

## 7<sup>th</sup> February 2021 – ‘Finding strength in the Year of the Ox’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** Burden, Foy Vance

<https://youtu.be/OQ02s9uz4VM>

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome everyone. Welcome to church from the comfort of your own home, or wherever else you may be. Here we worship the wonder of creation, the joy of connection, the poignancy of frailty, and the sometimes surprising strength we find in ourselves, in each other, and in our god.

I'd like to open with some words by Starhawk.

We are all longing to go home to some place  
we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned  
we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.

Community.

Somewhere there are people to whom we can speak with passion  
without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands  
will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter,  
voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means

Strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.

Arms to hold us when we falter.

A circle of healing.

A circle of friends.

Someplace where we can be free.

May that place be here.

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,  
symbol of transformation since time began,  
fire our curiosity,  
strengthen our wills,  
and sustain our courage  
as we seek what is good within us and around us.

This Friday 12<sup>th</sup> February is Chinese New Year and this year it's the Year of the Ox. The ox is the animal that symbolizes strength, reliability, dependability. An animal who will carry your burden – literally. And the ox also represents stubbornness. Well, none of us is perfect.

And so the theme of our service today is 'Finding strength in the Year of the Ox'.

Let's sing. If you're not comfortable with the word 'God', well this song uses it a lot. But take comfort, if you will, from the absence of gender, and the beautiful characteristics attributed to the divine: strong, kind, warm, glorious and free.

### **HYMN 22 Come strong God**

Come strong God and walk beside us  
from the start to journey's end;  
come and guide our faltering footsteps  
as a true and trusty friend.

Walk with us as our companion  
and our lives at last transcend.

Come kind God and sleep beside us  
so you may dispel our fears;  
come and live among our dwellings  
as the drier of our tears.

Sleep with us through nights of sorrow  
till the new bright dawn appears.

Come warm God, burn strong within us;  
melt with fire our frozen hearts;

come and stir our minds and spirits  
while in life we play our parts.  
Burn within us bright and freely  
As the artist of our art.

Glory strong God, glory kind God  
And to warm God, glory be.  
Glory unto your creation  
And its swirling energy.  
Glory unto all that's living  
in your glorious liberty.

## **PRAYER**

Divine Spirit  
You are the wind in my sails.  
You guide me as I steer and find direction.  
You give me the strength to keep on going.  
You watch over me as I navigate stormy seas.  
You are the harbour where I stop for rest.  
You are my encourager when I lose hope.  
You are the lighthouse that keeps my path safe.  
You are with me always.  
Thank you.  
Amen.

## **STORY:** The bundle of sticks, Aesop's fable

Once there was a farmer who had a family of five sons. The sons were forever quarrelling among themselves. No words the farmer could say did any good, so he cast about in his mind for a striking example that might make his sons see that discord would only lead them to misfortune.

One day, when the quarrelling had been even worse than usual and each of the sons was moping about in a surly manner, he asked one of them to bring him a bundle of sticks.

Then he handed the bundle to each of the sons in turn, and told them to try to break it. But although each one tried his best, none of them was able to do so.

The farmer then untied the bundle and gave the sticks to each of his sons to break one by one. This they did very easily.

“My sons,” said the farmer, “do you not see how certain it is that if you work together and help each other, it will be impossible for your enemies to injure you? But if you are divided among yourselves, each one of you will be no stronger than a single stick in that bundle.”

**READING: The Strength That Defines Us** by Rayla D. Mattson

My son was five when he announced that he would no longer cut his hair. He hated going through the whole process. He also liked his hair and was done. I agreed; I, too, was done fighting with him about haircuts. As time went on, I marvelled at the beauty of his hair and the way his curls frame his face.

Soon the questions started about why his hair was so long, and comments about how I was “confusing” him by not cutting it. I ignored it all.

Then the bullying started. At first it was a few people calling him a girl. We would correct them and move on. Then it became vicious enough to send him home from school in tears, the teachers all saying *What did you expect?* and that if I want people to see my son as a boy, then he should look like one.

