

## Wake Me When It's Over

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Tuesday Vespers, August 11, 2020

Online with the UU Society of Sacramento



### Hymns:

“We Are Gathered,” text by Amanda Udis-Kessler (tune “Nettleton”); #47 “Now on Land and Sea Descending” (First Unitarian of Oakland choir).

### Homily

When I lie down in bed this evening, after I've brushed and flossed my teeth for the 18,000<sup>th</sup> time in my life, which of course could be my last time, and some day will be the last time...

After I've tried to catch up on magazine reading but had to give up when my hands drop and my head nods down...

After I've put on my tee shirt and soft flannel Monty Python pajama bottoms...

When I pull the tan and blue cover up over me and adjust my pillow just right, and after I read a prayer from a square little blue book, then I will reach across to set my alarm to go off at 6 o'clock in the morning of some future morning on a day in a month yet to be determined.

What I mean is that I don't want to wake up until the pandemic is over. I want to pull the covers over my head and stay there. I don't want to get up until I can hug my church members again, till I can hang out in a café, read in the library, stroll through a museum, or work out at the YMCA. That's when I

want to wake up. When it's over. Would you please tell me when that will be?

You may know the story of Rip Van Winkle, written by Washington Irving in the late 1800s. Though Irving set the story in the Catskill Mountains of New York, it has origins in a German folk tale. Rip was a nice guy with a wife and kids, but he was a slacker. Not very helpful around the house. One day he left and went up the mountain and into the woods. He came upon a group of dwarves; they were bowling a game of 9-pins on the forest floor. They took a break for a drink of alcohol and shared some it with Rip. He fell asleep and didn't wake up for 20 years. He didn't have an alarm clock or a smart phone. He had no specific time at which he would come back into consciousness. He just passed out. I, on the other hand, want sleep *exactly* until this is all over.

Yes, I want to escape. Not only do I want to escape, I want to be able to come back refreshed and renewed and act as if all of the pain of today's world did not even take place. All of this pain... includes not only the disrupted schedules, the distance from loved ones, and the denial of so many of my favorite activities. The pain includes bearing witness to the grief and fear that are engulfing the globe, and the dangers that are hitting hardest on people of color and poor people.

The pain seems almost too much to bear, and I don't even bear most of it directly myself. I don't have children, so I don't have the agony of having to juggle distance learning or child care while working from home, or trying to make ends meet after losing a job. I'm not a teacher, either. So I don't have the pressure of online teaching to a student body filled with a variety of learning needs and family situations. I am not a factory worker or a farm worker in a place where I have to live or work in close quarters with other people. I can't be sure, but I wonder if people living with such pressures even have the luxury to be able to fantasize about a good long nap.

I know, I know. It doesn't do much good for me to say, “You don't have that much to complain about, so lighten up! Stop whining!” Harsh words will just make me want to hide under the covers even longer.

On his way out of town and into the forest for his long time away, Rip Van Winkle sees a sign at the edge of town. On it is a picture, the image of King George III. Of course, New York is a colony of Great Britain. Twenty years later, when Rip stumbles back into town, he passes the sign again. This time, it holds a picture not of the king, but of George Washington, President of the United States. Rip finds it confusing, and we find it amusing! But Dr. Martin Luther King finds it to be cautionary for us. It's a wake-up call, if you will.

In a sermon he gave in March of 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington, Dr. King said: "While [Rip] was peacefully snoring up in the mountain a revolution was taking place that at points would change the course of history—and Rip knew nothing about it. He was asleep. Yes, he slept through a revolution. And one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution."

Dr. King said people in this country were waking up. And he urged us to stay awake during the changes confronting us. Certainly, it was tempting to sleep through the upheavals of those times, just as it is now. There was no guarantee how things would turn out, and there is no guarantee now. Maybe it was no accident that Rip slept through it all-- because he didn't want to live with stress and uncertainty. He wanted escape more than engagement.

I realize that I don't want really want to avoid bearing witness to these times we're going through. I don't want to avoid doing whatever I can do to have some effect on the outcome.

Dr. King said let's not sleep through the changes now confronting humanity. Let's face them, together. Tough times are full of discomfort. Yet I'd rather bear witness to these times and live with my discomfort and the urge to escape, than sleep through it all and wake up in a house that I can't recognize.

As I have admitted, the longing to escape, the longing to follow Rip Van Winkle, is understandable. Yet the price is high. You see, that's because Rip Van Winkle had aged in those 20 years. It surprised him to wake up and find that he had gray hair and a long white beard. Not only did he miss a revolution, he missed being present and awake for his own life in each day of those 20 years. He didn't get to go back and live them over again after he woke up. I can't think of two decades of my own life that I would forfeit. I can't think of two decades that I'd give up, lock stock and barrel, can you?

It seems that if I really do want to be awake for life, for all of life, then I will have to take the discomfort along with all the joy, and the pain with the beauty. If being awake means bearing witness to terrible setbacks as well as times of progress, I pray for the grace to do it. I pray to have the mindfulness and curiosity to do it. I am willing to be awake for the losses as well as the blessings. So may it be.