

Exiting the Coma Train

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 18 November 2007
Rev. Chip Roush

FIRST READING Drew Dellinger is a spoken word poet, teacher, and activist. He is the founder of Poets for Global Justice. This is his poem, "hieroglyphic stairway":

it's 3:23 in the morning
and I'm awake
because my great great grandchildren
won't let me sleep
my great great grandchildren
ask me in dreams what did you do while the planet was plundered?
what did you do when the earth was unraveling?

surely you did something
when the seasons started failing?

as the mammals, reptiles, birds were all dying?
did you fill the streets with protest
when democracy was stolen?

what did you do
once
you
knew?

I'm riding home on the Colma train
I've got the voice of the milky way in my dreams

I have teams of scientists
feeding me data daily
and pleading I immediately
turn it into poetry

I want just this consciousness reached
by people in range of secret frequencies
contained in my speech

I am the desirous earth
equidistant to the underworld
and the flesh of the stars
I am everything already lost

the moment the universe turns transparent
and all the light shoots through the cosmos

I use words to instigate silence

I'm a hieroglyphic stairway
in a buried Mayan city
suddenly exposed by a hurricane

a satellite circling earth
finding dinosaur bones
in the Gobi desert
I am telescopes that see back in time

I am the precession of the equinoxes,
the magnetism of the spiraling sea

I'm riding home on the Colma
train with the voice of the milky way in my dreams

I am myths where violets blossom from blood
like dying and rising gods

I'm the boundary of time
soul encountering soul
and tongues of fire

it's 3:23 in the morning
and I can't sleep
because my great great grandchildren
ask me in dreams
what did you do while the earth was unraveling?

I want just this consciousness reached
by people in range of secret frequencies
contained in my speech

SECOND READING Jane Martin is the pseudonym for an unknown playwright, who evidently lives in Kentucky. She has won many awards; one of her plays was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. This is adapted from her first produced work, "Talking With...", a series of monologues which premiered in 1981:

Shoot—Rodeo's just goin' to hell in a handbasket. Rodeo used to be somethin'. I loved it. I did. Once Daddy an' a bunch of 'em was foolin' around with some old bronc over to our place and this ol' red nose named Cinch got bucked off and my Daddy hooted and said he had him a nine-year-old daughter, namely me, wouldn't have no trouble cowboyin' that horse. Well, he put me on up there, stuck that ridin' rein in my hand, gimme a kiss and said, "Now there's only one thing t' remember Honey Love, if ya fall off you jest don't come home." Well I stayed up. You gotta stay on a bronc eight seconds. Otherwise the ride don't count. So from that day on my daddy called me Big Eight. Heck! That's all the name I got anymore...Big Eight.

Used to be fer cowboys, the rodeo did. Do it in some open field, folks would pull their cars and pick-ups round it, sit on the hoods, some ranch hand'd bulldog him some rank steer and everybody'd wave their hats and call him by name. Ride us some buckin' stock, rope a few calves, git throwed off a bull and then we'd jest git us to a bar and tell each other lies about how good we were...

Used to be people came to a rodeo had a horse of their own back home. Farm people, ranch people—lord, they *knew* what they were lookin' at. Knew a good ride from a ride, knew hard from easy. You broke some bones er spent the day eatin' dirt, at least you got appreciated.

Now they bought the rodeo. Them. Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola. Marlboro darn cigarettes. You know the ones I mean. Them. Hire some New York actor t' sit on some ol' stuffed horse in front of a sagebrush photo 'n smoke that junk. Hell, tobacco wasn't made to smoke, honey, it was made to chew. Lord wanted ya filled up with smoke he would've set ya on fire. It riles me.

There's some guy in a banker's suit runs the rodeo now. Got him a pinkie ring and a digital watch, honey. Told us we oughta have a watchmacallit, choriographus or somethin', some ol' loudmouth used to be with the Ice darn Capades. Wants us to ride around dressed up like Mickey Mouse, Pluto, crap like that. Told me I had to haul my butt through the barrel race done up like Minnie darn Mouse in a tu-tu. Huh uh, honey! Them people is so screwed up they probably eat what they run over in the road.

Listen, they got the clowns wearin' Astronaut suits! I ain't lyin'. You know what a rodeo clown does! You go down, fall off whatever—the clown runs in front of the bull so's ya don't git stomped. Pin-stripes, he got 'em in space suits tellin' jokes on a microphone. First horse see 'em, done up like the Star Wars went crazy. Best buckin' horse on the circuit, name of Piss'N'Vinegar, took one look at them clowns, had him a heart attack and died. Cowboy was ridin' him got hisself squashed. Twelve hundred pounds of coronary arrest jes fell right through 'em. Blam! Vio con dios. Crowd thought that was funnier than the astronauts. I swear it won't be long before they're strappin' ice-skates on the ponies. Big crowds now. Ain't hardly no ranch people, no farm people, nobody I know. Buncha disco babies and dee-voce lawyers—designer

jeans and day-glo Stetsons. Hell, the whole bunch of 'em wears French perfume. Oh, it smells like money now! Got it on the cable T and V—hey, you know what, when ya rodeo yer just bound to kick yerself up some dust—well now, seems like that fogs up the ol' TV camera, so they told us a while back that from now on we was gonna ride on some new stuff called Astro-dirt. Dust free. Artificial darn dirt, honey. Lord have mercy.

