

7th March 2021 – ‘Boldly live, my daughter’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC

‘Darling’, Beautiful Chorus

<https://youtu.be/V0qDguA-LXE>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone. Happy March, and happy International Women’s Day for tomorrow, 8th March. Welcome to you all, wherever you join us from today, and an extra special welcome to all women, as well as anyone who’s born of a woman or has ever known one.

And now, as is our custom, I’ll light our chalice, as a symbol of our free religious faith. *If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.*

May this flame be a symbol of the feminine that resides in each one of us, whatever our gender: our capacity to be warm, nurturing, caring, strong, compassionate – and passionate.

8th March was also the date of the last service held here before the church closed for Lockdown 1. Tomorrow a whole year will have passed, but nevertheless we have continued to keep the flame alive, lighting our chalice each week as a sign of our commitment to each other and to all that we hold sacred. We have kept our Unitarian witness and continue to do so, whatever is happening in our lives or in the world.

First hymn: 194 (purple) We light the flame

We light the flame that kindles our devotions.

We lift our hearts in blessed community.

The mind has thoughts, the heart its true emotions,
we celebrate in worship, full and free.

Our faith transcends the boundaries of oceans.

All shall be granted worth and dignity.

So many ways to witness to the wonder,
so many dreams by day for us to dare.

Yet, reaching out, each way is made the grander,

and love made bold for dreamers everywhere.
Diversity will never cast asunder
our common weal, our bonds of mutual care.

Infinite Spirit, swell with us, we pray thee,
that we may share in life abundantly.
Forgive our sins, feed us with good bread daily,
with strength resist temptation steadfastly.
O God of life, sustain us now, and may we
with mindful hearts, be thankful constantly.

International Women's Day is a celebration and a call to action. And so today is a chance for us to celebrate some of those women in our movement and beyond who have dissented, who have inspired, who have pushed boundaries on behalf of us all, and who – to follow on from last week's service – have committed to their passion and lived boldly, inspired by their faith and driven by love.

PRAYER by *Rebecca Parker, contemporary Unitarian Universalist writer and theologian*

Dear God,
Dear Earth and Sky,
Dear Mystery,
Dear Love,
I pray today for this congregation,
This vibrant gathering of tender hearts
And hopeful spirits,
Of willing activists
And deep contemplatives
Faithful fools and genius misfits,
Prophets and artists and devoted workers,
Sleepy little ones and sturdy old ones
And weary middle-agers,
The lost, the searchers, and the anchors.
May the people of this congregation
See in one another the face of a holiness
That calls us to abide in solidarity;

May we be bathed in beauty
That moves us to resist all that disparages human dignity
and to delight in that which is good;
In times of brokenness, may the poetry of unexpected grace
Open us to humility and transformation;
And, in the face of the world's needs,
May this church be a channel of our peace.
May this church be a place of refuge from sorrow and distress
But not from the struggle to realize justice for all.
May it be for all
A balm for the cure of weary souls,
A place the Spirit of Life can call home
And be gathered into the hearts,
Of a people who love what is sacred and will defend it
With all their hearts, minds, souls and strength.
Dear God,
Dear Earth and Sky,
Dear Mystery,
Dear Love.
Amen

STORY: *'My heart has been there all my life', Sr Joan Chittister*

Once upon a time in the rainiest part of the rainy season, an old monastic began her pilgrimage to the holiest shrine on the holiest mountain in the land. Forced back by fierce winds and driving rain, she stopped at the foot of the incline to check directions one last time.

"Old woman," the inn master scoffed, "this mountain is deep in wet and running clay. You cannot possibly climb this mountain now."

"Oh, sir," the old monastic said, "the climb to this shrine will be no problem whatsoever. You see, my heart has been there all my life. Now it is simply a matter of taking my body there, as well."

READING: *some words from Carolyn McDade, singer/songwriter (including of some of our hymns – not actually a Unitarian but closely associated)*

My singing as a child, what I know now as prayer, was freed from the language of church. It was buoyancy that held without confinement, that affirmed my capacity to shape my heart into sound, that took my burrowed and expansive treasure of being and poured it in real voice upon the air - air that touched my piano, solid and wood - air that floated my unexplainable self to whatever ears beyond the wall might hear. It was an act of childhood courage and innocence to sing.

