

THE FOURTH ONE

Here is the text of the Worship Service recorded on Saturday, March 14 for distribution on March 15.

Welcome to our experiment in online video worship at UUCA. I'm Rev. Mark Ward, lead minister, here with Minister of Faith Development Rev. Claudia Jimenez, Music Director Les Downs and Worship Associate Charlie Marks to offer you an abbreviated, recorded worship service, with Director of Administration Linda Topp helping us wrangle this Zoom technology.

Our service will include a story from Rev. Claudia, reflections from Charlie, a moment of meditation from me, music from Les, a homily from me, announcements from Charlie and a closing.

We miss having you with us. It is a little odd speaking into a computer screen with an empty sanctuary before us. But you are in our minds and hearts as we gather here, and we look forward to being with you again once the pandemic we are experiencing has passed and we feel it is safe for all of us to gather. Meanwhile, do what you need to do to stay safe and in this interconnected age use whatever technology you have available to stay in touch.

To begin our service, I offer these words from Albert Schweitzer for lighting our chalice: "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us." In this troubled time may we be light bearers for one another.

And now, Claudia.

(REV. CLAUDIA JIMENEZ, MINISTER OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT)

Welcome. We are glad you are able to connect with us this morning. These are challenging time as our families deal with health safety precautions, the possibility of school closings or working remotely as well as financial concerns. Please know we are doing what we can to keep us connected and provide pastoral support. Staff will be working remotely and in person to create online opportunities for virtual connection.

Despite the social distancing and fear many of us may be feeling, we encourage you to find ways of noticing the beauty around you, the signs of spring and the blooming trees and flowers. Go on hikes, walk around your neighborhood, spend more time on your hobbies or reading. Take time to share how you feel. Treat each other with care and enjoy the time you have together. Take deep breathes, and check in on each other: phone calls are safe ;0) And know that your ministers and staff are reachable by phone if you need to talk. This community is here for each other, even if at this moment we are unable to gather.

Story

Today our focus is our fourth principle, searching for what is true. Part of the search involves the search for meaning, which in many religious communities centers around the concept of a god or gods. Our story this morning is adapted from a reflection by religious educator Mary Ann Moore who share 4 different ideas about god from different people:

One person says they are not really sure about God. But every once in a while, when they are in their garden, they have a feeling they know what God is. When they are down on their knees digging in the earth, putting seeds in the ground, covering them with soil, knowing they'll grow into beautiful plants. They feel so amazed that something like that can happen. What makes those plants grow that way? They think that is what god is.

The second person is not sure about God either. But if she had to say, she would describe god like the fiery orange-yellow-red energy that comes from the big explosion called Big Bang that happened at the beginning of the world. That energy traveled out into space and slowly, over time became all things in the universe: our planet, you and me. It's in everything. Even when things go bad. That's what she thinks god is.

The third person say he thinks god is love. He thinks of god as being in people's hearts whenever they care and support each other. If he were to draw a picture of God, it would be a circle of people, side by side, holding hands. He would draw a big heart on each person. That is his idea of God – the love people have for each other and all beings.

The final person shares a story from their childhood. Feeling lonely and excluded by other children, this person would take walks in the woods behind their home, and on one of those walks developed a sense that she was part of everything around her, the grasses, the flowers, the trees, the birds. She felt she was a part of all there is, and knew she was love. That feeling could be her idea of God, but she doesn't use that word.

What is your idea of God? This might be a good time to pause and share your thoughts with each other or reflect quietly on your understanding of the concept of God.

OPENING from Worship Associate Charlie Marks

Twenty years ago Rita and I first ventured into a UU in Springfield Massachusetts. Following a wonderful service I was looking over their literature rack and saw a brochure describing the seven principles. Reading through it, I was stopped in my tracks by the 4th one, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. That was me!

One Christmas morning, about two weeks before my twelfth birthday, under the tree was a spectacular gift. My father had a workshop in the garage and a generous assortment of woodworking tools. He had built this beautiful box and painted it a glossy red. The box opened like a book stood on end and on one side was a microscope and the other side held a rack of test tubes. My very own science lab!

