

9th May 2021 – ‘Are you in a good place?’

led by Rev Kate Whyman, reader Joan Wilkinson

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Calling me home’, by Rhiannon Giddens

<https://youtu.be/3siE2xbVD34>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome. Welcome to you all, and especially to anyone here for the first time, including our visitors from Brighton! Hello! It’s wonderful to see familiar faces and new ones too, and a great pleasure to have you with us this week.

Welcome, however and wherever you are joining us from this morning. You are welcome with your joy and your sorrow, your anticipation and your apprehension, your faith and your doubt, your optimism and your concern. You are invited to be here, just as you are.

I shall begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice flame, the symbol of our free Unitarian faith. *If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now, if not this flame is for us all.*

We light this flame to mark this moment that unites us, as we remember – once again – that we share a common humanity, are breathed by the same spirit, nourished by the same planet, and spin in the same universe. This simple light offers us a point of connection and – for all our glorious diversity – it is a symbol of our unity.

Tomorrow is the start of ‘Dying Matters Awareness Week’. Dying Matters exists to encourage a more open culture in which it’s ok to talk about death, in which people feel able to listen and support those who are planning for their end of life, as well as those who are dying and those who have been bereaved. This year the theme of the week is ‘Are you in a good place to die?’ In other words, have you had the conversations, and made the preparations you can, that will help you to die well when the time comes?

However, since dying is an inevitable and essential part of living, the question ‘Are you in a good place?’ feels like it’s one we might also want to ask about our lives right now, and as we come out of lockdown, with all that that entails.

Let's begin with a prayer...

PRAYER

Spirit of Life and Love

Be with us now.

We want to give thanks for our many blessings.

We yearn to connect with our deepest selves, and with each other,
and with the great mystery that is You.

May we be prepared to give of ourselves: of our time, our attention,
and our willingness to reach out across space and dimension.

May we be ready to receive whatever moments of grace or inspiration may arrive.

Let us open ourselves up to the possibility of your presence and guidance
in this hour, and in the coming week.

Spirit of All that is, and was, and ever shall be.

Be with us now. Amen

Let's sing...

1st hymn: 152 (P) Thanks be for these

Thanks be for these, life's holy times,
moments of grief, days of delight;
triumph and failure intertwine,
shaping our vision of the right.

Thanks be for these, for birth and death,
life in between with meaning full;
holy becomes the quickened breath;
we celebrate life's interval.

Thanks be for these, ennobling art,
images welcome to our sight,
music caressing ear and heart,
inviting us to loftier height.

Thanks be for these, who question why,
who noble motives do obey,
those who know how to live and die,
comrades who share this holy way.

Thanks be for these, we celebrate,
sing and rejoice, our trust declare;
press all our faith into our fate;
bless now the destiny we share.

16th C Hungarian melody, words © Richard Seward Gilbert, Joyce Timmerman Gilbert & UUA

STORY: Concentration and compassion, from Buddhism (adapted from Bill Darlison's anthology of the same name)

Once a young Chinese man called Ling left home and went off in search of wisdom. He wanted to know the most important things in life: how he could live happily without causing pain to other people. He went from teacher to teacher but none of them seemed able to answer his questions. Eventually he came across an old monastery in a very remote and secluded part of the country. He asked to see the Abbot, and was granted an audience.

'What are you seeking, my son?' asked the Abbot.

'I want to know how I can live my life happily without causing pain to others,' replied Ling.

'And is it possible to learn this quickly?'

'Mm,' replied the Abbot. 'First you must tell me something about yourself. What have you done with your life so far? What have you studied? What are you good at?'

'I've not studied much, and I'm not really good at anything,' said Ling. 'I come from a wealthy family and to be honest I've spent most of my time in idleness.

I can play chess, though. I passed many enjoyable hours playing with my father's servants so I became quite skilled at it.'

The Abbot thought for a moment and then said, 'I think I can help you, but first you must agree to do what I say without question.' Ling tentatively agreed.

The Abbot called to one of the Brothers and told him to set up the chessboard. He said: 'Brother Ru, when you entered this monastery many years ago, you promised you would obey any order I gave you, no matter how difficult or dangerous the task. Today I'm going to really test your obedience. I want you to play chess against this young man. He says it's the only thing he does well, so he's probably very good at it. But this will be no ordinary game. Whoever loses will have his head cut off! And with these chilling words, the Abbot took a huge sword from behind his chair and held it menacingly above the chessboard. Ling and Ru were in no doubt that he meant what he said.

The game began. At first Ling was so nervous that he made elementary blunders and lost some important pieces. He could feel the sweat trickling down his neck. His hands were clammy and his mouth was dry. But then as he began to concentrate, and focus his attention on the game, his position improved. Now his opponent became agitated and started playing erratically, losing one piece after another.

Ling looked carefully at him. He seemed kind and intelligent, and his face showed the wisdom that had come from many years of study and meditation. 'How can I let his man die?' he thought. 'His life is worth much more than mine.'

And so Ling started to play deliberately badly, so that Ru could win.

As the game was nearing completion, and Ling was resigning himself to his death, the Abbot suddenly struck the chessboard with his sword, scattering all the remaining pieces over the table and the floor.

'The game is ended,' said the Abbot. 'No one will lose his head.'

Turning to Ling he said, 'Only two things are required in life and you have displayed them both today. When you were playing the game you concentrated with all your might because your life was at stake. But then you realized your opponent had a right to live too, perhaps even more so, and you showed pity.

'You have answered your own question: the most important things in life are concentration and compassion. If you cultivate these two virtues you will live happily and you will not cause pain to others.'

