

For Scrying Out Loud: Pre-Election Considerations

A Sermon Given

By The Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia

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The new Jerusalem (*reference to anthem prior to sermon*) seems pretty far off right now. And, lately, as I mentioned in my blog this week, I regularly hear from people who are experiencing anxiety about ... well Mostly about the election and the future after that. Honestly, I have my own moments when I think – yup – it looks bleak. It's true, we have prescient moments. As a backup, I have this crystal ball. But between my, admittedly unreliable psychic powers and the reality that my crystal ball only tells me what I tell it to tell me (and most often it's blank) I have precious few firm predictions about the future. Your powers may be better.

It's hard to live with uncertainty. But there is breathing room in uncertainty, there's possibility in uncertainty. I know -- if things were completely unknowable it'd be agonizing. Like, if you weren't sure that the world would still be there when you opened the front door – or that strange moment between dreaming and waking when the mind swims in the images and imaginings of the subconscious. Or Wednesday night when I found myself standing on my sofa, crouched by my sofa, sitting on the edge of my seat – while watching the last game of the World Series.

Now, I am reasonably certain that next week we're going to celebrate the 60th anniversary of this congregation. Over those 60 years remarkable, wonderful, and terrible things have come to pass. The Voting rights act was passed and then later much of the power of that act was undermined by the supreme court – but in the meantime, generations of white Americans awoke and continue to awake to the realities of and injustice toward black Americans and then to the injustices facing people of so many ethnicities. Those 60 years saw a white man on the moon and black man in the oval office. We have seen a global and growing movement for women's rights that is the result of the work of both women and men. We've seen the first white woman on the Supreme Court, the first white woman named as a presidential candidate from one of the major parties, and perhaps well – still no answers. We've seen homosexuality move from being the love that dared not speak its name, from unacknowledged hate crimes, to being the subject of global debate, declared an issue of human rights, and same sex- marriage made legal in many countries and even our own. We've seen the spoiling and exploitation of nature – but – since Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, a worldwide environmental movement has grown to advocate for life on earth. I can go on -- but you know that even here – this congregation has seen tremendous change. We have suffered our tragedies and celebrated amazing accomplishments – but more on that next week.

There are bunches of websites out there that claim to predict the future using special magical algorithms. Statistically, it is probable that one of them will be right at some point about something or another. I can tell you – that on Wednesday night, as I climbed on my sofa as on a jungle gym, until the very last moment, I did not know for sure that the Cubs were going to win. I *am* sure that, around the world, there were folks making predictions and even putting money on the outcome of those games. In

retrospect, I am sorry I didn't challenge my brother-in-law – a Cleveland fan – to a bet on the outcome.

People have always tried to see the future. Oracle bones, Tarot Cards, Palmistry, astrology, and scrying. I guess I heard about scrying when I was fascinated by magic as a teenager. According to Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft:

“Scrying is a practice that enables you to literally "see" the future (or present or past). Almost any reflective surface can be used for scrying. A crystal ball and a gazing mirror are two of the best. The crystal should be without flaw. Rest the ball on a background of black -- to ensure that you see nothing around the ball to distract you as you gaze into it. Initially you should work alone, in a room that is quiet and dark. Your temple, of course, is the ideal place. Have just one small light... Place the light so that you do not see it reflected directly in the crystal. Now sit and gaze into the crystal trying to keep your mind blank ... this will take some practice. Do not try to imagine anything in the ball. Just try to keep your mind blank. After a while (anywhere from two to ten minutes) it will seem that the ball is filling with white mist or smoke. It will gradually grow more and more dense until the ball seems full of it. Then, again gradually, the smoke will thin and fade, leaving behind a picture — almost like a miniature tv picture. It might be in black-and- white [or] color. It might be still or it might be moving. It might be from the past, present or future. Also, it is ... likely to be a symbolic picture, requiring some interpretation — much like a dream.

A black gazing mirror seems to work better for some people than a crystal. Make it opaque by coating one side three times with asphaltum...[or] spray the back side of the glass with a good black enamel paint (it may not seem very magickal, but don't forget, the mirror is merely the focal point for your concentration. The actual "images" are projected by your powers; they do not come from within the mirror, or crystal, itself).”

Much as I am fairly case-hardened skeptic – there's some real truth in that bit of magic.

People have always tried to see the future. Still, and for the most part, the picture of the future that you or I have in mind in this moment is largely a portrait of our expectations. Our brains spin together history, intuition, and the stories that float all around us – and out of that we weave our vision of the future.

There is plenty over which we have no control. There are billions of people going this way and that to make something happen and we have to reckon with that reality as it unfolds – whatever it is. But there are also forces within us – these stories that try to shape the future according to their own ends. The universe is, indeed made of stories.

The stories that we are given – tell us what to think about ourselves, how to value our world, how to love, how to live, how to value our own lives.

Here's one you may know.

“In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth.... Male and female, created G-d them, God saw everything that God had made, and, behold, it was very good..”

And here's another.

“Then God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils

the breath of life; and man became a living soul. God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and God took one of his ribs... And of the rib, which God had taken from the man, made God a woman, and brought her unto the man.”

