

11th April 2021 – ‘Becoming who we are’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC

‘Though I may speak with bravest fire’, by Koiné

<https://youtu.be/AXSI8krPwx0>

This is hymn 174 in our purple hymnbooks, though we don't have our own recording of it. It's based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

Though I may speak with bravest fire
and have the gift to all inspire
and have not love, my words are vain
as sounding brass and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess
and striving so my love profess
but not be given by love within,
the profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control,
our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed;
by this we worship and are freed.

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone.

You are welcome here. Whether you've become a regular participant in these services, or this is your first time here. Whether you come seeking shelter from the storm or inspiration for living; as someone who today is full of joy, or who perhaps feels empty, lost in grief, sadness or loneliness; whether you feel at peace or troubled by anxiety. You are welcome with your wonderful talents as well your quirkiness and foibles, your beliefs and your doubts, your strengths and your insecurities.

You are welcome, just as you are.

I shall begin by lighting our chalice flame, the symbol of our Unitarian tradition, to mark once again the beginning of our time of worship together.

If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.

We keep this flame alive as a sign of our Unitarian witness. May this flame be a symbol of our unique and diverse selves, each one of us shining our own light into the world, and bringing our potential for love and beauty, in our own particular way.

1st HYMN The light of the spirit, by David Kent and Sarah Tinker

The light of the spirit is shining in you

The light of the spirit is shining in me

The light of the spirit is shining within

How blessed we must be.

PRAYER Adapted from 'To be fully human' by Sue Monk Kidd

Divine Spirit

To be fully human and fully divine,

in other words, fully myself;

to accept all that I am, the parts I like as well as the parts I struggle with,

and to embrace all that you envision for me, however wonderful, however scary, this is my prayer.

Walk with me, I pray, out towards the very rim of life itself,

to a place beyond the familiar and the comfortable.

Take me with you to that exquisite edge of courage and possibility

and release me there,

to become what I am.

Amen

STORY: Waiting for our souls, based on a story in the public domain

It is said that an explorer wished to enter into inhospitable land in Africa, and so he found some local guides to accompany him. Each of them carried a machete so they could make their way through the thick vegetation.

The explorer's desire was to keep going at any cost.

If a river appeared, they would cross it in the shortest time possible. If there was a hill, they quickened their pace so as not to waste a minute. They were making good progress. But suddenly the guides stopped. The explorer was surprised. They had only been walking for a few hours. So he asked them: "Why have you stopped? Are you already tired after just a few hours walking?"

Then one of the guides looked at him and said: "No sir, we are not tired. It's just that we have been moving very quickly so we have left our souls behind. Now we have to wait for them to catch up with us again."

READING from 'Become what you are' by Alan Watts © 2003 Shambala Publications Inc

When we say that all things in the universe are the creative activity of God, this is really like putting legs on a snake, or painting the reflection on a mirror. It is not to be compared to seeing that activity as it is, although we say that it is God's activity to draw attention to it in a particular way. But the trouble is that people spend so much energy looking for the God that they fail to see the activity, which is surely a sad state of affairs. What is this activity? The rivers flow; the flowers bloom; you walk down the street. Really we should need to say no more than this, but it is sometimes called the activity of God to point out a certain understanding to the sort of person who might retort, 'The rivers flow; the flowers bloom; you walk down the street – so what?'

So what? Well, what else are you looking for? Here is someone who eats out the grocer's store and still complains that he is starving. Thus we call the universe the activity of God to induce the 'so-whatter' to pay some attention and reverence to it, because he always bolts his life instead of rolling it appreciatively round his tongue. He always thinks of the second and third pieces of cake while he is eating the first, and thus is never satisfied with any of

them, and ends up with a thoroughly disordered digestion. This is called the vicious circle of having lunch for breakfast, or living for your future. But tomorrow never comes.

REFLECTION

We now come to a period of reflection. This is an opportunity for us to let our souls catch up with us. Today I invite you to join in singing, followed a short silence.

2nd HYMN 35 (P) Find a stillness

Find a stillness, hold a stillness,
let a stillness carry me.

Find the silence hold the silence,
let the silence carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Seek the essence, hold the essence,
let the essence carry me.

Let me flower, help me flower,
watch me flower, carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Words by Carl Seaburg, based on a Transylvanian hymn, © Alan Seaburg

SILENCE

ADDRESS

How can we become who we are? What does the question even mean? It sounds like a riddle, and in a way it is. We already *are* what we are – of course we are. There's nothing else we could be! There's nowhere we need to go, no different we need to be (or can be in

this moment), no course we have to go on, or path we must follow, in order to become who we are. We already are it.

So why might we ask such a question? Why might we feel, as I'm guessing you might, that it does in fact have some meaning for us? And that, in some paradoxical way, are we *not* in fact who we are? Aren't we all, at some level or another, always striving to do better, to be better, to understand more fully, or to finally 'get' what it means to be alive? To see the point of it all, and of ourselves? To reach some goal, or achieve some kind of peace, or resolution, or enlightenment, or at-oneness with ourselves and the universe? Isn't that what our opening prayer expresses, and what some of the psalms also cry out for? For answers. For help. For salvation. We want, I think, to know that we're living the life we're meant to be living and not somehow missing it. We want to make sense of the choices and decisions we've made, and to find meaning in the slings and arrows that have been fired at us, and we yearn to know that we're OK just as we are.

And the paradox is, perhaps, that the more we try to be at home in ourselves, the more we feel lost and at sea. Because the very act of trying – to think, or feel, or be different from the way we are – is itself an admission we don't already feel at home with the way we are.