READING 'Birth is a beginning' by Alvin I Fine, from 'A Jewish Book of Comfort'

Birth is a beginning
And death is a destination.
And life is a journey:
From childhood to maturity
And youth to age;
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
And then, perhaps, to wisdom;
From weakness to strength
Or strength to weakness –
And often, back again;
From health to sickness
And back, we pray, to health again;
From offence to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion,
And grief to understanding –
From fear to faith;
From defeat to defeat to defeat –
Until looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey,
Stage by stage,
A sacred pilgrimage.

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
And life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage –
To life everlasting.

REFLECTION

I invite you now into a time of silence for your own prayer, meditation, contemplation. If you would like to share a joy or a sorrow in your life at the moment.

INTERLUDE 'Art thou troubled?' by Handel. Performed by Brandon Hornsby-Selvin, tenor; Adam Podd, piano.

<https://youtu.be/Sqv5wnBMLag>

ADDRESS

Are you troubled? Or are you in a good place right now? And if you answered yes to that, what I wonder do you mean by it?

Do you mean that you have your life all planned and sorted? If so, great! I'd love to meet you. Or perhaps you mean that you have a sense at the moment that you know what you're doing and why you're doing it? Maybe it means you'd feel able to describe your life to yourself and others, as though it made some kind of sense? Or maybe it's just a way of saying 'I'm OK, thanks for asking'. And possibly waving away any further awkward questions.

Like Death Cafes, which we've held here, with friends from Brighton, Dying Matters Awareness Week asks us are we 'in a good place to die', which sounds a bit of a riddle. But it just means have we thought about it? Have we considered, for example, where we'd like to die – at home, or in a hospice, perhaps? Have we written down an advance plan for the kind of care we'd like to receive – or definitely wouldn't want to receive – when the time comes? It means, are we able to talk about how we feel about dying, and have conversations with friends and loved ones about how they feel about it? And have we taken any practical steps, like making a will, planning a funeral, and generally getting our affairs in order.

Well, have you? It's definitely tempting to put all these things off. I know I had to be chivvied into making a will, by people who are here today, actually. (Thank you, you know who you are.)

And perhaps that's because they all hinge on taking one essential first step, which is to look the inevitability of our own death squarely in the face. To befriend the only final destination

that's available to us, on this earth at least, with interest and curiosity, rather than fear and denial.

Our culture is one that's still not comfortable with dying. We see it as failure and tragedy. Yet, though the loss of a loved one – particularly when that loss comes early or in difficult circumstances or is someone really close to us – can of course be heartbreaking, death itself is surely the gift that's 'calling us home', as some of you will have heard Rhiannon Giddens singing earlier. And not only that, but the quality and honesty of our relationship with death profoundly shapes and colours and how we live.

In our story, the young seeker Ling, wants to know how to live happily without causing pain to others. He seems like a nice boy, though not for him a lifetime of patiently sitting in silent meditation. He wants quick answers.

The older and wiser Abbot understands how the spectre of impending death can focus the mind enormously. And so, Ling finds himself playing chess with a sword literally hanging over his head. At first it's as though he's never played before in his life. He panics and makes rookie errors. He loses his pieces in much the way he risks losing his head. But soon he settles and finds his centre. And when he focuses his mind and concentrates on the situation in front of him, and on what he needs to do, he begins to play well.

We might now expect Ling to go ahead and win, in order to save his life. But something surprising happens. There is a moment in which he lifts his eyes and looks at his opponent. And finds himself suddenly struck by Brother Ru's qualities, which he sees are at least equal to, if not greater, than his own. And in this simple but startling moment of perception Ling changes tack and chooses to lose the game instead. The sword of death hanging over him is no longer a source of fear, to be avoided at all costs, but now offers up to him a reason to love and an opportunity do the right thing. He has made his peace with it.

We could say that Ling finds himself 'in a good place to die', which it turns out, is also a good place in which to live. It is the way of concentration and compassion, in which we may find happiness without causing harm to others.

In these limbo-like weeks we are in the process of making a transition, not from life to death (although we are of course always making that transition) but from lockdown to freedom.

Some of us may be excited, others of us may be apprehensive, or maybe - like me - you feel a mix of emotions about how this long awaited emergence feels, and what kind of a world it is that we are re-entering. And that's fine, and normal, and inevitable. And just as there's no benefit to be gained from denying our mortality, there is no benefit either in suppressing difficult or confusing feelings. They are part of life, and to be accepted. What matters is only what we do with them.

So how about we take on board the lessons of Dying Matters Awareness Week, and apply them to our living, too. Let's take time and make spaces to talk about how we feel, and think about what might help us navigate the changes ahead. Let's do what we can to ease this strange and unfamiliar journey, for ourselves and for each other, and make plans for it, as best we can. Let's pay attention to what is real and true for us, and choose to meet each day with an open mind, and a loving heart, with curiosity and compassion.

And then, whatever happens – for we can never know, either in our living or in our dying, quite what the future will hold – but whatever happens we can have faith that the spirit of love will be with us.

And that we will be in exactly the place we're meant to be.

Which is 'in a good place'.

Blessed be.

Let's sing...

2nd hymn: 116 (P) O let us now our voices raise

O let us now our voices raise
in invocation and in praise;
O let us sing with hearts inspired
by love that's ever mindful fired.

For though we sing a mighty song,
louder than any angel throng,
the veil of truth will not be rent
unless each word is thought and meant.

For though we sing as angels sweet
our melodies will not be meet,
no holy purpose will they find
unless our hearts be warm and kind.

So, sing we loud and sing we well,
word, thought and heart our loving tell!
Let our compassion fill the air,
our hymn a true and worthy prayer!

Words © Peter Galbraith

CLOSING WORDS

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
And life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage –
To life everlasting.

May we each live that journey well, with attention and loving compassion for ourselves, for each other, and for the world.
Amen.

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC

Beautiful Life, Harry Pane
<https://youtu.be/GFWiozwck8s>