



**Auckland Unitarian Church**  
*Love beyond belief*

## **That's how the light gets in**

Rachel Mackintosh © 15th January 2023

If you think about the vastness of space, and how enormous our galaxy is, and how big our planet is, and how small we are, I'm not really eating all that much cheese.

Thanks to Kay for finding and sharing that.

In this past week, we have experienced some heavy things. Shirin Caldwell has had a stroke and is recovering with the support of her son, the public health system, and the love of this congregation and her other friends. Clay has been in hospital again with persistent low haemoglobin levels. Betsy Marshall has been in ED with complications from COVID. Betsy is a person who is constantly caring for others. For her, the weight of the situation may be more than physical debilitation; it may also be grief at having to temporarily suspend her role as caregiver to the several friends that she has always been present for.

We have also had joyous and momentous news from our new member Jandyra, who in adulthood has found family she didn't know until now, most of whom she didn't know existed. Even joyous events can carry a weight, as we readjust our sense of who we are and our place in the world.

My own situation has some heaviness and darkness in it. The inversion of the caring relationship with my mother, who has increasing dementia, takes some major adjustment, both for me and for her. She has been looking after herself for 70 years, and cannot do so any longer. Sometimes she understands this, and at other times, not at all. Her keen intelligence is still there, but its application is increasingly random.

The responsibility of my job can also weigh heavily. I have a senior role in a private sector union whose task is to aggregate the diverse interests of the working class across multiple industries, and to organise to advance those interests. While we make quite impressive progress against long odds, often the task seems impossible. Look at how long the powerful have been powerful. Look at the resources they employ to keep it so. Impossible?

Also, my partner has been ill. He nearly died last year.

One of the things we do as Unitarians is to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We sometimes say that we are "living the questions." We are living the impossibilities of our various lives. It has a weight. It can be dark. I have just mentioned a few of us. We all have experiences that weigh heavily, or feel dark, at least some of the time.

We live in this exquisite tension — it is the task of humanity, to live through this.

Last week Ted quoted Stephen Fry, whose view is that language is what makes us human. At the time I thought, "What about music? Oh, but birds also have music."

And then I thought, “Does that matter? Do we have to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the universe?”

Maybe the question of what makes us human is irrelevant in a universe where we are made of atoms just like everything else, where a solid desk, at the atomic level, is more space than matter, as the electrons whizz around the nucleus of each atom in space. The same goes for cheese.

In a hat-tip to Stephen Fry I note that there is language for this situation (of course), in the form of this quote: “The best thing you ever done for me / Is to help me take my life less seriously / It’s only life after all.” [Indigo Girls, “Closer to Fine”, from the 1989 album *Indigo Girls*]

In this universe we are learning that we have more in common with that family of birds called corvids — ravens, crows, magpies, etc — than we used to think. Turns out they are quite brainy too. Maybe we aren’t so special.

This perspective may bring some light, some lightness to make the weight of our realities supportable. A crack in the conceit that we are exceptional.

The reality may still feel heavy.

We may be atoms, but we are not ectoplasm, so we might as well make the most of the way matter is arranged to form us. We can still search for truth and meaning.

Just as matter is made up of much more space than substance, so language is made up of much more silence than sound, much more gap than word. Along with music and art, language gives us a framework to navigate our existence.

So how do we deal with the heaviness and the darkness? How does the light get in?

Sometimes, the cracks can be burst open for us by a joke — “I’m not really eating all that much cheese.”

Sometimes an image will do it — “there is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.”

If you think about that image, language really is the key. When children are learning language, early picture books introduce opposites. Opposites are early maths at primary school: Big, small. Up, down. In, out. In Leonard Cohen’s line, “that’s how the light gets in,” he uses the word “in.”

“In.”

Surely light gets out. No. It’s the opposite. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets *in*.

I fear that to analyse the image any further than that will drain it of its magic. I prefer just to contemplate in silent wonder.

.... the light gets *in* ...

The silent component of language is where the light gets in.

The words as well as the silence can bring light: my reading was a poem from Hone Tuwhare, written in Aotearoa in 1968, at the time Martin Luther King was assassinated in the US. It contains both

the darkness and the light. It contains this image: “armed only with a dream: a dream held aloft / in your red-hot parable-picking hands.”

The words here are dense, and they contain cracks, for the light to get in.

“Armed” for a fight.

But this fight is one of non-violent resistance — “armed only with a dream.”

The dream is held aloft, a beacon of hope and the possibility of a better world. A light.

And then we have “red-hot, parable-picking hands”. The subject of the poem is African-American, descended from cotton-picking slaves. Martin Luther King, though, picks parables ... in Hone’s image, he has turned that dark history around to build a beloved community.

There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.

Hone offers us other light too. Sometimes more simply.

Here is another of his poems:

“Yes”

Hone Tuwhare

*I like the Way  
you slip out  
of your things  
pausing between zip and  
catch of breath  
as if you were  
punctuating  
a movement: a phrase  
of love. God*

*it cheers me  
when you move with  
purpose: animal  
grace and awareness  
of the urgency with  
which agents  
of locomotion take  
us from a to z  
table to bed and  
back to the floor  
again: hip hip*

*Yes: and I love  
the Way our limbs  
construct  
a superstructure  
to a heavenly  
accommodation: cheers  
me no end*

We may find ongoing or transitory light in language and poetry, in words and silence.

It might take more.

We might need also to forget our perfect offering.

Friends have said to me, when I tell of the three things going on for me that can weigh heavily — an apparently impossible job, a mother in transition, and a partner who because of illness is doing a lot less housework than he was — words to the effect that I am under a lot of pressure.

So, what do I do?

I sit in stillness.

I work to forget my perfect offering, offering simply what I can.

I try to remember that it's only life after all.

I forgive myself when I feel hopeless, because hopelessness is an understandable reaction.

I bend myself to wearing it all lightly.

Tread lightly.

Do what I can do and don't fret about the rest. Enjoy what I can enjoy — a cup of tea, a deep breath, warm air, cool water.

Accept help.

Trust that the world will keep turning, the electrons will keep spinning in space.

Know that, in the words of Joan Baez, every day on earth is another chance to get it right.

Amen

**Meditation / Conversation starter:**

Where is the crack in you?

How do you let the light in?

How do you get on forgetting your perfect offering?