What I know now - it is still an act of courage to sing - to really sing, in the way that disrobes the heart and lays its curve into the world, that leaves the soul whole and the body shining. Such singing as women leads us into confrontation with entrenched and unjust power. To be true to its timbre, the human voice requires authenticity of body, language, community. In this society, when we shape our body/sexual energy with integrity, tell what we know with candor, and create communities committed to the wellbeing of the whole, we invariably shake the status quo.

Singing does not automatically carry us there. When singers become the singing, however, some horizon, both inner and outer, opens and we know, if only briefly, why we live. Such moments do not assure that our plans will succeed, but we know what is worth doing. We have become part of the singing river, the long voice that has held, washed, and laid down ten million mornings of song, yet still rises with her bag of sounds and rubs the currents of river and wind over bare rock, bearing witness to all that exists in that moment.

SILENCE *followed by music*

'Shine on me', Melanie DeMore, vocal activist and Unitarian Universalist

<https://vimeo.com/456583064>

ADDRESS

There is a venerable tradition of women in British Unitarianism – or at least closely associated with it – who have made their mark on the world in creative, progressive and sometimes radical ways. This was especially true from the end of the 18th to the beginning

of the 20th centuries. Writer and feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, for example; novelist, biographer and short story writer Elizabeth Gaskell; novelist Mary Ann Evans – aka George Eliot; and children’s author and illustrator Beatrix Potter. These are perhaps the best-known names, but there are many others. Harriet Martineau, sister of Unitarian theologian James Martineau, is widely considered to be the first female sociologist in the UK; Frances Power Cobbe, an Anglo-Irish writer, was also a social reformer, anti-vivisectionist and campaigner for women’s suffrage; Gertrude von Petzold who not only became the first female Unitarian minister in 1904 but the first woman minister of any denomination in the UK; and more recently Dorothy Tarrant, a classical scholar specializing in Plato, became the first female professor of Greek in the UK.

There are plenty more – and I recommend Ann Peart’s book ‘Unitarian Women: A Legacy of Dissent’, published by the Lindsey Press from which I have drawn for this address. Ann makes the observation that women were not only dissenters in theological terms, but also dissented from the prevailing views on social norms, and from what was considered appropriate behaviour and suitable employment for women at the time. They were ‘double dissenters’, as she puts it.

By the way, I only this week discovered Mrs T B Broadrick (whose own first name seems to have become lost in the mists of time) became the 2nd woman after Gertrude Petzold to appear on the roll of Unitarian ministers. When her husband, who was minister at Bridgwater, died she took over from him for a year. She also served as minister in charge at Lewin’s Mead Domestic Mission in Bristol, and as a supply preacher in the Western Union. So well done Bridgwater and Bristol and WU!

But let’s now hear the story of an earlier and more prominent West Country woman, Mary Carpenter. Mary was born in Exeter but moved with her family to Bristol when she was 10, where her father Lant Carpenter was Unitarian minister at the aforementioned Lewin’s Mead. And it was here that her passion for educational and social reform took root.

According to Ann Peart, in the 1830s several events occurred which led to Mary recognizing this was to be her life work. Firstly there was rioting in favour of the Reform Bill, which was to make major changes to the electoral system. This was followed by an outbreak of cholera, which was particularly bad in the low-lying areas around the Lewin’s Mead meeting house, and the women in Mary’s family tried to relieve some of the suffering with gifts of food,

clothing, and fuel. Then came the visit of the reforming Indian rajah, Rammohun Roy, friend of her father Lant. When the rajah fell ill and died, Lant enabled the necessary Hindu rites to be performed at a private burial. And then there was a visit by an American Unitarian minister, Joseph Tuckerman, who had developed a ministry of visiting the homes of the poorest people in his hometown of Boston. Mary accompanied him on his explorations of the poorest parts of Bristol and when a small ragged boy ran across their path, so the story goes, Tuckerman remarked, 'That child should be followed home and seen after'. Mary always remembered this moment as a turning point in her life.

The Lewin's Mead congregation established a Women's Working and Visiting Society, which engaged in social work in the immediate area, and a needlework group, which supplied warm clothes to the poor. Mary was the secretary and main organizer of both these groups. Ann Peart writes that Tuckerman's insistence that children should not suffer because of inadequate care became Mary's 'bible', together with his assertion that 'Human nature is never to be given up... There is no condition so desperate as to forbid recovery, nor does repeated failure justify discouragement,' he said. Mary also maintained connection with American Unitarians and reformers, and supported their anti-slavery work, although she was troubled by the factional divisions.