If you want to talk about the power of story to create the future – look no farther. I don't often think of that story – not consciously. I bet most people don't think of it consciously either. But centuries of church men and church teaching and even Jewish orthodoxy have been steadily working that story and others into our minds. It's clear from recent news that the misogyny supported by that version of the story is still operating with considerable power in our part of the world

Deep stories – true and false, made up in our lifetimes or carried forward through the ages create the stories of our own lives. We're told stories every day – in messages subtle and overt. Years ago there was something called the men's movement. And there was a folk tale that sparked it – called Iron John – retold by Robert Bly, a poet I much admire. It was the tale of a man who found strength, wisdom, and joy living outside of ordinary society – in the wild. The power of the way that he had found was so great that men were drawn into his forest and never went home. The movement that grew up connected with this story was based upon the idea that what the men found was a new, more authentic life – a life of freedom.

(video of Joel McKerrow)

My inbox is full of alarming emails that could make one jump up on a chair like a frightened mouse. Perhaps you have such an inbox or a website you check. The stories you get on TV, from newspapers, even from those sophisticated websites are just stories. They are not truth – though, sometimes, if you sift through them, you can find facts. It's the world shown through a heavily tinted lens. Through that lens the forecast is bleak. The people appear rather tiny – like ants scabbling about while much larger, greater creatures direct and determine the lives and movements of those ants. If you pull away that lens – (it might be many lenses) you could see a magnificent creature crouched and facing a wall.

The Greek philosopher Plato tells the story: that we are like people chained in a cave, looking at the shadows that move against the wall – shadows made by the sun that shines faintly behind us – but we can never turn around to see reality. In Plato's cave the shadows represent the things we see in the world every day. This pulpit, that chair, a friendship, starry night by Van Gogh.... Pretty much everything that is around us is a shadow of a perfect idea – the very essence of chair, of friendship, of starry nights are all non-material forms – transcendent, perfect ideas. But in this version of a cave story, it is only our stories that keep us turned away from the world – the real world, a world of poverty and plenty, greed and generosity, exploitation and beauty, people of violence and people of peace, people of hatred and of love.

We have the capacity – I'm not saying it's easy – but we can turn around and even leave the cave. We can see the forces ranged against us, see the world more clearly – in all its peril and brokenness, yet we can see the deeper story -- that within us is an unbreakable wholeness – and that the forces within us and among us are greater than we have ever been told.

So clear your mind. Look long, deep, and gently into the reflective surface of your spirit. In time – and not a bit like a tv screen – you will find your stories, the bad and the good, the useless and the useful. And then look closely at the ones that serve life, compassion, hope, justice, and even joy. Those are the stories that have been

hidden from you. Then look again, this time into the world – into the deep stories of the world and the powerful stories of community. You will find the stories that will nourish your soul and transform your life.

I'm a fan of science fiction and I know that I've mentioned before that I kind of like superhero stories. There certainly are a lot of them around right now. Marvel's going wild! But don't let those stories fool you, either. I have a sneaking suspicion that superheroes abound both to distract us and, on some perhaps not so subtle level, to remind us of what we can't do.

All these superheroes – and even the teams of super-toned, lethally fit, spy types – can make us seem puny by comparison. But we aren't puny – we're powerful – in ways you cannot see and that we are not told. We may not qualify to go to the Olympics but we can make our space and our world more welcoming no matter how physically able we are; we may not be able to defeat 10 ninjas at once – or even one if it comes to that -- but we can reach out and build relationships that strengthen our communities; we may not have a golden lasso that can force people to tell the truth – but we can speak truth to power; and we may not be able to go backward or forward in time to eliminate injustice – but, beginning with our words – like we have in our hymns, our signs – as we have when we created gender neutral bathroom space, our flags as we do with our rainbow flag, our awareness as we've begun in the small pilot group for Beloved Conversations on Race, to build a transformative learning community within these walls that can unlock the wisdom and skills to partner in the larger community and transform the world beyond these walls.

A science fiction book that I read in college inspired me then and gives me hope, now. It was probably the best known book by Theodore Sturgeon, titled "More Than Human." A group of people – each gifted and limited individually – find one another and gradually, fully combine their gifts and limits to become one being – still, interestingly individual, but one being – the next stage, the story says, in human evolution. The character called baby, brilliant but only able to communicate through another is quoted in the story. "He says he is a figure-outer brain and I am a body and the twins are arms and legs and you are the head. He says the 'I' is all of us." "I belong. I belong. Part of you, part of you and you too." So wrote Sturgeon.

The true story of human being is awe-inspiring, challenging, and powerful. And it is ready to be told through my life and yours.

Don't let the false stories lead you astray. Worry and anxiety only serve those who would like people to stay in the cave. No matter what happens on Tuesday, there is plentiful work ahead for we who love this world, we who love all our kin here – in our many hues and habits, we who love our cousins our non-human kin, we who love life, and who love peace and justice. There is work ahead if we hope – if we aspire to answer the call of love.

The future is coiled here among and within us of all ages. How we will respond to the future and how we will choose to shape it, is here – awaiting discovery. No matter what comes to us beyond our control we have only to remind one another of our deeper, finer stories, to remember, to share, to live into and out of those stories so that we can meet the future with a strength that is human and more than human -- shape the future with our full hearts and deep spirits – and purposeful -- strong – and together – move into that future to make hope and peace and justice.