

MARY PONDERERS AND A MUDDY POND CLEARS—THAT FOR WHICH, IN ADVENT, WE AWAIT (A POST-ELECTION ADVENT ADDRESS)

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The nativity scene in the Cambridge Unitarian Church

READINGS

The Shepherds and the Angels (Luke 2:8-19)

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favours!

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

From Chapter 15 of the ['Tao Te Ching'](#) by Lao Tse

Muddy water,

let stand,

Becomes clear.

From ['The Way of Zen'](#) by [Alan Watts](#) (Vintage Books, 1957, pp. 154-155)

It may seem both strange and unreasonable that strong and intelligent men should simply sit still for hours on end. The Western mentality feels that such things are not only unnatural but a great waste of valuable time, however useful as a discipline for inculcating patience and fortitude. Although the West has its own contemplative tradition in the Catholic Church, the life of 'sitting and looking' has lost its appeal, for no religion is valued which does not 'improve the world' and it is hard to see how the world can be improved by keeping still. Yet it should be obvious that action without wisdom, without clear awareness of the world as it really is, can never improve anything. Furthermore, as muddy water is best cleared by leaving it alone, it could be argued that those who sit quietly and do nothing are making one of the best possible contributions to a world in turmoil.

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ADDRESS

Mary ponders and a muddy pond clears—that for which, in Advent, we await

Clearly, one broad, central theme of Advent is, as the season's name suggests, a patient waiting for that which is to come. At this time of year, the orthodox, metaphysically committed, believing Christian community's retelling of the first period of waiting for the birth of Jesus the Messiah (the son of God, God-with-us, [Immanuel](#)) is also a waiting in the here and now for the actual second coming of Jesus the Messiah and the associated institution of the kingdom of God. Within orthodox Christian churches these two things are, in various and sometimes contradictory ways, significantly thickened-up into strong doctrinal statements of belief the length and detail of which can make 'War and Peace' look like the outline for a short story. In short, they believe, in

some detail, that they know for whom and what they are waiting.

However, for all our own genuine and deep love of the Christmas myth I, and I imagine most of you here this morning, simply cannot believe for one moment that there is to occur an actual second coming of Jesus the Messiah and we (mostly) doubt the truth that Jesus' birth was an event that could meaningfully be called a first coming. Yes, a mortal, one-time, single-lived baby was born, but in our [Radical Enlightenment](#) inspired, free-thinking, religious-humanist community this birth is not understood as being part of some preconceived, unstoppable plan through-written by a supernatural God and revealed to mere mortals through scriptures, angels, dreams and prophecies but, instead, the natural result of many completely contingent historical-material factors which, in time, shaped the wholly human man Jesus of Nazareth into the remarkable person he became with all his strengths and weaknesses, faults and admirable qualities.

So, this means that if we're not waiting for the second coming of Jesus the Messiah, for what, if anything, might we meaningfully be said to be waiting in this season of Advent?

If we compare ourselves with orthodox Christian understandings it clearly has to be said that we are waiting for no-one and no-thing; not Jesus the Messiah nor a sudden and completely 'new heaven and new earth' (Rev. 21:1) and, for the sake of honesty, this should, in my opinion, be frankly and publicly acknowledged.

But, it seems to me, when a person or a community is able frankly to acknowledge this it can serve to shift them into a new position from which it becomes possible to sense that this time of year might be used consciously to await patiently for something much more realistic, powerful and actually salvific than those things awaited for in the orthodox Christian circles.

To see what this something might be we need to start with a well known Taoist proverb, 'Muddy water; let stand; becomes clear.' I first came across it in my early twenties when I was reading a lot of Alan Watt's writings from the 1950s and 60s. You heard the relevant passage from his influential book 'The Way of Zen' earlier but here, once again, is the sentence I particularly want to centre upon: 'as muddy water is best cleared by leaving it alone, it could be argued that those who sit quietly and do nothing are making one of the best possible contributions to a world.'

It might seem strange and profoundly wrong-headed to some of you for me to suggest that at this time when so much clearly needs urgently to be done — politically, ecologically, economically — that we might be able to make the best possible contributions to a world simply by sitting quietly and doing nothing.

But the point of Lao Tse's ancient proverb is to remind us that there are some tasks, such as clearing a muddy pond, which can only be accomplished by sitting quietly and (apparently)

doing nothing. Flailing around in an excess of business will simply not do.

Today, I want to suggest that in Advent and Christmas, by sitting down and (apparently) doing nothing other than pondering the natural and human aspects of the birth of a child (as we are told Jesus' mother Mary did) what a person can accomplish is something which can only be achieved by patient, reflective waiting, namely for a certain clearing to occur, not in this case a clearing of muddy water, but a clearing of muddy thinking about how the world is and our place in it.

To my mind it makes a great deal of sense to try and achieve this clarity of thinking before we set out to attempt to tackle our many other, clearly pressing, tasks. As Alan Watts observed, 'it should be obvious that action without wisdom, without clear awareness of the world as it really is, can never improve anything' to which may be added the thought expressed by Jesus that 'if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit' (Matthew 15:14).

