuratively and literally.

As Bernice Johnson Reagon reminds us, "When there is a promise of a storm and you want change in your life, walk on out into it. If you get to the other side, you will be different. But if you want change in your life and you are avoiding the trouble, you can forget it." When she said these words, Bernice Johnson Reagon was the director of singing group called Sweet Honey in the Rock. She used these words to introduce the well-known spiritual, Wade in the Water.

Wade in the water, children
Wade in the water
God's gonna trouble the waters

This song is as black as night...and it is deeply American...born of us, generationally. This song is our inheritance. Sweet Honey sang,

See those people dressed in white
They look like the children of the Israelites
See those people dressed in black
They come a long way and they ain't turning back
See those people dressed in blue
Look like my people comin' thru
See those people dressed in red
Must be the children that Moses led

They were dressed in white and they were dressed in black. They were dressed in blue and in red. Red and white and black and blue. This song is deeply American and in our time, in these good days, it is so important to sing it beautifully. In the last verse, Sweet Honey sang,

Some say Peter and some say Paul
But there ain't but the one God made us all.
And God's gonna trouble the water.

The waters come after rain has fallen. After the rain has rearranged our lives.

We sing about the rain a lot. Rain is spiritual. It comes up in sacred writings all of the time. In Leviticus, chapter 26:verse 4, it is written,

then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit.

In Deuteronomy, chapter 32:verse 2, it is written

Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.

In Proverbs, chapter 16:verse 15, it is written,

When a king's face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.

And Mahalia Jackson sang it. She sang,

Didn't it rain, children
Didn't it rain, oh, my Lord
Didn't it rain?

It rained 40 days, 40 nights without stopping
Noah was glad when the rain stopped dropping
Knock at the window, a knock at the door
Crying brother Noah can't you take on more
Noah cried, "No, you're full of sin
God's got the key and you can't get in

Just listen how it's rainin'
Will you listen?

And Take 6 sings it. They sing,

Way back in the Bible days
Noah told the people that it's gonna rain
When he told them they paid him no mind
And when the rains came they were left behind

It's gonna rain...

After the rain began to pour
They knocked on the windows
And they knocked on the doors
The people didn't know exactly what to do
You don't want this to happen to you

It's gonna rain...
And you better get ready and bear this in mind
God showed Noah showed him the rainbow sign
Said it won't be water but fire next time

Commonly...regularly, the rain is the marker of transformation. It is the sign and signal of powerful change. Walk into the rain. Wade into its waters. Sweet Honey would always say, "When there is a promise of a storm and you want change in your life,

walk on out into it. If you get to the other side, you will be different. But if you want change in your life and you are avoiding the trouble, you can forget it.” [] At the end of It’s Gonna Rain, Take 6 sings,

Noah said I'm sorry my friend
But God's got the key and you can't get in
(So sorry)
If something don't happen to the very hearts of men
Don't you know that the same, same thing is gonna happen again

This makes me think a little differently about meaning of rainy days. It makes me think differently about the rain.

A good friend of mine once asked me, “What is the first drop of rain dreaming of?” I like questions like this one, questions that lead the imagination to new and different places...where new hopes and new possibilities are possible. It’s so encouraging to explore such places when the old ways aren’t working. I like this question. I love this question, actually...because the answer seems obvious. And, if I’m not mistaken, it’s always true. No matter the storm, the first drop of rain is always dreaming about music. And if I’m not mistaken, Geri Allen would agree. She composed a piece of music and she called this music, ‘Rain.’ It’s wordless, of course. Just like the real thing...and it falls to earth as it pleases. Rinsing us. Washing us clean. Refreshing us. The first drop of rain is singing a dream—complex and simple, tense and tender...beautiful. If we take a deep breath and slow ourselves down long enough to truly listen, we will hear the singing of the rain. Flowers are the singing of the rain. Life and beauty are its hidden meanings.

As we slowly move past the changes that COVID-19 imposed on us and in the midst of legislative efforts to walk back—regressively—the baseline rights of American democracy, may we take moment enough to measure and to value and to treasure the meaning and new purpose of the

rain—the storming rain that changes us, its thunders that transform and its life-sustaining waters—God-troubled and heaven-blessed—that keep us all alive and gently growing.

May it e'er be so. Blessed be and amen.