

Now Voyager by May Sarton

Now voyager, lay here your dazzled head.
Come back to earth from air, be nourished,
Not with that light on light, but with this/hers bread.

Here close to earth be cherished, mortal heart,
Hold your way deep as roots push rocks apart
To bring the spurt of green up from the dark.

Where music thundered let the mind be still,
Where the will triumphed let there be no will,
What light revealed, now let the dark fulfill.

Here close to earth the deeper pulse is stirred,
Here where no wings rush and no sudden bird,
But only heart-beat upon beat is heard.

Here let the fiery burden be all spilled,
The passionate voice at last be calmed and stilled
And the long yearning of the blood fulfilled.

Now voyager, come home, come home to rest,
Here on the long-lost country of earth's breast
Lay down the fiery vision, and be blest, be blest.

Buddhist Story

One day, two monks set out on a journey to a temple in a distant village. Along the way, they came to a shallow and fast moving river where a young woman waited, full of despair for fear of falling in.

The monks looked at each other because the rules of their order forbid them from touching a woman.

The older monk bent forward, put the woman on his back, and crossed the water. When he reached the far side, he set her down gently, and resumed his journey.

The young monk scrambled out of the water, splashing in his hurry to catch up with his elder. The two walked quietly together for several hours.

The troubled monk couldn't remain silent any longer, "Master, I don't understand."

"Yes," the elder answered.

"As monks we are forbidden to look at a woman, much less touch her. How could you put her on your back?"

The elder monk stopped and turned towards him, "I set her down on the other side of the river. Why are you still carrying her?"

Monks at the River

Rev. Peggy Clarke

It's Christmas time. We can hear Carols playing everywhere we go; sometimes they're even pumped onto the sidewalks telling us it's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year. Everyone is working hard to instill or remind us about the warmth of the season. This is the time to catch up with old friends, to maintain contact with people we don't see any more if only by sending a card, to enjoy traditions like cookie swaps and Secret Santas, to read holiday poetry and snuggle on the couch with perfectly choreographed holiday specials that always end with twinkling Christmas trees topped with angels or stars shining hope and light on all the land.

But with all that joy and cheer, there's also the reminder of the places in our lives things aren't perfect, a reminder of the people who used to be part of our lives, but aren't any more, a reminder of the relationships we hoped we'd have one day, but that have not come pass. Because of the *joy* of the season, *pain* or *loss* can be experienced in stark relief, far bolder and brighter than most of the year.

Today, I'm asking us to consider the burdens we're carrying. The difference between delighting in these few weeks and dreading them is often related to the emotional baggage we're carrying on our backs. Even for those of us who are enjoying the Christmas season, there might be a lone resentment, a grudge popping up from time to time, preventing us from being merry and bright. And for some, this might be a time when the burden feels most heavy. All that cheerful holiday music can amplify the loneliness or anger or hurt or guilt that isn't more than background music the rest of the year.

What burden are you carrying this holiday season? Take a moment for a little moral, emotional inventory. Is there someone you think has hurt you? Someone you think owes you an apology? Is there a regret you're nursing? Is there a hurt – past or present – you're hanging on to? Sadness? Anger? Self-righteousness? Fear? What concern have you picked up and have not set down? I'll give you a moment to think...

I recently came to a new understanding of the song "Down by the Riverside". I'm hoping today we can lay down our burdens. We don't have a riverside, so maybe it'll have to be in the sanctuary. If you're so inclined, a little trip to the river this afternoon might not be a bad idea. Gonna lay down my burdens, gonna lay down my sword and shield. And I ain't gonna study war no more. I've thought of those as one thing. It's a peace song. A way of saying, I'm not going to carry weapons, I'm not going to study war. And therefore, I'm not going to fight. It's been part of the peace movement for decades; that's often the way white and non-Christian people sing the song.

The song was actually written about baptism and also, like all the old Negro Spirituals, it was about escaping slavery and later other racial injustice. The rest of the verses include things like, "Gonna put on my long white robe," and, "Gonna cross the River Jordan." Slaves often wrote songs that Christian slave-owners could tolerate like a song about baptism but they often had alternative meanings about escaping or justice or freedom. In this case, the River Jordan was a reference to the Ohio River. That part I knew.

But over these last few days, I've been hearing it differently. I haven't been associating it with war, or not an international geo-political war, and of course in my life it wasn't ever about escaping slavery. "Gonna lay down my burdens, down by the riverside and I ain't gonna study war no more." When I carry my burdens, war becomes a viable option. When I'm weighed down by worry and concern and anger and fear, war becomes an option. Not international war. *Interpersonal* war. War between people happens when we're carrying too many burdens.

When I lay down my burdens, I have no need to prepare for war. When I let go, when I release my anger and fear and hurt and resentment, I can rest. There will be no grudge match today, no fight to the death. When I open myself up, allow the vulnerability of authentic emotion without the need for revenge or self-protection, I am preparing for peace.

Are you carrying a burden today?

I was carrying a burden this week. I learned something that broke my heart. A trust was broken. My first response was anger. "How could you do that to me?" Second was self-defense. "Never mind. I don't care and I don't need you anymore." Third was sadness. Disappointment. There was a sinking. I needed to be there for a little while.

Then I talked with someone, actually a lot of someones. I told my story. And each time I told it, the intensity of the sadness decreased. I was laying down my burden. I put it on the ground between me and trusted friends and colleagues and together, we looked at it. What is that, exactly? We brushed away the fear and anger and hurt like sand on an old bone.

