

## 4<sup>th</sup> July 2021 – ‘Telling our stories’

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** ‘Nobody knows me at all’, The Weepies

<https://youtu.be/OBzA76QGqz8>

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome. That was The Weepies singing ‘Nobody knows me at all’.

Do you sometimes feel like that - that no one really knows you? That you show up at work, at the meeting, or at church as you have done today, and people say hello, and maybe they’re friendly (I hope they are here, anyway) and perhaps you have a little chat about this and that but still...it feels a bit superficial...and you go home again wondering whether anyone really knows you at all?

If you’ve ever felt that, then this service is for you. The unknown you. The person who shows up, and does stuff, and says stuff, and chats and laughs and plays along with it all, as best they can. But still feels unheard. Unseen. And yearns for the chance to tell their story, and for it to be received, given time and space, and respect. It’s for anyone who longs to step out from behind the mask of pleasant social interaction and say actually, this is who I am. As Kate did last week

So let’s begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle. *If you’re at home do light a candle with me if you would like to.*

As we gather in the light of this flame once more, may we open our hearts and minds. May we turn to this day that is yet to be written. May we be open to hearing a story yet to be told. And may we together write a new story into being, one that is rich with love and beauty and hope.

Amen

Let’s sing...

**HYMN 62 Here we have gathered**

Here we have gathered, gathered side by side;  
circle of kinship, come and step inside!  
May all who seek here find a kindly word;  
may all who speak here feel they have been heard.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Here we have gathered, called to celebrate  
days of our lifetime, matters small and great;  
we of all ages, women, children men  
infants and sages, sharing what we can.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Life has its battles, sorrows, and regret:  
but in the shadows, let us not forget:  
we who now gather know each other's pain;  
kindness can heal us: as we give, we gain.  
Sing now in friendship this, our hearts' own song.

*Words by Alicia S Carpenter*

## **PRAYER**

Beloved

I am alone. Or at least that's how it often feels.

I do my best to meet the expectations, both real and imagined, of this world.

I still try to make my parents proud, even though they're no longer even alive.

I yearn for acceptance from my family and friends, from my colleagues and my community.

Hardest of all, I strive – and fail – to meet my own expectations of myself.

And yet I am not alone. Not really. For you are always with me. And I am eternally in you.

And your expectations are only that I be myself, fully alive.

And your hope is only that I will find delight in the beauty and possibility of the universe.

And be kind and generous to myself and to others.

You only ever want what's best for me and for this world.

Help me to remember this, and to live in the light of its truth.

Thank you. Amen.

**STORY:** The story is sufficient

*By Elie Wiesel, from The Gates of the Forest.*

When the great Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light the fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Years later when a disciple of the Ba'al Shem-Tov, who was the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, another rabbi, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

The years passed. And it fell to Rabbi Israel of Ryzhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient."

And it was sufficient.

**READING** Padraig O'Tuama, from 'Imagining Peace'. He's from Corrymeela Community, Northern Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organization. He's talking about stories, and tells one his mother told him.

'One time my mother, who lived with a long and painful experience of depression over decades really, said to me casually over a cup of tea when I was only half tuned in 'Have I ever told you about the time when the Virgin Mary appeared to me?' And I said – and I started to listen then, certainly – I said, 'No you haven't actually, I think I would have remembered that.'

And she said 'I was lying on the bed, in the middle of the day sleeping, during that difficult time.' And she said, 'I woke up because there was a strange woman in the room. She was very ordinary-looking, around 70. She look like she was dressed out of Primark but I knew it was the Virgin Mary.'

And she said, 'I felt the depression on the bed where she sat down', and then in my mother's experience, the Virgin Mary looked at my mother and said to her, 'You've never like me very much have you?' And my mother said 'No'. And she said, 'That's all right'.

And into the room came my little brother and my mother looked at my little brother and then looked back, and nobody was there.

Now did that happen? Does it matter? The Zen Buddhists have an understanding that when the wrong question is asked you can say 'Mu'. Because sometimes to ask the wrong question is to inhibit the possibility of goodness that is present in the story. And so did that really happen? Is it true? Mu. Did it mean a whole world? Yes. Did it open up the possibility of a life and a breathing that could breathe life where there had been little previously? Yes. These are the kinds of things we need for the tired spaces of our world.

## **REFLECTION**

Candles of joy and concern

**INTERLUDE** 'To a wild rose', E MacDowell, performed by Philip Croft

## **ADDRESS**

'Have I ever told you about the time when the Virgin Mary appeared to me?' What a great opening for a story! I wanted to tell you a story, but I can't compete with that. Maybe later...

Stories have such power in our lives, don't they?

We're constantly telling them in order to make sense and meaning of the world. Our scriptures and myths, literature and poetry, our films and dramas, our songs, computer

games and graphic novels – it's all storytelling of one form or another, all ways in which we reflect us back to ourselves, and share what it means to be human – what it means to be us.

We tell stories to ourselves too, all the time: about who we are, and how we are, and why we are the way we are. Our monkey brains are constantly busy, explaining or justifying what we've just said or done. Some of the stories we tell ourselves are kind and forgiving, inspiring and encouraging. Others are undermining and limiting. Cruel even. Sometimes we repeat them so often we end up believing them.

Often we construct narratives that conceal the truth of who we are, preferring to present versions of ourselves that seem more acceptable maybe, or more impressive, perhaps. And we embellish our stories, sometimes heightening them for dramatic effect, sometimes editing and softening them – to make the telling and the listening more bearable.