Banker Suit called me in the other day said "Lurlene.." "Hold it," I said, "Who's this Lurlene? Round here they call me Big Eight." "Well, Big Eight," he said, "My name's Wallace." "Well that's a real surprise t' me," I said, "'Cause aroun' here everybody jes calls you Dumb Butt." My, he laughed real big, slapped his big ol' desk an' then he said I wasn't suitable for the rodeo any more. Said they was lookin' fer another type, somethin' a little more in the showgirl line, like the Dallas Cowgirls maybe. Said the ridin' and ropin' wasn't the thing no more. Talked on about floats, costumes, dancin' choreog-raphy. I wanted t' punch him. Said he'd give me a lifetime pass though. Said I could come to his rodeo any time I wanted.

Rodeo used to be people ridin' horses for the pleasure of people who rode horses—made you feel good about what you could do. Rodeo wasn't worth no money to nobody. Money didn't have nothing to do with it! ...

There's a bunch of poachers in this country sneak around until they see ya havin' fun and then they buy the fun and start sellin' it. See, they figure if ya love it, they can sell it. Well you look out, honey! They want to make them a dollar out of what you love. Dress *you* up like Minnie Mouse. Sell your rodeo. Turn yer pleasure into Ice darn Capades. You hear what I'm sayin'? You're jus' merchandise to them, sweetie. You're jus' merchandise to them.

HOMILY ONE

"the coma train" How many of you enjoy movies like "It's A Wonderful Life" or "Miracle on 34th Street"? How many have watched "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas" at least a couple times? How many of you have seen the movie "the Matrix"? Unlike those traditional Christmas movies, the Matrix shows a dystopian future where human beings are kept in a coma-like state; they are fed nutrients through tubes and fed experiences through wires implanted directly into their brains. The energy produced by their bodies is harvested and used by the machines who are running the whole project. In the movie, each person thinks that she or he is living a normal life, but they never really move outside of their pod, and all their energy feeds the machines who keep them clueless and enslaved.

On days when I am feeling particularly cynical, I can imagine that our United States Christmas industry is becoming like the matrix. I imagine that those of us who celebrate Christmas run around and bake cookies and wrap presents, make sure to have a tip for the mailman, get something in the right price range for the office gift exchange, redecorate the whole house (and possibly the yard and the roof), and stay up impossibly late writing short letters to people we love and a few we're not even sure we remember, but they write to us every year, and we wish we could write longer, more meaningful letters to our loved ones, but our hand is cramping up already, and we have seven more letters before we get to bed—and we attend four parties in a week and a half and three holiday dinners in 48 hours and we collapse afterward, utterly drained by our efforts.

In my cynical fantasy, human beings work harder and harder, to keep up the illusion of meaningful holiday connections while their energy and their money is siphoned off by the retailers and the tax collectors and the US Postal Service.

So it is little wonder that I really resonated with Drew Dellinger's poem that we heard as our first reading this morning—especially the line about "riding the coma train." In my head, I imagined a scene like the Matrix, with a trainful of passengers, dressed in their holiday finest, who think they are traveling somewhere but they are really just running in circles, and paying another fare every time the train stops.

Imagine my chagrin when I discovered that Mr. Dellinger was actually talking about riding the train in Colma, California, a little south of San Francisco.

However, even though I misunderstood his word, I think my concerns about Consumerism tainting not only the holidays, but our culture in general, are valid. And the question posed by the poet's great-great grandchildren, "what did you do while the planet was plundered?" is still an important question.

I should point out that Consumerism is **not** the same thing as Capitalism. I do support the right of individuals to profit from their own labor and ideas. That's capitalism. Consumerism is the assertion that personal happiness comes from buying things. Consumerism is the substitution and pursuit of popular products and brand names instead of healthy human relationships. We are most familiar with Consumerism in its contemporary, western form, but it occurs all over the world, in places like Tokyo and Dubai, and it has been around since Babylon and Egypt where the trendy cities. And the "bigger, better, faster, more" mentality of Consumerism is not only corrosive to healthy human development, it is bad for our environment, depleting natural resources and polluting the biosphere.

So as I watch one more commercial that claims you can create the experience of a cheerful, loving, fully-functional family simply by buying the correct product or shopping at the correct store, I get more and more frustrated.