My heart broke the day he stood in the bathroom crying. He handed me a pair of scissors and told me to *just cut it*. He was done and he was tired. I told him how beautiful his hair was and how sad I would be to see him cut it. When I asked him why he grew his hair, he said he felt things through it. He said it connected him to his indigenous heritage that he could not claim officially. He said that sometimes it was his hiding place. But he was tired of being teased and tired of being called a girl when he wanted to be called a boy.

So I found pictures of indigenous men with long hair, and asked him what he saw in the pictures. He said he saw strength and pride; fierceness and sadness. I asked if he thought these men were teased over their hair. And he said no, but that if they were, they probably

wouldn't care. I told my son that the strength he saw in those men was the same strength I saw in him.

My son is now fourteen, almost six feet tall, and has facial hair. His hair is still amazing. He pulls it up in a messy bun and no longer lets me comb and brush it. He still gets questions about cutting it. He's been called gay and Trans and queer. None of which offends. He sees it as a compliment. He endured the bullying and now stands strong. Not because he has long hair, but because he didn't let others define what being a man or male meant to him.

*Spirit of Life, may we all be so bold as to not let the world define us by its standards but rather by what is in our own hearts.*

## **REFLECTION and MUSICAL INTERLUDE**

Some generous-spirited Unitarians have begun recording copyright-free music for us all to use. 'fingersphil' (otherwise known as Philip Croft, the organist at Upper Chapel in Sheffield), is one of those and after our silence you'll hear him playing 'The Water Is Wide', which is quite appropriate for Chinese New Year... more about that later.

But first please take a minute or two of silence for your own reflection, meditation or prayer. You may like to light a candle for your own joys or concerns.

<https://soundcloud.com/fingersphil/sets/upper-chapel-meditations-1>

## **COMMENTARY**

The story of how the Chinese years got their names goes something like this. The Emperor Jade decided to hold a race among the animals. There were 13 of them in total, including a dragon, a horse, a snake, and of course an ox. Jade asked them all to race across a wide, strongly flowing river, to gain their place in the zodiac, which is what they did. To the surprise of the emperor, it was the ox who led the way. His strength and determination enabled him to keep focused and forge ahead while some of the other animals who were naturally faster swimmers – such as the dog – got distracted and fell behind. However, the rat, who was also in the race, cleverly leapt on the ox's back and at the last minute he leapt to the shore, beating the ox to first place. Which is why the rat is

first and the ox is second in the Chinese zodiac. You can read a version of this story in a lovely resource published by the British Council -- it's a great one to read with children and grandchildren – you'll find out why the cat never made it into the zodiac, and there's an activity included too. Here's the link.

[https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/british\\_council\\_year\\_of\\_the\\_ox\\_education\\_pack.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/british_council_year_of_the_ox_education_pack.pdf)

All the animals in the zodiac have their strengths and weaknesses, and each of us has something of all of them in us. I think the ox's capacity to see a job through - to keep ploughing ahead, even when times are tough - will be helpful for us this year.

But what does it mean to be strong? And how can we find our strength?

The story of 'The bundle of sticks' reminds us we are stronger together. I've been reminded of that this week by a flurry of emails from fellow Unitarians who've been trying to work out how we can best share information, expertise and ideas; pool our resources and help each other navigate the coming months and changes together. [Even as I wrote that sentence I received an invitation to a zoom meeting on copyright – I'm definitely going to that one!]

We live in an individualistic society and Unitarianism too has often prioritised individual conscience and belief. But it's increasingly clear – and the pandemic has made it more so - that we fare and thrive better when we work and learn together. When each of us brings our gifts to the table. There's no way the vaccination program would be rolling out now without huge cooperation between public and private sectors, scientists and health professionals, across nations and borders. Not that working together is necessarily easy, as we know. It requires constructive and respectful communication, a willingness to listen and understand rather than trample on other people's hopes and dreams, generosity of spirit. But we humans are meant – I believe – to be in community together, even if we live alone. We can't survive in isolation. We find strength in each other, and hugely increase our capacity to realize our dreams when we find others to share them with.