My mother was a teacher and my father was an engineer. Their message to me had always been crystal clear, "Look for the evidence, then go there."

However, there's a downside to science and reason. In this country especially, we're surrounded by the competing cultures of the revealed religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. We're constantly assaulted by superstition and myths. Fantasy competes with reality. For many, perhaps most, fantasy wins. How do we function in that society?

My solution, perhaps our solution, lies right here in this sanctuary, on this campus, in this society for which we advocate . . . where we continually engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

MEDITATION

A BRAVE AND STARTLING TRUTH

by Maya Angelo

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
 Traveling through casual space
 Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
 To a destination where all signs tell us
 It is possible and imperative that we learn
 A brave and startling truth

And when we come to it
 To the day of peacemaking
 When we release our fingers
 From fists of hostility
 And allow the pure air to cool our palms

When we come to it
 When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate
 And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean
 When battlefields and coliseum
 No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters
 Up with the bruised and bloody grass
 To lie in identical plots in foreign soil

When the rapacious storming of the churches
 The screaming racket in the temples have ceased
 When the pennants are waving gaily

When the banners of the world tremble
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze

When we come to it
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce
When land mines of death have been removed
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace
When religious ritual is not perfumed
By the incense of burning flesh
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake
By nightmares of abuse

When we come to it
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids
With their stones set in mysterious perfection
Nor the Gardens of Babylon
Hanging as eternal beauty
In our collective memory
Not the Grand Canyon
Kindled into delicious color
By Western sunsets

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji
Stretching to the Rising Sun
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores
These are not the only wonders of the world

When we come to it
We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace
We, this people on this mote of matter
In whose mouths abide cankerous words
Which challenge our very existence
Yet out of those same mouths
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness
That the heart falters in its labor
And the body is quieted into awe

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
 Whose hands can strike with such abandon
 That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
 Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
 That the haughty neck is happy to bow
 And the proud back is glad to bend
 Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
 We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
 We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
 Created on this earth, of this earth
 Have the power to fashion for this earth
 A climate where every man and every woman
 Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
 Without crippling fear

When we come to it
 We must confess that we are the possible
 We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
 That is when, and only when
 We come to it.

SERMON – THE FOURTH ONE – Rev. Mark Ward, Lead Minister

Twenty years ago this fall, two months after I had entered seminary, I received a letter in the mail from my father-in-law, David.

In years past, on his trips to our home, David had often stayed over and joined us for worship at the Unitarian church that we attended. David himself was not a churchgoer, though he had been raised Presbyterian. But he was curious about my decision to end a career in journalism and make my way in ministry.

I had written him a letter describing my course of study, and he began his letter of reply saying that it seemed “intellectually intensive.” But then he went on to talk about what had struck him about our services.

Attending our churches, he wrote, “I have always assumed I was surrounded by good, honest, ethical, decent people.” But it puzzled him that he observed little mention of “God or Christian beliefs.” So, as pleasant as the experience was, he said, “I have also concluded that they subscribe to no formal religion.”

Perhaps others of you have heard similar observations. I can see how, after growing up in a mainline Christian church, worship at a Unitarian Universalist church can feel a little disorienting. The order of worship looks familiar, but something seems missing. They hear no unified doctrine on God, or Jesus, or scripture.

For some, this is evidence that if Unitarian Universalism is a religion at all, it is religion lite, people who aren't willing to take the risk and do the hard work to develop a firm theological stand. This was suggested by a woman I met standing in line at a bookstore in Hyde Park, Chicago, who, on learning I was Unitarian Universalist, responded, "Oh, isn't that the religion where they pray to: to whom it may concern?"

It's a cute dig, but it also misses an essential strength of our religious movement that I find embodied in our Fourth Principle: "We covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

It's all centered in that word "search," and in that word, I would argue, lies the central point that distinguishes us from any other religious tradition. Charlie is not the first person to have found themselves in our fourth principle. I am another. There is so much that is beautiful and compelling to me in our religious tradition, but without the fourth principle, I'd be gone tomorrow.