Burdens are easier to deal with when done with friends. Sadness and hurt and disappointment and grief and guilt; they all dissipate when the right partner is helping.

Some burdens are more difficult than others to lay down. Some hurts are so old, they have grafted themselves on to our spirits. They become part of us. In my childhood home we had a brick chimney that had been overtaken by vines. Taking them down meant ripping out some of the brick and mortar. Two friends of mine climbed all the way up on a two story ladder and starting tearing down those thick old vines. They needed heavy gloves and brute force and with each tear, pieces of my house were torn out with it. They threw it on the grass and all those old parasitic vines began to wither, leaving behind pieces of crumbled brick, but exposing the still standing chimney to the sun, ready now for healing.

Old hurts can do that too. They also become parasitic, feeding off our bones, sucking life from us. Psychological and spiritual hurts can become so much a part of our internal landscape that we have trouble recognizing them. But if we're paying attention, we can see them in action. We see those old hurts separating us from other people, creating empty spaces and loneliness. Or we see it fire our anger inappropriately or bring us to tears unexpectedly. Often we don't know ourselves without these hurts; they have become part of who we are. We act and react out of them without even suspecting they can be healed, that we can let them go.

So, we have two monks. One picks the woman up on one side of the river, and puts her down on the other. The other carries her for miles in his mind. He broods and worries and resents.

Which monk are you going to be this Christmas season? Are you carrying a burden that will ruin your journey? Do you know how to put it down?

After our Thanksgiving service, someone asked me in the hall if my family is really that perfect. I had to laugh. Yes. And No. Yes, I have what might be an unusually healthy and happy family. And No. Perfect we are not. Not even a little bit. We quarrel and disagree and we can bug each other like no one's business and there are losses we carry and dreams that haven't been fulfilled. Some of them we talk about. And some we don't.

A lot of life is a matter of perspective. I use a lens of gratitude when I can. I know that if I don't love what I have, there is nothing I can get that will make me happy.

This is to say, sometimes living a burdened life is a choice. It's a choice for the monk in the story. He can let it go if he wants, like his travel companion. Or he can hold on to it for miles and miles. Of course, it's not always a choice. Gruesome, horrible things happen and there are seasons of grief that cannot be denied.

But sometimes, the burden is a choice and it's good to know when those times have come. Sometimes, carrying, being weighed down by our burdens, is optional. We can set them down. We can lay them down between friends. Sometimes we need to brush off the sand and see what's really going on. Sometimes, we just need to walk away. Lay it on the side of the river. And walk away. That's not mine any more.

The beauty is that, either way, they aren't on our backs. We can put them down and decide what do with them once we are unencumbered. They haven't grafted themselves to our bones; we are not they.

In one version of that story, both monks carry the woman across the river and set her down. 5 miles down the road, one monk is complaining that his back still hurts. We carry our burdens, our stress, our worry, in our bodies. Can you feel it? Is there a place in your body you are carrying your stress? How might you let it go? Set it down?

How will you lay down your burdens this Christmas season? What are you carrying on your back today? What are you afraid of? How is it informing your behavior? Can you lay it down? What has made you angry? Is it inspiring anger in other areas of your life? Has old anger grafted onto your spirit? Can you see it anymore? Do you know when old anger is fueling new anger? How will you lay down your burdens today?

When I let go, there's a new feeling in my body. My shoulders drop. My muscles relax. I can stand up straight. I can hear people again, rather than hearing my own voice. I can see them again rather than seeing the ground which is what happens when I'm bent over. When I'm no longer carrying my fear and sadness and guilt, my embarrassment, my loneliness, my anger, my hurt I'm focused and present and connected. I can be part of a community again when I lay my burdens down. I can connect with other people more authentically, rather than connecting with them in the hope that they will perpetuate my own anger or affirm my deep hurt.

Next week we're talking about the winter solstice and a few days later we'll be in this room for our candlelight service on Christmas Eve. We'll remember the glory that is our lives and proclaim Joy to the World. We'll celebrate our community and sing traditional carols in gratitude and enjoy meeting each other's extended families. But that doesn't mean this isn't sometimes a difficult season. All that delighting doesn't negate the daily

living we're all doing.

We have a chance to prepare for a little more holiday cheer than we might have expected this season, if only we're willing to let go of some of the things that are weighing us down.

The older monk knew something the younger monk didn't know. He knew that the woman didn't matter. He knew that picking her up and putting her back down again was trivial and ultimately irrelevant. He knew that nothing was lost and something was gained and once he put her down, he walked silently through the woods, enjoying the glory of the day. He's the older monk, the one who's done this before, the one who has a little experience under his belt. The younger monk missed the trees and the opportunity to be with his friend because he was distracted by an irrelevant detail.

There are things in this world that matter. Tens of thousands of people marched yesterday on New York and Washington calling for racial justice. We're in an unprecedented climate crisis. There are fathers burying their children, mothers worried that they don't have enough to feed their families or heat their homes. The older monk knew that. And we know that too.

This Christmas season, we have a choice. We can lay down our burdens and keep walking. We can lay down our hurt and anger, our sadness and grief, our disappointment and resentment, our humiliation and our guilt. We can let them go. We can stand up straight and open ourselves to the world around us. No need to walk into the woods weighed down, bent over. It's here we let it all go and walk freely and joyfully into the glory of the season.