

1st May 2022 – ‘This beautiful life’

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Beautiful life’, Harry Pane

<https://youtu.be/GFWiozwck8s>

No matter how cluttered your life feels,

your moment is as clear as the air. ELIAS AMIDON

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone, as we gather here in person and online. Last week I spoke about widening our circle and reminded you that our Sunday services are public events. And for the first time ever we are being beamed in to Brighton Unitarian Church – welcome to all of you who have gathered there as well. This is a another first for us.

I hope that wherever you are, and by whatever means, you will each feel fully welcomed and fully included in this service, which I’ve called ‘This beautiful life’ – a title suggested by our opening music which was sung by Harry Pane.

Some opening words by Suzelle Lynch

Our community is filled with beauty!

When you open the door to greet me, that’s where the beauty begins.

When you share with me what’s important to you,

Beauty is there as I listen.

When we join hands to practice compassion

Beauty’s heart blooms like a flower.

When we teach or learn or work for justice

Beauty abounding sparks joy in all.

Let’s light our chalice candle, as is our custom, as a symbol of our free religious faith. And if you’re at home, you might like to light a candle with me.

Chalice lighting

We light this chalice for the beauty we are, the beauty we seek,

the beauty we share, and the beauty we nurture together.
Let's join in singing our first hymns – All are welcome here.

1st HYMN 178 (P) Together now we join as one

Together now we join as one
our common faith to sing;
to render to this pilgrim world
our heartfelt offering.

We strive to be a fellowship
with mind and conscience free,
to search for truth and saving light
in cosmic mystery.

We worship God – love's source and power;
we celebrate the life
that all earth's children freely share
beyond their sinful strife.

We would, in love serve humankind
with caring justice, peace;
and with the earth seek harmony
that pride and pillage cease.

We hold in reverence the man
who walked in Galilee,
who healed the sick and loved the poor -
revealed divinity.

We welcome truth, we welcome light,
all prophecy and song,
whoever they be channelled through
to all they shall belong.

Prayer by Lyn Cox

Creative spirit, source of life and love

We give thanks for this day and for the company of all those assembled here.

Thank you for the breezes of change, clearing our heads and bringing fresh ideas.

May they cleanse our minds of the oppressions and isms that divide us.

Thank you for the flame of hope, the heat of righteous anger, the warmth of compassion, and the fire of commitment.

May they bubble the cauldrons of transformation.

Thank you for oceans of love, rivers of connection, tears of relief, and pools of serenity.

May healing waters flow over us and through us and among us, wearing down the sharp rocks of despair to bring joy in the morning.

Thank you for the good earth beneath us, around us, and within us.

May we take this clay and co-create a new realm of justice and beauty.

Thank you for all these and more.

We accept our gifts and commit to building, sculpting, painting, singing, and dancing them to life; to abundant life.

Blessed be.

And I invite you to pause for a moment in quiet and stillness, and to bring in to your mind's eye anyone known to you who is unwell, grieving, anxious, or suffering in any way at this time.

And now to widen your circle of concern to those unknown to you, those caught up in conflict or oppression, those imprisoned or homeless, those struggling to survive in whatever way.

As we centre ourselves in stillness, here in this moment, may we imagine the warmth of our hearts and the light of our spirits travelling outwards like ripples in a pond, gently reaching out in to a beautiful, broken, joyous and hurting world.

Amen

Today is Beltane, the pagan festival that is midway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice. It is a festival that's associated with fertility and abundance, fire and passion, beauty and blessing. It's celebrated with maypole and morris dancing. And it features a mythical character known as the Green Man. So here is today's story – The Green Man.

STORY: The Green Man

Once there lived a rich young squire who loved hunting animals for sport. He thought the woods and all its creatures belonged to him. The nearby villagers, however, believed the woods provided a home to birds, squirrels and deer. They told their children that a Green Man lived in the woods who cared for all these creatures. Each winter they left food out for the Green Man to eat.

One hot day the squire rode into the woods, trampling nests and dens as he went. He came to a beautiful, clear pond, so he took off his clothes and jumped into the cool water. While he was swimming, a hand reached out from behind a tree, took the clothes and led the horse away! When the squire got out of the water, he had nothing to wear. But he found a rope and fastened some leaves to it to cover himself.

