

## **25<sup>th</sup> April 2021 – ‘Reach for the sky’**

led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** ‘Rising’, by Reuben and the Dark

<https://youtu.be/EuRVaVGxSjw>

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome. As we draw towards the end of another month – and they’re flying by, aren’t they? – we gather together in shared worship once more. You are welcome 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.*

May our flame burn brightly for each one of us on this spring morning, and for all beings. May it mark the beginning of our time in beloved community, and be a symbol of our presence here, now, in this moment.

### **LISTENING PRAYER**

To bring ourselves in to that greater Presence, I invite you into a time of prayerfulness, and a form of listening prayer...

Begin by allowing yourself to settle in a position that’s comfortable for you, but in which you are still awake, and take a few deep breaths. *Pause*

First you might like to listen for any sounds outside: traffic, planes, children playing, birds singing, whatever you can hear. *Pause*

And then bring your attention back indoors, into the space you are sitting in. Your living room, your kitchen, bedroom – wherever you are right now. And listen again, this time to the sounds in this space. Maybe you can hear a clock ticking, the fridge whirring, or someone else or a pet moving around. Whatever you can hear, just notice it. *Pause*

And then turn your attention inwards, into yourself. What can you hear within yourself? Your heart beating, perhaps, your breathing, your thoughts arising and disappearing again, maybe? Simply notice whatever arises. *Pause*

The world goes on, life continues around us and within us all the time. And we discover, with a little practice and when we are able to take time to pause for a while, that we are able to become aware of all that is happening, to notice it, and to let it be. *Pause*

May we may find that what truly matters emerges from the deep and hidden places of our hearts and souls and blossoms into the light.

May it be so.

Let's sing...

**1st HYMN 33 (green) Do you hear?**

Do you hear, O my friend, in the place where you stand,  
Through the sky, though the land, do you hear, do you hear,  
In the heights, on the plain, in the vale, on the main,  
In the sun, in the rain, do you hear, do you hear?

Through the roar, through the rush, through the throng, through the crush,  
Do you hear in the hush of your soul, of your soul,  
Hear the cry fear won't still, hear the heart's call to will,  
Hear a sigh's startling trill, in your soul, in your soul?

From the place where you stand, to the outermost strand,  
Do you hear, O my friend, do you hear, do you hear,  
All the dreams, all the dares, all the sighs, all the prayers –  
They are yours, mine, and theirs: do you hear, do you hear?

*Words by Emily Lenore Luch Thorn, music is William Caldwell's 'Union Harmony'*

**STORY: The Lotus Flower** as told by Shana Begum

On Friday evening I was involved with the opening worship for the General Assembly Annual meetings. A few of you were there, too. I'd like to share the story that Shana Begum shared then about a flower and its journey.

The flower is called a lotus flower and is a beautiful flower that can be found all over the world.

But the flower's life isn't so beautiful to start with.

The flower starts out under water, in lakes and ponds where the water is still on the surface.

But underneath it's all muddy and mucky because of the fish and insects.

It's quite dirty and rough down at the bottom of the water.

The Lotus flower is strong and manages to find its way through all these dirt and obstacles, it's only a stem with a few leaves and a small pod at this point.

It continues to grow and slowly makes its way to the clearer surface.

When the pod finally reaches the surface of the water into clean air, at last it's free from the tough conditions below.

Now the lotus can slowly open each petal to the sun and relax in the beauty around it.

The flower is ready to take on the world.

So, although born into dark and murky conditions, the lotus grows and goes up against the difficulties.

As the lotus opens each petal to the air, not a stain or spot of mud stays on the outside.

The inner lotus has never seen a drop of mud or dirty water.

It is pure, bright, and beautiful.

### **READING** About 'Spirit of Life'

In a few moments we're going to sing one of our popular hymns, 'Spirit of Life', which includes the words 'Roots hold me close; wings set me free', but first I wanted to introduce it.

