

## THE STRANGER IN MY HEART

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt  
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Once upon a time, in a land far away from ours (but not so very different from ours) a young man was studying to be a wizard. He showed a considerable gift for the work of wizardry, yet he also showed immaturities and character flaws that had the potential to seriously compromise his work. One day, in the typical one-upsmanship of young students with no experience and too much knowledge, the young man accepted the dares of his peers to attempt an exceedingly difficult and dangerous spell. Pronouncing the words and making the gestures with his wand, the spell unfolded as intended—until something mysteriously went awry: all the darkness in the room, the shadows from corners and beneath furniture and outside the reach of lamplight seemed to gather into a ball and with a loud crack rushed from the room, leaving everyone knocked flat on the floor, bleeding and terrified.

This is not a previously unpublished chapter from the *Harry Potter* canon; rather, it is a summary of the beginning of an older story of a wizard's life, *The Earthsea Trilogy*, by fantasy author Ursula LeGuin. Much like the *Harry Potter* narratives, LeGuin traces the maturing of a

wizard from adolescence to adulthood, but with a particular focus on how her wizard learns to deal with his own personal dark side. Like many of us, the wizard initially wants to deny the existence of any such shadow. In time he comes to recognize its existence but always responds with fear, believing that if he takes certain actions, runs fast enough, becomes powerful enough, he can always avoid the shadow. Yet no matter what he does or where he goes in the course of the *Trilogy*, that darkness continues to menace him.

Though it has been many years since I first set foot in a Unitarian Universalist church, I still remember my initial impressions. I was captivated by the minister's sermon that ranged from science to Jesus, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King without once insisting that any perspective was superior to another, that any one path had a corner on truth. I admired the people I met who came to church not to score points with God nor because any religious authority told them to come, but because they wanted to be there. And most powerful of all for me, coming from a church tradition where preachers thundered about sin and punishment week after week, threatening the consequences that would befall us for wrong actions and wrong beliefs, I was amazed to be in a church where fear was not the central emotional piece of the experience. In fact, as best I could tell, fear played no part whatsoever in motivating UUs to pursue their spiritual path.

I continue to believe the absence of fear, our refusal to play upon people's fears in order to motivate them and control them and make them do what people in power want them to do, may be the best part about us. It can at times be hard to maintain that fearless style, especially when something seems urgent to us, when we believe that everything is at stake. Like any people anywhere, in our churches we sometimes get drawn into fearmongering, threatening to leave, threatening to withhold our money if we do not get what we want, or being willing to believe the worst intentions in those who hold different views than us. But the fearlessness wins out, again and again, bringing us back to what is best in us.

And it is that abiding commitment to what is best in us, that belief, as our first principle articulates it, in the "inherent worth and dignity of every person," that ultimately keeps us from heading very far down the fearmongering path too many traditions seem to prefer. As long as we continue to insist on the fundamental goodness of one another, fear cannot overtake us.

Yet just as shadows are darkest where light is brightest, this core commitment of ours can become a double-edged sword, leading us into negative behaviors when understood too simplistically or too concretely. You have heard the jokes about Unitarians believing they are "too good to

be damned”; you may have seen the UU-themed bumper sticker that responds to evangelicals insisting all must be born again by claiming, “born right the first time.” A few of you, upon hearing this would be a sermon about our personal darkness, laughingly reminded me that “Unitarians don’t believe we have any.” All such responses suggest the potential for a kind of shallow optimism unworthy of us whenever we cling so tightly to our commitment to innate goodness that we lose the capacity to see the darkness in ourselves and our lives. I understand that none of us wants some sort of traditional view of sin and hell and a judgmental Boss in the Sky; but are there no other alternatives than those traditional views or a one-sided, simplistic insistence on goodness with never a word said acknowledging badness, not just the badness out there in the world but the badness in here, inside the human heart?

After spending nearly two-thirds of the *Trilogy* narrative fleeing the darkness set loose in the world by his arrogant spell, LeGuin’s wizard recognizes that the only resolution will require him no longer to flee, but to pursue, to confront the feared shadow head-on. We follow similar strategies in our own lives as we seek control, deny, flee, or explain away what we do not understand and fear, especially what eludes our understanding of our own selves. And it is a hard fact that no matter how much therapy work

anyone does, no matter how many hours spent in meditation and introspection, no matter what books and guides are consulted, no one of us will ever fully understand the depths of our being. There is a part of us—a rather sizeable part—of the person confined with our skin that forever eludes probing eyes and probing minds. This mysterious, intangible self that I have come to refer to as the “stranger in my heart,” can frustrate me endlessly with its ability to resist my control; in fact, there are times when it appears that the stranger is in control of me. Whenever I say something I had not intended to say or do something I had not intended to do or otherwise act in an inexplicable fashion—that is, whenever I am spontaneous, uninhibited, unpredictable, or downright mean—then the stranger in my heart has taken charge of me, causing me to behave in uncharacteristic ways.

