

UU Church of Waterville – January 26, 2025
Recruiting for the Army of Light
Dennis Perkins and Rev. “Twinkle” Marie Manning

Training for the Army of Light – Dennis Perkins

Stewards are people who nurture, support, and defend things of value. This morning we'll look at stewardship in a slightly different way: not just as providing financial support for this little church for the next year, although this is certainly an important stewardship. But also to see this as call for supporting and defending something much larger than our tiny congregation. We are called to dedicate ourselves to a struggle that has been given different names at different times and in different places in human history. Let's look at it this way:

Every time, every nation, every empire has had its voice, its bard, to tell the story of humankind's long struggle up out of the darkness. Greece had its Homer, China its Confucius, India its Buddha, the ancient Middle East its Moses, the later Middle East its Muhammad, the West its Jesus, and America its Lincoln and its Martin Luther King.

In the pantheon of modern mythology, few stories resonate as deeply and broadly as George Lucas's *Star Wars*. A saga that spans galaxies and generations, *Star Wars* is more than just a space opera; it's a tapestry of myths, dreams, and symbols that speaks to the eternal struggle between light and darkness, the journey of self-discovery, and the power of redemption through sacrifice.

At the center of Lucas' complex and beautiful Homeric ode is the continuing battle fought over generations between the members of the [Jedi Order's Army of Light](#) to combat the forces of the [Brotherhood of Darkness](#).

The forces of darkness are always the same: prideful, greedy, intolerant, deceptive and powerfully intimidating. The ultimate goal of the force of darkness is to dominate everything in its path. In opposition, the forces of light rely on humility, generosity, tolerance, courage, and honesty. The ultimate goal of the force of light is liberation.

We can sit in a darkened theater and thrill to the war between light and darkness being played out before us while we eat our popcorn. But the real battle between the Jedi and the Siths is not played out on a screen. The real battle goes on outside the theater—in homes, and neighborhoods, in states and nations, and in the hearts and minds of every human being. We are called to engage in this struggle, to join the Army of Light and to invite as many people as we can find to join with us.

This morning Twinkle and I will talk about first, preparing ourselves for battle and second, engaging in the fight upon each battlefield in which we find ourselves.

We are a little church but we are not alone. We are also not Pollyannas. This struggle is ancient and will go on long after we are forgotten by generations yet to come.

Squadrons of the Army of Light appear throughout history. The leader of one such cadre was Abdu'l Baha, eldest son of the founder of the Bahai religion. Abdu'l Baha cautions against easy optimism, but not against hope itself, in one of today's Thoughts for Contemplation:

“The universal divine organization and the natural system is long and challenging...The seed does not at once become a tree; the embryo does not at once become a man; the mineral does not suddenly become a stone. No, they grow and develop gradually and attain the limit of perfection.”

Or, to put it another way, in Lord Tennyson’s modern telling of the story of the struggle of Ulysses against the forces of darkness:

“That which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Look at the brave young girl on the front of your Order of Service. The light coming from her saber is not produced by the saber but by the light that she has worked to gather within her. Members of the Army of Light gather light within so that they then may spread it about.

No country, empire, or organization would think about sending new recruits into conflict without first giving them ample training and discipline, repeated exercises to build strengths and reduce distractions. In this way each recruit would gain skill in handling of the instrument upon which they would ultimately for both their survival and their victory— in the case of a member of the Army of Light--their character.

A few years ago, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist, Angela Duckworth, got a bit more specific. She wrote that character formation means building up three types of strengths: strength of the heart (being kind, considerate, generous), strength of the mind (being curious, open-minded, having good judgment) and strength of the will (self-control, determination, courage).

Now every cadre of recruits falls into the hands of the dreaded drill sergeant—unkind, unforgiving, not prone to sympathy—at first hated, but later respected and even loved. The job of the sergeant is to build the strengths that Duckworth spoke about, strengths of thought, of emotion, and of will.

History has provided humanity with some of the greatest sergeants imaginable for training in becoming part of the Army of Light. One who stands out-- since his drills have stood the test of time for more than two thousand years-- is the Buddha (and who seems to be the one from whom Prof. Duckworth took her lead.) The 8-Fold Path of the Buddha was divided into three sections: Ethical Conduct, Mental Discipline, and Wisdom. In a very real way the Buddha was the first—and still greatest—of practical psychologists and the *Eightfold Path* the first self-help book, written in Sanskrit.

The first group of behaviors for new recruits to the Army of Light to practice are Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood (which ethical conduct is based on and leads to compassion.)