I am not interested in religion that teaches final, indisputable truth; I am drawn to religion centered in search, a religion that tells its adherents as Charlie says his parents taught him: "Look for the evidence, then go there."

The "intellectually intensive" study I pursued in seminary taught me much about the richness of human imagining that feeds a religious impulse that seems to me native to our species. We are born both to wonder and to wander: so when we lock ourselves into doctrine. choose among sheep and goats, declare true believers and heretics, we set ourselves up for needless conflict that only diminishes human society.

One of our preeminent theologians, James Luther Adams, observed that it is the nature of this liberal religion to, in his words, "live on the frontiers and to break new paths." We represent a tradition dating back millennia that has challenged settled doctrine and pushed for intellectual integrity.

It dates back to King John Sigismund of Transylvania who declared 500 years ago that his subjects should be free to follow their own faith, otherwise, he said, "their souls would not be satisfied." Or the Swiss theologian Sebastian Castellio, who urged Martin Luther to leave people free to follow what their minds declare. "There are, I know, persons who insist that we should believe even against reason," he said. "It is, however, the worst of all errors, and it is laid on me to fight it."

The American poet Adrienne Rich framed it a little differently five centuries later: “There comes a time,” she wrote, “when we have to take ourselves seriously or die,” when “the incantations and rhythms we’ve moved to thoughtlessly” are something we can no longer bear.

I have heard those words resonate in the stories of many people who find their way to this congregation. They found themselves walking away from church communities whose teachings no longer spoke to them, or just drifting along in their lives with a vague sense of dissatisfaction. Something within told them it was time to take themselves, what they truly feel is and should be important in their lives, more seriously.

This pattern may help explain why our forebears 35 years ago placed this one in the center of our seven principles. We can illustrate how our seven principles relate to each other using an arch. The first and seventh principles – affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the interdependent web of existence, of which we all are a part – ground us as people and as a community. But our fourth principle, affirming a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, acts as a keystone, holding together all the others, giving the structure strength and integrity.

In the end, what all this gives us is not a do-your-own-thing hodge-podge, as some of our critics would charge, but a nimble, flexible, ever-evolving structure: not the might fortress of the Protestants, but more like a web.

And don’t take my word for it: that was the judgment of Tim Berners-Lee, the British computer scientist who was one of the inventors of the World Wide Web. Berners-Lee became a Unitarian Universalist some 30 years ago while living in New England. He wrote in his book “Weaving the Web,” that, “for me, who enjoyed the acceptance and diverse community of the Internet, the Unitarian church was a great fit. Peer-to-peer relationships are encouraged wherever they are appropriate, very much as the world wide web encourages a hypertext link to be made wherever it is appropriate.”

The image that emerges from this is something like the Buddhist concept of Indra’s net, made up of individual jewels, each with their own integrity, linked in an interconnecting web where they balance and reflect each other.

In an interview, Berners-Lee observed that “in a Web structure each person behaves like a neuron in a brain, trying to figure out how best to live in the world and play their part.” Both the Web and UUism, he said, “have a real appreciation of the value of individuals and the value of systems in which individuals play their role, with both a firm sense of their own identity and a firm sense of some common good.”

That process nicely describes what we might call “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning:” individuals deeply interconnected, searching freely with an eye to the common good.

Such is the work of we, this people, on a small and lonely planet, traveling through casual space, people whose hands can strike with abandon yet can also touch with healing, irresistible tenderness, seeking to realize a brave and startling truth: that we have the power to fashion for this earth a climate where every person can live freely without sanctimonious piety without crippling fear, so that, when we come to it we are able to see in each other, the possible, the miraculous, true wonders of this world.

CLOSING

As we look ahead to the work of our congregation, I invite you to hold close these words of Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky:

Every hand that we don't shake
must become a phone call that we place.
Every embrace that we avoid
must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern.
Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another,
must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.

We close our service with these words of my colleague Lynn Unger, her poem:

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.