Now, to avoid the pit and get a general sense of what might be seen when a person shifts their position by admitting that in Advent they are waiting for no-one and no-thing, we must begin our pondering by recalling that our whole European and North American culture has been inexorably shaped by a belief in the existence of the interventionist, creator god of theism. The ghost of this being is still found alive and well in powerful secular ideas such as the 'hidden hand' of our supposedly self-regulating, algorithmically driven, high-speed, financialized forms of capitalism.

But when you hold such world-views everything is (wrongly) believed to be an inevitable out-playing of either god's eternal will/plan or the inexorable working out of various algorithms: God says 'yes', or 'no', just as the [Little Britain comedy team were fond of reminding us, 'computer says no'](#) or, on occasions, 'yes'.

It's important to realize that these are profoundly disabling and anti-humanist ideas and they constantly serve to muddy our view of how the world actually is and our (potential) place in it. But, when we wait and take time quietly and patiently to ponder the Christmas story from a naturalist, materialist and religiously humanist perspective a certain, freeing, clarifying sense of in what consists our freedom from the tyranny of either our old conceptions of god or algorithms emerges.

As we patiently ponder upon any child who is soon to come (Jesus stands here, of course, simply as a symbol of every new-born child), it should be obvious that, although it is true we may be able (and, perhaps, should be willing) to make a few very, very tentative short and mid-term projections, and express a few very, very tentative short and mid-term hopes, on the child's behalf about what the child will be and achieve when they grow up, the truth is that the

contingent structure of the universe, with its endlessly moving material-historical flows, folds and fields, ensures that there always-already exist an almost innumerable set of possibilities that could conceivably outplay from the point where we happen to find ourselves in the here and now. In the presence of every new born child it is possible to be powerfully reminded that the future is always-already open. To be sure, we have various duties we feel we must perform on behalf of the child that we hope will help shape the child's life in good ways, but we also know we have nothing approaching complete control over how the child will actually develop and grow. I know of no better expression of this insight than the wise saying found in one of the ancient Hindu scriptures, [the Bhagavad Gita](#):

You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction (BG 2.47).

This recognition is true even when we feel we are as sure as sure can be that it is for outcome x or y we are waiting (and will, in time, perhaps even fight for) and that, from where we stand, x or y's coming seems inevitable. The Cambridge economist [John Maynard Keynes](#) summed this up brilliantly and pithily when he reminded us that even 'the inevitable generally does not happen, because the unpredictable prevails instead.'

We would also do well in these moments to ponder the wider, general truth expressed by [William Morris](#) in his '[The Dream of John Ball](#)' (1888):

'Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and then it turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.'

In short, by patiently waiting for the birth of the baby and pondering carefully upon these things our vision can slowly clear so that we begin to have a better awareness of the world as it really is, namely radically open and beyond the total control of either god, algorithms, or human kind.

It seems to me, therefore, that one possible kind of Advent waiting we can meaningfully practice in this kind of church is to create the quiet and still conditions such that a clarity of vision can emerge in which we can see that everything, but everything, is always already changing and nothing is for ever, not the things/ideals we value the most, nor the things/ideas we loath the most.

It should serve to remind us, as [Tony Benn](#) once wisely observed, that

There is no final victory, as there is no final defeat. There is just the same battle. To be fought, over and over again. So toughen up, bloody toughen up.

This realistic clarity about the world, as I hope you realise, is not some new-fangled example of my own, eccentric, crazy thinking but, in fact, ancient wisdom that has been ascribed to the archetypal wise person himself, namely, King Solomon. The poet [Edward Fitzgerald](#) tells us:

The Sultan asked Solomon for a Signet motto, that should hold good for Adversity or Prosperity. Solomon gave him, 'this also shall pass away.' ([Polonius, CX](#)).

But we have a problem in our own age because so many things in it deliberately attempt to stop us developing the practice of the kind of patient, reflective waiting that can help us see how radically open the future always remains. Our neoliberal capitalist system — which is currently doing so much damage to the whole world — can only survive in so far as it can convince us that ‘there is no alternative’ to it, TINA, and that we must simply knuckle down to fact that the world must unfold as the algorithm or god tells us it must.

But a patient, reflective pondering of every baby child can serve to remind us of TATIANA, that, ‘astonishingly, there is an alternative’ despite the fact that orthodox forms of Christianity and capitalism try so damnably hard to stop us from seeing this.

As we draw to a close, it’s worth remembering some words of [Ursula K. Le Guin](#) that brings together both religion and capitalism. [In her 2014 acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, she said:](#)

‘We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words.’

And with the art of words we find we are back at the Christmas story. But, as we recount it in our services, there is another ‘art of words’ in play, namely, the art of interpreting such a story and telling it to each other in ways that gift us with clarity about how the world is and our place in it rather than gift us with a decidedly muddy vision of the world.

It reveals to us, again and again, as does every birth of every child, that, in Ursula Le Guin’s concluding words, ‘the name of our beautiful reward’, the fruits of our patient, reflective waiting, ‘is not profit. Its name is freedom’ — the freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today.

It is for a **sight** of this always-already open-future and freedom that we await and which, in symbolic form, we hope to see in the face of the new born Jesus on Christmas morn.