And yet, the strength of any community is determined by the resilience of each of its members, so we need our own inner strength too. To find it means really understanding what strength is and what it isn't. I don't think it's what we're usually told it is. True strength

isn't brute force or having a 6-pack, for example. It isn't shouting, or arguing, or confronting, or pouncing on others – all of those are usually signs of weakness. Rather true strength is rooted deep within us. It grounds us and yet is also fluid and flexible. True strength is having the quiet confidence to be who you are, and the grace to afford others the same dignity. It is having the courage to say what is true for you without needing to impose it on anyone else. We recognise real strength when we see it for it is graceful and beautiful to behold, like the young man in our reading who discovered how to be male in his own way, who was able to embody his own pride and humility in what he was, who discovered his capacity to be at one with himself, to be at home in the world, and to let others find their own truth too. He was able to stop worrying about what other people thought without losing his love for them.

This kind of inner strength is not at odds with working together. Quite the opposite. For when we tap into our inner strength we discover we can work with others more easily than ever before. Ideas begin to flow and projects start to take shape. Once there's no need for friction, or dogma, or digging our heels in, there is just space for creativity. When we are grounded in our inner strength we can let go of our insecurities, of our fears, of feeling threatened or defensive. In fact when we are truly strong these simply fall away.

You may ask, but how can we find such inner strength? How do we gain the quiet self-confidence that combines being strong and with being gentle, and which brings the gifts of grace and love into community? The truth is we already have them, though we may need help recognizing this fact.

Ministers sometimes say that they basically have one message to share but they keep trying to put it across in different ways. My own minister Jane, in Brighton, used to say that her underlying and enduring message in worship - whatever the title of the theme – was always 'May the force be with you'. I'm sure most of you know that's a quote from Star Wars. She meant, I think, 'may you be always connected to that which is larger than yourself, that higher power – which you may call Spirit or God or by any other name – for it is that connection which will lead you, guide you, warm you and ultimately free you'.

It is that which will also strengthen you. And help you carry your burden. .  
May it be so always, but especially in the Year in of the Ox.

Let's sing. This may be an unfamiliar song to you, but there's a whole verse of introduction to get you started. (And here's an opportunity to mention 'Uni-Sing', a group that meets online at 3pm every Saturday to sing favourite hymns and learn new ones.

<https://www.unitarian.org.uk/event/uni-sing/>

### **HYMN 151 (purple) Strong and steadfast**

Strong and steadfast, heart-affirming,  
clear minds set on sure resolve –  
what a life do we inherit,  
what a world is ours to own.

Friends and lovers, joyful workers  
in a common enterprise,  
share the future of our planet;  
never can we fail the trust.

Brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers –  
God by any other name –  
how can we not keep our promise  
to each other to be true!

Much there is now to endeavour,  
stir our will to seek the way.  
God of peace and God of justice,  
yours will be our glorious day.

### **Notices**

Next week's service will be led by me on the theme Love and Lent. We'll have some guest readers, so don't miss it!

Thanks to Myron for filming, Janine for reading, and Karen for co-hosting.

This Wednesday evening at 7.30pm is our congregational service on Zoom. You're invited to bring contributions on the theme 'Stirrings – what's new for you?' I'd be most grateful if you let me know as soon as possible if you're bringing something so I can put together the order of service. Music requests are also welcome.

Thanks to those of you have responded to our draft strategy document. I look forward to hearing from the rest of you!

Now a few words about our closing music, which this week is a video suggested by Myron and Janine. It's Sting singing 'An Englishman in New York' which he wrote for Quentin Crisp, who you'll also see featured in the clip. Crisp famously defied convention. He wore nail varnish, was gay at a time when it was not acceptable to be, and when he was 90 said he would have been a trans woman had that option been available to him in his lifetime. This month is LGBT+ history month and the refrains of the song – 'Be yourself no matter what they say', and 'I'm an alien, I'm a legal alien', speak to anyone – any one of us who has struggled to find the strength to be themselves no matter what other people think.

**CLOSING WORDS** adapted from Andy Pakula

As you prepare to leave this sacred space  
Keep a moment from this gathering in your heart.  
Cherish it carefully like a precious gem.  
Carry it with you through the joys and sorrows of your week.  
Let the gentle glow of it strengthen you, warm you, free you  
And remind you of all that is good and true  
Until we gather here again in this place of love.

**CLOSING MUSIC** An Englishman in New York, Sting (dedicated to Quentin Crisp who famously defied convention and features in the video)

[https://youtu.be/s\\_IMFIOGCFc](https://youtu.be/s_IMFIOGCFc)