You can buy candles that smell like pumpkin pies baking; you can buy DVDs that look and sound like logs on a fire. Like Ms. Martin wrote in our second reading, "they figure if **you** love it, they can sell it."

What the Consumerists do not understand, is that we don't just love the smell of pumpkin pie—we love eating it with our families and friends. Watching a fire roar on the television is nice, but it is not as nice as sitting around a fire, telling stories or singing songs or otherwise interacting with people whom we care for.

In the final analysis, we don't measure our lives by price tags and designer labels. We measure them with lessons we've learned, and the times we cried, and times we laughed and times we made sacrifices for others. We measure with love.

HOMILY TWO

"exit!" How many of you have ever participated in a boycott? How many have participated in a consumer fast on Buy Nothing Day? How many of you have heard of Buy Nothing Day?

This year is the 15th annual Buy Nothing Day, where people in as many as 65 countries will abstain from spending—instead, throwing parties and protests, hosting credit card cut-ups and shopaholic seminars, and engaging in street theater such as zombie marches through malls. The organizers explain that carbon offsets, fluorescent bulbs and hybrid cars are good in themselves, but they don't change the underlying fact that we simply consume more than is sustainable. They intend that Buy Nothing Day is not merely a 24-hour experiment, but the beginning of a real life change, for its participants.

So when Drew Dellinger's grandkids wake him up at night, he might say, "I led a conga line of empty shopping carts in a dance through Wal-Mart on Buy Nothing Day."

That may sound a little flip, a little...*insufficient* to address the real concerns of a stressed planetary system, but I'm being sincere.

We don't necessarily need big, grand gestures. We cannot solve global climate change by ourselves. All we can do is do what we can do, and try to do it with grace and good humor. We're conditioned, by action movie heroes and grandstanding politicians to think that heroes must be bigger than life. But that is just another form of consumerism. Real heroes go about their lives, one day at a time, doing what they can to make their particular part of the world better.

I think that many of us are in a collective depression about the state of our world. The human condition—that we are the only animals with an awareness of our own impending death—has always been difficult. Wars and religions have been created to deal with that fact. And our condition is now worse. We now know that we are all interdependent. We are aware not only of our own eventual demise, we are also aware of the danger to our whole species. Every day, newspapers and television sets and radio and the internet deliver more bad news into our heads and hearts. It is tempting to shut down, to allow ourselves to sink into a coma, and try and escape all that painful knowledge.

I humbly submit that it is better to wake up, to engage—to forge and foster and deepen relationships with other human beings. Yes, the news is usually bad, but most of the good stuff isn't reported. Details of how billions of ordinary humans went about their lives, trying to cope and be as decent as possible to each other, doesn't sell ad space.

I'm not saying that we either should or should not follow the news. I'm just suggesting that we take it with a grain of salt—and that we go out and engage with other people. I hope that we get *off* the coma train, and we keep our eyes and ears open, and take advantage of any opportunities we're given, to do something good for ourselves, for our families and friends, and for the rest of our human cousins.

Christmas, and the other holidays of light, are all about that generosity and connection. They're about not giving in to the dark and cold, but re-emerging into light and warmth and fellowship. And that human impulse, that human need for the return of the light, is being manipulated by marketing departments. If you love it, they think they can sell it.

And they *will* sell it. We just don't have to buy it. We can still find deep meaning, and real joy in the holidays, even without playing the game of Consumerism.

We can consciously give fewer gifts to each other—we could even give *no* material goods, but rather the gift of time to our loved ones. There is a line on the insert in today's order of worship that says, "give time instead." That website has a bunch of good ideas for how to spend meaningful and fun time together.

We could give only recycled gifts, only green or fair-trade gifts, we could create new traditions in our family holidays.

This brightly-wrapped gift on the chancel might seem incongruous, with all this talk of reduced buying, but it is for a child at the Woman's Resource Center. It is good to create new traditions with people with whom we are already in relationship; it is good to give these children, and these women, new toys and new clothes and new hope.

In fact, that can be the best gift of all: we can give gifts to other people, in the name of our loved ones. There are several organizations listed on the insert that will give animals or eyesight or even birth certificates to people who need such things. I will close with a story about such a gift, which was originally told by Nancy Gavin.

"It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so.

It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas – oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it – overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma – the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else.

Knowing that he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended. Shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes.

As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat.

Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly. "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them."

Mike loved kids -- all kids -- and he knew them, having coached youth league football, baseball, and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church.

On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year, and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition – one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground, and on and on.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, their toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure.

The story doesn't end there.

You see, we lost Mike last year to dreaded cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more.

Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown, and someday will expand even further, with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation, watching as their parents take down the envelope.

Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us. May we all remember the true reason for the season, this year and always."

So may we be.