Right Speech means to refrain from telling lies and supporting lies. (Hitler’s big lie, that the Aryan race of light skinned, blue-eyed people were superior and chosen to lead the world, led

to the Holocaust. And the big lie of the 21st century, “the election was stolen” led to January 6.) It means to refrain from using abusive or hateful language or from using language that instigates abuse or hatred to grow in another. And finally, to refrain from silly, useless language and gossip.

My daughter Julia is in her early forties and she and her husband have two young teenage daughters. I asked her a few days ago whether she was still on Facebook and, if so, was she using it less than before, the same, or more. She said she and her group of close friends—all men and women about her age with children about the age of hers—had just been talking about the problem that social media was causing them. It used up precious time, caused anxiety and anger, and was absolutely addictive, for both parents and children. They all said they intended to reduce their use to a minimum or stop all together. As the Buddha said: for serenity stay away from useless, silly language and gossip.

Right Action means to abstain from stealing and other dishonest dealings, to abstain from sexual exploitation for selfish pleasure, and to help others achieve these same goals.

Right Livelihood means to engage in work that brings the least harm to others.

Mental discipline consists of Right Effort, Right Attentiveness and Right concentration.

Right Effort refers to the practice of using the will to prevent injurious states of mind from arising, to remove injurious states of mind when they do arise (e.g. that guy deliberately cut me off or “just one more cookie”), to exercise the will to cause healthy states of mind to arise, and to maintain healthy states of mind when they have arisen. (One more piece celery.)

Right Attentiveness is staying aware of sensations of the body and emotions, thoughts, and ideas as they occur. This means to stay awake and aware of the passions, thoughts, and biases that arise in human consciousness so that the power of these thoughts and emotions can be prevented from producing “thoughtless” behavior. This state was called *nirvana* or a state of “wokeness” (a term which for some odd reason seems to drive some people into frantic rejection, sort of how a vampire acts around sunlight.)

Right Concentration is emptying the mind of desires, thoughts, fears.

Finally, the Buddha wanted new recruits to the Army of Light to develop Wisdom. Wisdom consists of Right Thought and Right Understanding. Right Thought is detachment from self, putting others first; thoughts of love and of non-violence which extends to all beings. Right Understanding is the learning nature of being and the source and the power of light.

Most of us recruits would run screaming from this particular sergeant, despite his serene smile. But the Buddha knew how difficult the self-preparation and self-maintenance is for joining the Army of Light. After all, he said, “The one who has conquered himself is a far greater hero than he who has defeated a thousand times a thousand men. “

A final word about accepting the call to the Army of Light: there are no victims here. To claim victimhood robs a recruit of the core vitality necessary to become a warrior. History and circumstance will from time to time rob an individual or a group or party or a nation of justice—but that is a temporary defeat corrected over generations of effort and the effort will

be fed by the courage of men and women who see themselves, not as victims, but as warriors of the light and by the love of their fellow warriors who see that same light in them as in themselves.

I think this is what David Brooks saw when he made the following observation following the most recent federal election: “We need a social vision that is as morally compelling as identity politics but does a better job of describing reality. We need a national narrative that points us to some ideal and gives each of us a noble role in pursuing it. That’s the gigantic cultural task that lies ahead.”

Who are candidates for joining the Army of Light? Well, skin color makes no difference. Age makes no difference. Income makes no difference. Sexual orientation makes no difference. Country of origin makes no difference. Neither religious background nor its absence makes any difference. Political affiliation makes no difference. The **only requirement** is the still, small voice in every human heart that says, “Turn toward the light.”

George Lucas understood this as well: the strength of the Jedi warriors did not lie in the invisible potential light filling the universe and hidden in the darkness, but could only become visible and powerful when concentrated through the relentless dedication of an individual to concentrate and then release the saber of light within themselves.

Entering the Battle – Rev. Marie Manning

As I look out into the world of politics, I see approaches to solving potential armed conflict, almost unilaterally with military action as the means. Here in the USA, the Department of Defense, mitigating its propositions with so called “military action” - almost always means gearing up for combat.

Warfare. Defined as: engagement in or the activities involved in war or conflict. If warfare is the focus, and warfare with the tools encompassed therein, then war shall be the path and the outcome.

External wars and internal wars seem to reign here on Earth. That’s not the path of peace. That’s not the path of unity. Yet military combat operations are the “go to” method those in leadership have historically taken. That is the very nature of the design chosen by this nation, and many nations the world over: Warfare.

