

## **“Don’t Hit Snooze”**

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

### **Reading**

the light that came to lucille clifton by Lucille Clifton<sup>1</sup>

...but the light insists on itself in the world;  
a voice from the nondead past started talking,  
she closed her ears and it spelled out in her hand  
"you might as well answer the door, my child,  
the truth is furiously knocking."

### **Sermon**

In the early morning hours, I sometimes find myself in a half-asleep, half-awake hazy kind of consciousness. The alarm goes off, and I hit snooze once, twice, a third time. I often awaken before the first light of day has appeared or just as dawn is breaking. Slowly I emerge from my sleepiness into awareness of the present hour and the present day.

Awakening can be a slow process at times. Or, it can be a sudden jolt as we are startled awake and forced into consciousness.

How was it that you awakened this morning? Or, perhaps, you are still finding your way to full wakefulness even now.

The awakening of our hearts and minds is another process altogether in which we may come to new knowledge of the present situation. We gain new insight into why things are the way they are. We let go of illusions that may have kept us from the truth - a truer way to be our authentic selves and a truer way to live in relationship with one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucille Clifton, "the light that came to lucille clifton," from *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton: 1965-2020*, ed. Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser

Many religious traditions and movements began with an awakening.

The Buddha went through a profound experience of awakening as he ventured forth from the royal palace as a then young prince and encountered for the first time the realities of sickness, aging, and death, and the suffering of others. When he came upon a wandering ascetic wearing robes and carrying a single bowl, he knew he needed to renounce his wealth and station and devote his life to a spiritual path.

The Prophet Muhammed was working as a merchant in Mecca when, at the age of 40, he began to receive revelations from Allah that pointed him to the belief in the oneness of the Divine. These revelations would become the basis of the Qur'an and the foundation of Islam.

Early founders of Unitarianism and Universalism also went through spiritual awakenings that led them to new religious and social truths. The prominent early Unitarian, Theodore Parker, awakened to a belief in the immortality of the soul and benevolence of God in the face of a series of tragic losses, including his parents and seven of nine siblings to tuberculosis. Parker would go on to become an active part of the abolition movement. Early Universalist Lydia Ann Jenkins, was a social reformer and suffragist from central New York state, who carried an awakened mind and spirit into the pulpit at a time when women were not typically recognized as preachers or religious leaders.

“The light insists on itself in the world,” writes poet Lucille Clifton. This light comes to awaken us and our lives may change.

The pandemic has created a time of awakening, an extended time to be sure, in which people have started to more fully recognize and name some truths.

We have awakened to the truth of the ruptures already present in society. Of course, many people have known for a long time that the pursuit of the so-called American dream is merely a dream-state. The consistent gearing of the system towards the profit and benefit of the few has made this dream far from attainable for most. The crisis created by the pandemic made it easier for many of us to let go of this and other illusions.

The illusion that social safety nets actually catch those who face the free fall of poverty or lack of access to health care.

The illusion that hourly wage workers like grocery store clerks, bus drivers, and child care providers are anything less than essential.

The illusion that we are separate and that our individual choices have no impact on the common good.

These illusions have been harmful, and in our waking up, we have the possibility of embracing truths that can lead us towards more compassionate, caring, and just ways of supporting one another.

The dramatic changes of the past two years have also led to shifts in our personal lives. Some of us have let go of relationships or started new relationships as we have more fully recognized our needs and desires. Some of us have made changes in our habits as we've awakened to the true needs of our bodies and spirits in a time of uncertainty and upheaval.

Even before the pandemic, there may have been times in your life when you experienced an awakening - whether it came on gradually over time or suddenly as if an alarm had gone off and jolted you from your slumber.

I invite you to reflect for a moment on when and how you have experienced an awakening. Was the truth furiously knocking on your door, or did the light emerge in a more gentle way? How did this awakening change you or your life?

In this time of uncertainty, the awakening of our hearts and minds can feel like that hazy, in-between wakefulness and sleep, time. It can be disorienting, yet also, potentially generative.

The Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön writes: “Awakening is not a process of building ourselves up but a process of letting go. It’s a process of relaxing in the middle—the paradoxical, ambiguous middle, full of potential, full of new ways of thinking and seeing—with absolutely no...guarantee of what will happen next.”<sup>2</sup>

Right now, there is no guarantee of what will happen next. This may be frightening. It can also be liberating. The question for us is how to live awakened to the truths before us, willing to let go of past illusions, and ready to embrace the potential of this ambiguous middle.

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<sup>2</sup> Pema Chödrön, *Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*, p. 3

To be certain, there are so many people right now who are living courageously awakened in this place of ambiguity and uncertain. Some of you may have heard of Ady Barkan. Barkan was diagnosed with ALS in 2016 shortly after the birth of his son. Living with this disease through a time when cuts have been proposed to Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, and other programs that his survival would depend on, has motivated Barkan to advocate for Medicare for All and other health care reforms.

There are truths that are furiously knocking on the door. The truth of our interdependence. The truth that all lives are holy and sacred and worthy of care. The truth that we must find a way to meet on common ground if we are to survive and thrive.

The public intellectual, Cornel West, recently spoke about the difference between being “woke” and being fortified. Being temporarily awake to racial and social injustice is one thing, West says, but what we need are people who are fortified for the long-haul work of making a more just society.

Those awakenings we experience about our own lives and the more authentic path that calls to us may also need fortification. How easy it can be for those truths to slip back into the place of slumber.

In this age of overwhelm, it takes courage to be awake to it all, and we need to know that we are not alone. To stay awake and fortified, we need others.

In spiritual and religious community, we support one another in the process of awakening. We encourage each other to awaken to the truth of our goodness and our inter-connection. We encourage each other to seek truth and meaning and to let go of false illusions even when it’s hard. We point one another towards new possibilities and inspire one another to engage with our whole hearts in seeking justice and living with compassion and to rest when needed.

Over the last few years, I have been inspired to awaken with more urgency to the moral overhaul needed in our country through the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. Led by the Rev. Dr. William Barber and the Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, the campaign builds upon the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and other leaders of his era who named economic injustice as intertwined with racism and militarism and called for a revolution of values. Today, the Poor People’s Campaign continues to call for a realignment of our principles and policies to

improve wages and protect workers' rights, to expand health care accessibility, to protect voting rights, and to save sacred lands.

A moral awakening moves through that movement and in every place and with any people who are willing to let go of pretense and illusion and to live fully awake.

The truth is furiously knocking. Will we pull the covers back, arise from our slumber, and open the door?

Whether we do this matters for all those who the pandemic has revealed are not safe or immune from society's inequities and inequalities or from the ruthless pursuit of power, and it turns out this is most of us. Indeed, we all benefit when a collective awakening is sustained.

Awakening leads to change. We awaken each day promised the possibility of letting go, promised the possibility of a new way of thinking or seeing, not knowing exactly what will happen next, yet basked in the light that insights on entering the world.

In response to the events of September 11, 2001, the Zen Buddhist priest Rev. angel Kyodo Williams a piece called the Warrior-Spirit Prayer of Awakening. I'll close with an adapted selection of her words.

*May all beings be granted with the strength, determination and wisdom to extinguish anger and reject violence as a way.*

*May all suffering cease and may [I] we seek, find, and fully realize the love and compassion that already lives within [me] us and allow them to inspire and permeate [my] our every action.*

*May [I] we exercise the precious gift of choice and the power to change that which makes [me] us uniquely human and is the only true path to liberation.*

So may it be.