There is a lot of talk in spiritual and religious traditions about the need to lose our selves in order to find ourselves. Which is another paradox, of course. How can we lose ourselves? Who is it that would be doing the losing? Who would know if we'd succeeded? It's like to trying to eat your own mouth – it can't be done. But yet again, we sense somehow that there is truth in the idea. It's an idea that we can't quite grasp but keep returning to all the same.

Alan Watts, writer on Zen and Taoism, says it well, I think, when he writes: 'The one important result of any really serious attempt at self-renunciation or self-acceptance is the humiliating discovery that it is impossible. And this precisely is that death to oneself which is the improbable source of a way of life so new and so alive that it feels like having been born again. In this metaphorical sense, the ego dies on finding out its own incapacity, its inability to make any difference to itself that is really important.'

Realizing our own impotence and powerlessness to change ourselves, might sound defeatist. We might reasonably scream, but I'm depressed, or I'm terrified, or I'm beset by worry and anxiety, and I really want my life to be different. Of course. And there are

reasonable courses of action any of us might take – have taken, do take – to help ourselves in those situations - medication, or therapy, or support from friends, perhaps. But notice, as any 12-step program tells us, that the first step to recovery is acknowledging we have a problem and accepting it for what it is; and then admitting that we are not in control of the solution but need to recognize a higher power, something greater than our ourselves. Those are both vital steps in recovery that can lead to liberation not just from addiction, but from any pattern of thinking or acting that prevents us feeling at home and at peace with ourselves.

How do we reach the point where we acknowledge that we have a problem – whether it's a feeling of failure, or guilt, or shame, or not fitting in, or whatever it is, and fully accepting it as it is? And how do we reach the realization that we're incapable of making ourselves better through willpower or determination or denial? Maybe such realization comes in a rare moment – a moment of grace, you might say, or an out-of-the-blue flash of clarity. Maybe it takes years of trying to change ourselves; of trying to succeed, trying to assuage our guilt, trying to let go of our shame, or trying to find a way to fit in, before we finally realize we just can't do it. Perhaps we follow a path, or a course, or read a book, and it all helps, often by leading us towards that very same point, the one at which we finally give in and realize we simply can't change ourselves. And that moment of 'giving in' is when the healing can begin.

For me it's a process, and a combination. And sometimes it's one step forward and two back. But admitting the problem and then reaching out – or up – are always essential.

None of us 'fit in'. Perhaps you think I fit in. I don't. I feel as out on a limb in many ways as anyone else. Fitting in is an illusion, a kind of play acting. Some people make a better job of the façade than others. But I believe everyone is troubled and lost at heart, worried that they're unworthy, unloved, unseen.

And at the same time, of course, we all fit in. Perfectly. You do, and so do I. We are exactly how we are meant to be, entirely worthy and unconditionally loved, and seen in our entirety. We just struggle to believe it.

And so I think perhaps we come here to be reminded of these two truths. Firstly, that we're all struggling in this chaotic, messy, broken and very flawed, human world together, and secondly that we're all also joyfully in this miraculous, beautiful and perfectly divine universe

together too. Life is sometimes a dance, sometimes more of a wrestle, between these two truths, as we continually attempt to bring them together into wholeness.

So this week, I say take it slowly. Let your soul catch up with you. Be gentle on yourself. No one gives us a harder time than we give ourselves; or puts more pressure on us, or criticizes us more harshly, than we do.

But it's OK. We're OK. In fact we're perfectly OK, just as we are.

Our 3rd hymn is an echo of the prayer we shared earlier. It's a yearning for all that we wish to be, which turns out to be all that we can be; and what, at the heart and soul of ourselves, we already are.

3rd HYMN 70 (P) I wish I knew how
I wish I knew how it would feel to be free.
I wish I could break all these chains holding me.
I wish I could say all the things I could say,
say 'em loud, say 'em clear for the whole world to hear.
Say 'em loud, say 'em clear for the whole world to hear.

I wish I could share all the love in my heart,
remove all the bars that still keep us apart.
I wish you could know what it means to be me,
then you'd see and agree every one should be free.
Then you'd see and agree everyone should be free.

I wish I could give all I'm longing to give.
I wish I could live like I'm longing to live.
I wish I could do all the things I can do,
though I'm way overdue I'd be starting anew.
Though I'm way overdue I'd be starting anew.

I wish I could be like a bird in the sky.
How sweet it would be if I found I could fly.
I'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea,

then I'd sing 'cause I'd know how it feels to be free.

Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know how it feels to be free.

Words and music © Unitarian Universalist Association

NOTICES

Thanks to Myron, Karen and Jacquie

The committee has decided the church will re-open for in-person services on 23rd May. This is the first Sunday following the government guideline that allows people to meet indoors. There will be the same social distancing measures as before, and booking will be required. Zoom and Facebook will continue. Details will go in the next issue of 'The Open Road'.

This Wednesday at 7.30pm is our Congregational Service on the theme 'Being myself – what it means to be me'. Your contributions will be welcome – please let me know in advance.

CLOSING WORDS by Jean M Olson

May you be brave enough to expose
your aching woundedness
and reveal your vulnerability.

May you speak your deepest truths,
knowing that they will change as you do.

May you sing the music within you,
composing your own melody,
playing your song with all your heart.

May you draw, paint, sculpt, and sew,
showing the world your vision.

May you write letters, poetry, biography,
slogans, graffiti, the great novel,
laying bare your words to love and hate.

May you love even though your heart
breaks again and again.

And until the end of your days,
may your life be filled
with possibilities and courage.

Extinguish chalice.

CLOSING MUSIC 'This is me', from The Greatest Showman, sung by the bearded lady in
the circus.

<https://youtu.be/Rj4Yu9Utdw0>