'Spirit of Life' was written by Carolyn McDade – the same hymn writer who wrote 'Come, sing a song with me'. I was interested to discover that when in the early 1990s the Unitarian Universalist Association approached her to ask if they could include Spirit of Life in their new hymnbook, 'Singing the Living Tradition', Carolyn was reluctant. "I thought of it as a living prayer, not a hymn," she said. "I don't feel like a hymn writer." Eventually she did agree, but only when it was included in the hymnbook under the heading of 'Love and compassion' rather than 'Worship'.

Claire Hewerdine, daughter-in-law of Dot and John, who some of you know, has spoken about how her Unitarian faith and values have informed the way she brings up their own children...

In the book 'Living with Integrity' she wrote:

'My Granny once said to me that the key to bringing up children is giving them firm roots and strong wings. If you manage to do that, then you have done a good job. She was an Anglican, like most of my recent ancestors, although I can't remember her talking much about religion. I do, however, remember those words that she said to me as if it was yesterday, possibly because they are also in one of my favourite hymns 'Spirit of Life'. If I had to sum up my theology, maybe I should just show people the words of that hymn.'

So I invite you now to sing 'Spirit of Life', as it was intended, not as a hymn but as a sung prayer, as a call from the heart to the Spirit of Life to come unto us. And then afterwards we'll take a few moments of silence for our own prayer and reflection.

**2<sup>nd</sup> HYMN 148 (P) Spirit of Life**  
Spirit of Life, come unto me.  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;  
move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.  
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;  
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

*Words and music, Carolyn McDade, Arranged by David Dawson*

## SILENCE

### ADDRESS – Reach for the sky

When Maria Stevenson, who often joins us on Zoom or Facebook, heard that the title of this service was 'Reach for the sky' she said 'I couldn't help but send you this!' I wanted to share it with you.

Called 'Sky Orchestral', Maria drew this and then painted it. Personally I love the sense of lightness and movement in what I'm taking to be the solar system spinning and orbiting, but which could also be balloons, or maybe bubbles floating or rising. I love the patterns they're making in relation to each other, which clearly have order to them and yet also a great sense of spaciousness and playfulness, of dark and light, and transparency. Thank you, Maria.



When I thought about what it might mean to me to 'reach for the sky' words like 'hope', 'aspiration', 'potential' and 'lightness' all came to mind, not in terms of trying to achieve success or recognition, whatever that means, but in terms of touching that sense of freedom and possibility. I have often felt elation when I've been physically high up, like climbing up a cliff on the coastal path, or walking in the snow-covered Dolomites, or once in a tiny plane soaring and dipping above Victoria Falls. Up there, where the air is colder and thinner, and the busyness and cares of the world seem small and far away, there is a feeling of being less encumbered by material things and of being more at large with the spirit. And yet to reach for the sky, we still need to be rooted in the earth.

I have previously mentioned the 'fir tree' that grows in my next-door-neighbour's garden. In fact I recently discovered it's a Himalayan Cedar (*Cedrus deodara*, if you like to know the Latin names for things). I was quite delighted by this information. A Himalayan Cedar! In Peverell! And also to learn that the tree is considered to be sacred in Hinduism.

I mention this tree because, though it's ended up in a humble urban garden in Plymouth, it still reaches for the sky. Each year a little more growth upwards. I love that tree more and

more with each passing year. It's currently providing a home to a pair of nesting magpies; later in the summer it will offer food to swarming bees; and all year round it gives freely of its shade and peacefulness, its greenery and life-fulness. I worry about it when the winds blow but so far it's survived all storms. And I worry, too, that it doesn't seem to produce any cones, which is apparently a possible sign of stress in conifers. But mostly it inspires me. It's strong yet flexible, its softly falling branches are full of grace, and the bright tips of its new spring growth are joyful and hopeful. All year it's a grounded presence in what often seems to be a mad world. And it demonstrates perfectly how to live with what you've been given and make the best of it. It's entirely committed to being deeply rooted, exactly where it is, while also reaching for the sky in whatever ways it can, and being a blessing to all around it as it does so.