We tell stories so we remember. To honour those we have loved and lost; to give witness to the joys and traumas we've lived through. We tell stories in order to pass on our history, our customs and our beliefs, from one generation to the next. And so we live under these great narrative arcs about our families, our nations, their loves and their conflicts, their oppression and their liberation. We live in the shelter and community of these stories, and also in their shadow. Our stories shape us and define us. For good and for ill.

Are they true? Mu. It's the wrong question.

As Pdraig O'Tuoma says 'we don't tell stories as *they* are, we tell them as *we* are'.

As a community of Spirit, we yearn to uncover truth rather than facts. And so we aim to honour each other's real – and sometimes raw - experience, and to build meaningful connection and relationship. Which means telling stories that reveal what's true about ourselves, rather than conceal it. And we need those stories to be heard and acknowledged. Perhaps we don't do that enough.

After next week's service I'll be travelling up to the Nightingale Centre in Great Hucklow for 'Ministry in the Making', which is a residential training week for new and student Unitarian ministers. I'm on the leadership team. One of the exercises we always ask the participants to do is to go on a 'Credo walk', which is just a walk with one other person – usually someone you don't know, or at least not well - with the invitation to share deeply what's true for you in

the moment. Sometimes we give them a question to get them started, for example 'How is your heart?'

'How is your heart?' is the kind of question that elicits a deeper kind of answer. It calls you in to intimacy and gives you permission and encouragement to share your story, without pretence. 'How is your heart?' It is a disarming question, and one we ought to be able to ask each other in spiritual community, but usually don't. Perhaps because sufficient space and time have to be made to truly listen to the answer.

But then an important part of the work of spiritual community is to make that time and space.

O'Tuoma puts it this way. He says:

'We have to find ways for our stories to be imaginative enough, broad enough, spacious enough, open to the imagination, open to the possibility of creating curiosity and relationships where there currently are none. Open to the possibility of trust in the capacity to ask a good question, or when you're confused to say, 'I've never met somebody like you, tell me more about you.' This is what is the possibility of the imagination in storytelling, firmly rooted in the reality of now, firmly open to the wide skies of possibility that exist in human encounter and human imagination and human relationships.'

I began by saying I wanted to tell you a story about myself, but couldn't compete with the Virgin Mary. That's a poor excuse, of course. This isn't a competition. A good story, in spiritual terms, is not an entertaining anecdote, it's a revelation. It's a story that opens us up, and so requires taking a risk. It's not a tale we've told a hundred times before and always gets a laugh – that's fine for the pub. I'm talking about the kinds of stories where we allow our vulnerability to be seen.

So here is one moment in my life in which I felt particularly vulnerable and powerless.

When mother had become depressed and confused to the extent that neighbours had found her sitting in their front garden, it was clear something was wrong – in fact she had a brain tumour, but nobody knew that then. However, there was another problem too. My mother also had a history – a story, if you like. Years previously she had had a breakdown. And this was on her medical records. And, to be fair, she *was* depressed. So the GP was convinced all she needed was a holiday to cheer her up.

But by the time she had become unable to stand or walk - she could no longer work out how to move her feet - I was reduced to pleading with the doctor on the phone one Sunday night to do something because I couldn't cope alone.

And so eventually, and very reluctantly, the GP had her admitted to hospital... but to a ward for people with serious mental illness. My mother did not have a mental illness. I knew that. But it was completely beyond my power to convince anyone else. I suppose I seemed like a typical worried and pushy daughter, she was a typical depressed housewife. We were stuck in that story. And the night I left her in that ward, frightened and alone, all I could do was tearfully beg the night staff, who were in a side room at the time, chatting and laughing, not to forget about her. It wasn't enough. But it was the best I could do.

It's so scary not to be heard. The stuff of nightmares, literally. Yet so many people's stories do go unheard, either because they can't or daren't tell them (how do you ever get to tell your story if you have learning difficulties, or if you're a refugee or homeless) or because there is no one willing or able to listen, or see beyond the story they've already made up about you themselves. I've no doubt you have experienced times when you've felt similarly unseen and unheard, or worse. When the chasm between your experience and others' ability to hear it left you feeling alone and abandoned.

Of course it's true that stories can imprison us, or at the very least they can limit us. But when our stories are opened up and shared, and allowed to breathe, they can set us free. Then is when the telling – and the listening – becomes the releasing. Then the sharing becomes an act of love. Then the story resonates universally and we all grow as a result.

Then, yes, the story is sufficient.

#### **HYMN 42 (P)** From the light of days remembered

From the light of days remembered burns a beacon bright and clear,  
Guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear.  
*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;*  
*When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;*  
*When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,*  
*Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.*

From the stories of our living rings a song both brave and free,  
Calling pilgrims still to witness to the life of liberty.

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;  
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;  
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,  
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.*

From the dreams of youthful vision comes a new, prophetic voice,  
Which demands a deeper justice built by our courageous choice.

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;  
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;  
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,  
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.*

## **NOTICES**

There will be chances to tell your stories of the heart. I will be offering spaces online in a congregational gathering on Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup>. Heart & Soul will be on the theme of story on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> July. And in person in services in church next week and on 25th. Please let me know if there's something you'd like to share, something you haven't told us before.

## **CLOSING WORDS** by Padraig O'Tuama

We need stories of belonging that move us towards each other, not from each other.  
We need ways of being human that open up the possibility of being alive together.  
We need ways of navigating our differences that deepen our curiosity, that deepen our friendship, that deepen our capacity to disagree, that deepen the argument of being alive.  
This is what we need. This is what will save us.

*Extinguish chalice*

## **CLOSING MUSIC** Be Yourself, Graham Nash

<https://youtu.be/H7G9O2zPnmc>