By this time the ragged school movement was already underway in England. Mary was aware of this and in 1846 she established a school herself in a room in Lewin's Mead, supported by the congregation and a local Unitarian doctor, John Bishop Estlin. Mary insisted the children should always be treated with respect. She provided food and other necessities, and gradually expanded the school and introduced a wide variety of subjects, always centred on the needs of the children.

Her influential book 'Reformatory Schools for the Children of the Perishing and Dangerous Classes' (quite a title!) claimed that love and the re-creation of a supportive family environment were more effective than physical punishment. She also established two more schools in Bristol with help from Lady Byron, the estranged wife of the poet Lord Byron. She divided her time between running the schools, caring for individual children, writing and lobbying for improved understanding and treatment of deprived children. Reluctant at first, she soon became a regular speaker at the newly formed National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, and she grew became increasingly in the public eye.

Following her family's friendship with Rammohun Roy, Mary developed strong connections with India. She even founded schools there, not all of which were successful, and set up the National India Association which had branches in various parts of the UK. She edited its journal until her death.

When Mary visited the United States in 1873 she saw that women there were active in public office and she began to speak in church pulpits herself. In the last year of her life, after some initial reluctance, she joined the struggle for women's suffrage and shared a platform with her old friend Frances Power Cobbe at a meeting of the Bristol and West of England Society of Women's Suffrage. At the time of her death in 1877 Mary was considered the 'leading female advocate of deprived and delinquent children' in England. A stone memorial in her honour was placed in Bristol Cathedral.

I share this story with you just as one example of what Unitarian women have dedicated themselves to in the past. Their legacy that still speaks to us all. Of course it's not our job to be like them. They are of a different time. But we are, always, each called to be ourselves, whatever our gender; and to follow our hearts, as they did theirs. To see what needs to be done, and to do what we can; to bring our own particular gifts to the world, in our own special way.

I know many of us have done and still do this in our lives, even if we're not destined to end up in history books. Others of us may yearn to. If it feels daunting to do so, then take heart, and remember the old monastic woman in Sr Joan Chittister's story who said, *"the climb to this shrine will be no problem whatsoever. You see, my heart has been there all my life. Now it is simply a matter of taking my body there, as well."*

May it be so.

Our closing hymn is written by Carolyn McDade, whose words we heard earlier. Carolyn also wrote Spirit of Life and Come Sing a Song With Me, two favourites of ours. However, I've chosen this one for today, which she wrote for her own daughter. It's called "Boldly live, my daughter".

HYMN 217 (Green) Boldly live, my daughter

Come, my daughter, come with me
To where rushing waters flow to the sea;
We'll share what has been and what's still yet to be –
For now's the time for living.

Tell your story, sing your song,
Seek for gentleness and learn to be strong:
For living it takes now the whole of life long –
Your life is yours for living.

Learn to give and learn to love,
Nurture all life under heaven above,
And learn of the eagle and learn of the dove –
For love is yours for giving.

Taste the grapes on distant vine,
Fill your cup with fine and different wine,
And sit at the table with strangers and dine –
For you must learn of living.

Dance with milkweed, dance with rose,
Let the sun burn sand that drifts through your toes,
The sweat of your body let drench all your clothes –
For you must do your living.

Daughter dear, you leave today:
Take my love as you go out on your way,
And pass it to those whom you meet on your way –
And boldly do your living.

NOTICES

This Thursday will be the first of our strategy chats online, focusing on ways we might open up access to more people, including young people, those joining online, as well as those from different backgrounds and cultures. I'll send out the link to everyone on the zoom list, but if you're not on that, and would to take part, do let me know.

Our closing video is Bread and Roses sung by Women of the World. This is a hymn in our green books, though to a different tune. In 1912, Rose Schneiderman, a socialist and feminist in the women's suffrage movement, coined the phrase "Bread and Roses" which was taken from a line in her speech in which she said, "The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too." "Bread and Roses" was later adapted into a poem and became IWD's slogan for women's struggle for economic equality and their aim towards a better quality of life for women and girls.

CLOSING WORDS *from another exceptional West Country woman and friend, Kay Millard*

Dimming the flame lets memory rest.

Dimming the flame lets love grow again.

Dimming the flame sets life free to live.

Dimming the flame lets all go in peace.

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC 'Bread and Roses', sung by Women of the World

<https://youtu.be/94mSln34ZwA>