I bumped into another neighbour the other day, who lives several doors further down the street. I don't know him well but we always smile and say hello. This time, though, I was surprised because he stopped and obviously wanted to chat. He told me that he and his wife had both caught Covid several months ago and he was only just now beginning to feel better. For all this time he'd only been able to work in the mornings, finding himself exhausted and unable to concentrate by the afternoon. He said he felt he was finally emerging, not only from the illness but from a difficult time that had also included the death of his mother. It seemed as though his period of sickness and bereavement had made him want to open up, lotus-like.

Earlier I mentioned the General Assembly worship service on Friday evening. I offered a few words then on the theme of 'Recovery and Renewal', some of which I'll share again here because they seem relevant as we come out of lockdown...

*The way ahead is going to be a very different journey for each of us. It will be our journey, with its own twists and turns, its own disappointments and delights.*

*'There is no neat path to plot, no clear route out or forwards, no handy app or manual to download. But that's OK, because what we have instead are the timeless gifts of our souls' yearnings and the ancient wisdom of sages, and together they will guide us better still.*

*'And we have the ability, if we're brave enough, to look with searing honesty at the reality in which we find ourselves – however murky and difficult, chaotic and uncertain it may be and make our peace with it.*

*'We have our remarkable human instinct to hope, and hope again, and to envision what might yet be. We know well how to dream, how to imagine, and how to find ways – great and small – to bring beauty and kindness, love and justice into this hurting world. Opportunities to do so are constantly being revealed to us. 'The world offers itself up to your imagination,' as Mary Oliver puts it.*

*'And we also have that miraculous lotus-like capacity to root ourselves in what is, while also leaning and growing towards the light that calls us, somehow trusting that what we need will be provided, even if not quite in the way we'd expected, and that the way ahead will unfold in its own sweet time, like petals opening one by one.*

Life endlessly shows us ways to make sense of our lives, and of our suffering, and how to use it, and draw on it, to move forward. The lotus flower shows how we can transcend our worries and difficulties to reach the light. The Himalayan Cedar illustrates how we can adapt to, and make the best of, whatever situation we find ourselves in. And my neighbour reminded me how, as we slowly recover from illness and sadness, we can feel newly emboldened, enough to risk opening up and reaching out just a little more.

May we each find the strength to sit with the dark times, and the strange and the lost times, and trust that we too will navigate our ways towards the surface, into the light and up towards the clear skies, in our own way, and in our own time.

'Roots hold me close; wings set me free'.

May it be so. Amen

### **3rd HYMN 165 (P) The Spirit lives to set us free**

The Spirit lives to set us free,  
walk, walk in the light.  
It binds us all in unity,  
walk, walk in the light.  
*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light,  
walk in the light of love.*

The light that shines is in us all,  
walk, walk in the light.  
We each must follow our own call,  
walk, walk in the light.  
*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light,  
walk in the light of love.*

Peace begins inside your heart,  
walk, walk in the light.  
We've got to live it from the start,  
walk, walk in the light.  
*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light,  
walk in the light of love.*

Seek the truth in what you see,  
walk, walk in the light.  
Then hold it firmly as can be,  
walk, walk in the light.  
*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light,  
walk in the light of love.*

The Spirit lives in you and me,  
walk, walk in the light.  
Its light will shine for all to see,  
walk, walk in the light.  
*Walk in the light, walk in the light, walk in the light,  
walk in the light of love.*

*Words anonymous. Traditional melody, arranged by David Dawson*

## **CLOSING WORDS**

May the road rise up to meet you.  
May the wind be always at your back.  
May the sun shine warm upon your face,  
the rains fall soft upon your fields.  
And until we meet again,  
may God hold you in the palm of his/her hand.

*Extinguish chalice.*

## **CLOSING MUSIC** 'Blackbird' by The Beatles

Paul McCartney has said he wrote this partly inspired by hearing a blackbird singing while in India on meditation, but also the words 'You were only waiting for this moment to be free' were partly in tribute to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

<https://youtu.be/RDxfjUEBT9I>