Because I share our cultural values of deliberate, careful thought and rationality, I can feel some embarrassment at the directions my life takes at times in response to the stranger in my heart. In an attempt to shrug off my fooliwhness, I may casually attribute it to natural causes like “the full moon” or “not enough sleep,” or “a midlife crisis” and just wait for it to pass. Or, more seriously, I may clinically pin the label of “unconscious” or “unresolved issues” on the stranger, and resolve to subdue it with the

controls offered by behavior modification, self-help masters, and pharmacology. Or, if the stranger in my heart has caused me to harm another, I will vigorously condemn the stranger for wrongdoing and seek forgiveness for what it made me do. Or, on those rare occasions when something wise and beautiful is inspired by the stranger in my heart, I reverently refer to it as the God Within and give thanks for the gift of its presence. The stranger in my heart comes in many guises, and whether they be lovely or loathsome, they are alike mysterious and beyond the grasp of my everyday figuring-it-out self. Not content to stand aside and let the stranger be what it will be, I feel compelled to know it, make it familiar, get it in hand. And when all else fails, I repress and silence the stranger in my heart—a strategy that may come at great cost. For when silence goes on for too long a time, when the stranger is too long treated as an adversary, it can become tyrannical and wrest all control from the ordinary, waking selves that usually direct our lives.

LeGuin's wizard switches directions and begins tracking the darkness he had spent a lifetime fleeing. The path takes him to the ends of the world and beyond, to a place where it seemed all life ended, all sound ceased, all movement stilled, where nothing stirred but the wizard himself. He hikes over a rise, scarcely able to breathe so great is his terror, and sees the

darkness ahead in a vaguely human form. Though everything in him is urging him to run or fight, the wizard does neither: instead, he reaches out his arms as if to embrace the terrible shadow.

A wonderful story with a powerful ending—but a story nonetheless. Our own experiences with the strangers in our hearts are more likely to draw us into a catch-22 that has no escape: we feel reluctant to accept the unknown in us until it seems humanized and familiar; yet, that unknown cannot seem humanized and familiar until we accept it. To face the dark, mysterious side of our beings with consent, with an invitation to participate in shaping our lives, feels like an impossible demand. When our culture encourages taking charge of one's life, being in control, and feeling shame whenever our behavior suggests a lack of control, how can we be expected to love the stranger in us?

Some years ago, I looked around at the life path I had been walking, the world I had become invested in, and saw only ruins. The person I wanted to be, intended to be, seemed lost, replaced by a failure, a broken self that, like Humpty-Dumpty, could not be put back together again no matter how earnest my efforts to do so. I searched and searched, but found no center around which to arrange myself, no pattern for pulling together the pieces of

my life. Instead of the familiar person, it seemed a stranger answered to my name. Despair, fear, and an abiding anger were the colors of my days.

One day I unloaded my discouragement over the train wreck of my life and myself to a friend. He responded in the way we count on friends to respond, with words of reassurance that too often drift past us at such times because we cannot hold onto them. As he spoke, I stopped listening to his dear but predictable sentences. My attention focused instead on his eyes, in which I suddenly saw an amazing thing: I saw, in his pupils, a tiny image of myself. Reflected in his eyes was not the strange and broken self that I experienced, but a whole self, familiar, even beautiful. From one perspective, the usual one I held, I was a stranger without any definite form; from the perspective of another person, I was a distinct individual having a recognizable human form. With his eyes, my friend gave me the complete, known self that I had been seeking.

Later this week traditional churches enter the season of Lent, a time of self-examination with a particular focus on inner darkness, on that stranger living in each one's heart. It can be a dreary experience of way too much talk about sin; it can be a useful experience, a time of setting aside attachments as a means of discovering how they distract us from living more fully. Regardless of whether one accepts the theological interpretations of

Lent, the invitation to look deeply within can be worth accepting, however terrifying it initially sounds. LeGuin's wizard turned back towards his shadow and drew it back inside himself. Not only did such an action not destroy him, but it gave him the peace that he had spent a lifetime seeking. Traditional churches will urge followers throughout the Lenten season to "repent," a word that does not mean being sorry for sins as it is too often interpreted, but rather means to change directions, to go another way.

And in this time when slowly, ever so slowly, we see the world around us beginning to turn towards the new life of spring, perhaps we might turn a bit as well. Few challenges that await us on the spiritual journey are more difficult than the challenge of self-acceptance. When we stand before ourselves, gazing upon all the rags and bones and gold thread and stars that constitute a human being, we stand in the presence of an ultimate mystery—and no one, no one can master such a mystery. But we can relate to it; the strangers in our hearts do sometimes rise up to greet us in familiar forms, through the eyes of those who love us. Whether we choose to embrace the stranger makes all the difference in the world, the difference between a life only partially lived and a life of wholeness, unique, precious, and powerful.