Yet - in our modern day - an alternative has been proposed: A Department of Peace. Heart Phoenix and Marianne Williamson are among the founders of *The Peace Alliance*, a nonprofit established in 2004 and re-established again in 2008 to promote the creation of a U.S. Department of Peace, a cabinet-level department of the executive branch of the federal government of the United States.

I was on the board of a local Peace Center in 2008 when there was a swell of promotion and publicity campaigning for this. And I was surprised that one of our members, a retired military officer, pointed out there was little need for a Department of Peace. As, through his military-trained-lens, he said, “the US already has a Department of Defense, that is responsible for providing the military forces needed to deter war and protect the security of our country.” The

idea of a Department of Peace has for more than two decades been met with this same opposition to the cause, even amid those actively striving for unity.

While holding true to their mission, the Peace Alliance also leaned into their offerings to educate, advocate, and mobilize people into action to transform systems and public policy toward a culture of peace. They promote the truth that: “Peace-building isn’t just the absence of conflict...it is a conscious action toward solving systemic issues that create that conflict.”

So it is with the **Army of Light**. Light is not simply the absence of dark. It shines through, perhaps even is most notably seen, amid deep darkness. *Light is not simply the absence of Dark. It shines through, perhaps even is most notably seen, amid deep darkness.*

And, as people of faith, if we are called to enter into a battle of any kind, it must be for the Army of Light! And our garrison is where we are at any point in our lives: **here**, in our local community. And our marching orders must have the goal to create peace and unity in our world, in the USA, and most particularly, in our local communities.

There are plenty of resources dedicated to warfare. What we need is a balancing, an alternate approach to impending battles. We need viable alternatives to vicious combat, in all its forms.

This is not a new idea! In fact, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, **Benjamin Rush**, signer of the Declaration of Independence, also envisioned a Department of Peace. He wrote an essay describing it in 1793 entitled, "A plan of a Peace-Office for the United States." His vision called for equal footing with the Department of War, which was the predecessor to the United States Department of Defense. Rush pointed out the effect of having a Department of Peace for the welfare of the United States in promoting and preserving perpetual peace in the United States.

Since that time there have been many advocates calling for versions of a Department of Peace. From 1925 when **Carrie Chapman Catt**, founder of the League of Women Voters, publicly suggested a cabinet-level Department of Peace and secretary of peace be established. In 1935 **Senator Matthew Neely** wrote and introduced the first bill calling for the creation of a United States Department of Peace. He reintroduced it in 1937 and 1939.

Glancing over the history, it’s noteworthy that every decade heralded senators and representatives who put forth bills of similar nature. Authors throughout the entirety of US history have also written about the benefits to a Government-led agency that focused on peace-building and unifying programs.

Benjamin Rush, a man of his day, went so far as to suggest that “every family be furnished at public expense, by the Secretary of this office, with an American edition of the Bible.” Now that would likely not be appropriate in the multi-cultural, multi-religious country we have grown into, yet his sentiment was one that was rooted in what he understood Christian ideals to be, for he went on to say in his essay, “Let the following sentence be inscribed in letters of gold over the door of every home in the United States: ‘*The Son of Man Came into the World, Not To Destroy Men's Lives, But To Save Them.*’ to inspire a veneration for human life...”

The essay goes on in explicit detail how and why this is necessary, much of the content reflecting the patriarchal prevalence of the era. Yet, in that context, envisioning America's communities and its citizens residing in peace, being protected and free.

Preachers are meant to "meet the moment." Sometimes we miss the mark. Rarely are we met with 100% approval ratings. Such is the case of Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde who was the featured preacher in one of this week's flurry of inaugural events. Many are vocally scolding her. Others are celebrating her courage and tenacity.

In her sermon she spoke about the foundations of Unity: The ones the Jesus of the Bible cautioned about not building upon sandy foundations, but, rather, solid ones. She discussed, what we here well know, the importance of honoring the inherent dignity of every human being. She called it, "A birthright of all people." She talked about seeking common ground where possible. And, indeed attempted to establish that with the President as she spoke directly to him. Endeavoring to reach his heart as a man who professes to believe he has been saved by god, *his* god and *her* god, and saved to do great things in what remains of his life. She offered a plea for *mercy* in the name of unity and for the good of all people.

One of our *Thoughts for Contemplation* today is the words of author and political and cultural commentator, **David Brooks**, who alerts us to the fact that we need a "narrative that points us to some ideal and gives each of us a noble role in pursuing it." As Rev. Budde says, "People are scared!" She was speaking on behalf of her community. As we must when we are given the opportunity to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

We must **bring light** into dark places. The most vulnerable among us are in need of Compassion, of Mercy, of Unity, of Peace, of Light. As such we are called to create it so that it Exists! We are called to promote it so that others hear the call and join in. We are called to issue invitations so that those seeking can find us. And, like all well-girded enlisted troops, we are called to fortify our platoon, to train thoroughly for the mission, so that we can function as an effective unit; so that we can win in this engagement.

What does winning look like? Expunging all hostilities in our communities. Eradicating the vapid fear and fearmongering that is the root of it all. It means not just having places of sanctuary, but being a community of sanctuary.

How do we prepare for this? Some may point to the U.S. Peace Corp and say, "Join that!" The Peace Corp was established in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy. Its mission is to promote world peace and friendship through global service. It does great work at a global scale.

Our work is local. It is here in Waterville, Maine, connected to our sibling UU congregations and our cousin liberal religious congregations of varying faith traditions. Our work is to shine the light here, to be emissaries of light. And to do that, we need to shore up our foundation and verify its stability.

The foundation of our faith. Is it still relevant? Is it the Light the world needs? Do we know how best to shine it, to direct it so that it is seen? We need to plan for regular maintenance of our fortress, our church, ensuring it is ready to welcome in those invited. We need to prep our

storehouses. We are inviting hungry people in. Hungry for knowledge, hungry for spirituality, hungry for community, hungry for literal food. Do we have sufficient supplies and resources to replenish them?

We also need to ensure we are strong. Warriors are known for their strength! Modern day calisthenic exercise is based on how ancient Greek warriors trained. It uses bodyweight exercises to maximize strength, flexibility, equilibrium and neuromuscular coordination. The result is incredible muscle control and the ability to pose in gravity-defying positions. Taken in a literal way, warriors need to be healthy to champion their causes. Entertaining calisthenics as metaphor, the same is true. We need to train ourselves to ensure we are mentally and emotionally strong, spiritual and intellectually adept at pivoting as needed to meet the need, to meet the moment.

Warriors also cultivate awareness of the terrain and its inhabitants. Warriors know who their enemies and allies are. Warriors know who they are protecting and what their greatest needs are. And they take action, often preemptively.

Paulo Coelho de Souza, Brazilian novelist and lyricist, often lauded as a Mystic, in his book, "Warriors of the Light" offers several thoughts to consider. He says, "A warrior cannot lower his head - otherwise he loses sight of the horizon of his dreams. If he waits for the ideal moment, he will never set off." The time is now. "Because he believes in miracles, miracles begin to happen." And he says, "A warrior is always aware of what is worth fighting for... and he never wastes his time over provocations."

This is our work, as the Army of Light.

Closing Words – Dennis Perkins

Have we bitten off more than we can chew—with this Army of Light business? A little church with a small but loyal congregation? Why worry about the inner battle that the Buddha challenges us with in order to prepare for the outer battles against the forces of darkness all around us? Often the fight can seem lonely and the times perverse, but we are not alone. The campfires of the Army of Light shine across the globe, as they have done for thousands of years. We are not alone.

Listen to the words of a kinder, more compassionate, Republican president, George H.W. Bush, as he delivered the State of the Union Address on January 29, 1991:

"Tonight, I come before this house, and the American people, with an appeal for renewal. This is not merely a call for new government initiatives, it is a call for new initiative in government, in our communities, and from every American—to prepare for the next American century. America has always led by example. So who among us will set this example? Which of our citizens will lead us in this next American century? Everyone who steps forward today, to get one addict off drugs; to convince one troubled teen-ager not to give up on life; to comfort one AIDS patient; to help one hungry child. We have within our reach the promise of renewed America. We can find meaning and reward by serving some purpose higher than ourselves—a shining purpose, the illumination of a thousand points of light. It is expressed by all who know the irresistible force of a child's hand, of a friend who stands by you and stays there—a volunteer's generous gesture, an idea that is simply right."

Recall the words of battalion leader Martin Luther King from his 1964 Nobel acceptance speech: "I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality."

And again the words of Tennyson's Ulysses, who though old and tired, still promised

"One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

As far as we know the universe began in a burst of light 14 billion years ago and that light has been forming, reforming, and transforming into everything since then as it flows through each thing in the universe, including you-know-who. You are the saber of light and you are the Army of Light.