Night came. The squire sheltered in a cave but he didn't sleep much. It was dark, he was frightened, and he kept hearing animal noises. In the morning, he saw that he wasn't alone. There was a goat, a chicken and a gourd for holding water. Someone had clearly been living in the cave!

Gradually, the squire settled in to cave life. He fashioned a whole garment out of leaves. He ate eggs from the hen and drank milk from the goat. He befriended the small woodland creatures, and made sure they had enough food and water. Soon he had a wild beard and hair, and was covered head to toe with mud and leaves.

One day he came upon two small children in the woods. "Are you the Green Man?" they asked. "I guess I am," said the man.

Winter came and went. The Green Man collected food the villagers left out for him, and shared it with his animal friends. Then one warm Spring day, a rich young man, a squire

perhaps, rode into the woods and decided to swim in the clear, cool pond. He took off his clothes, and left them under a tree. The Green Man reached out a hand, took the clothes and the horse, leaving just a coil of rope. He used a sharp stick to trim his hair and beard, and rode back into town. But he had changed. He was now a friend to all creatures and each winter he left out food for the Green Man.

2nd hymn 147 (P) Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree

Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree,
water of life, flowing in me,
keeping me stable,
nourishing me,

O fill me with living energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of love, softly draw near,
open my heart, lessen my fear,
sing of compassion, help me to hear,
O fill me with loving energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of life, you are my song,
sing in my soul, all my life long,
gladden and guide me, keep me from wrong,
O fill me with sacred energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
spirit of love, expanding in me,
spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
inspire me with living energy*

READING: The sun – Mary Oliver

Have you ever seen
anything
in your life
more wonderful
than the way the sun,
every evening,
relaxed and easy,
floats toward the horizon
and into the clouds or the hills,
or the ruffled sea,
and is gone—
and how it slides again
out of the blackness,
every morning,
on the other side of the world,
like a red flower
streaming upward on its heavenly oils,
say, on a morning in early summer,
at its perfect imperial distance—
and have you ever felt for anything
such wild love—
do you think there is anywhere, in any language,
a word billowing enough
for the pleasure
that fills you,
as the sun
reaches out,
as it warms you
as you stand there,
empty-handed—
or have you too
turned from this world—

or have you too
gone crazy
for power,
for things?

We come now to a simple ritual...

In ancient times, in Gaelic villages it was the custom for all fires in the community to be put out and a new fire to be kindled for Beltane. And people “jumped the fire” in order to purify, cleanse and bring fertility. Couples might jump the fire together to pledge themselves to each other. Young women might even jump the fire to encourage pregnancy or a smooth birth.

Cattle and other animals were driven through the smoke as a protection from disease. This was a chance to drive out lice and parasites that had flourished while the animals had been kept in close confinement over winter, before they were taken to the higher pastures.”

Many Beltane ceremonies also involved beating the bounds - literally marching around the boundaries of the village with flaming torches to reaffirm the shape of the village and to check the fences were in order.

While at the end of the evening, it was the custom for villagers to take some of the embers from the Beltane fire to start their own fires anew.”

I’d love to light a bonfire for you all to jump over, but I think I’d be in trouble with health and safety. However, in the spirit of Beltane, I’m going to first invite you into silence to think if there’s something that you would like to ‘purify’ – something that perhaps you’d like to leave behind, or leave alone for a time. Or maybe something you would like to create in the coming months. Then after a while you’ll hear some music – it’s a Beltane fire dance – and then if you’d like to, you might like to come up light a flame. We won’t speak this week – the invitation is simply seal your thought with a healing and purifying flame.

I believe in Brighton there are candles for you to light, and those of you at home, I hope too you will join in if you’d like to.

SILENCE

CANDLE LIGHTING – a symbolic way to let go or leave behind anything that's holding you back at this time

Music: Huron Beltane Fire Dance, Loreena McKennitt

<https://youtu.be/NW2tYM2LZik>

ADDRESS: This beautiful life

It might seem strange to talk of this 'beautiful life' when so much in the world seems ugly, cruel and unfair – destroyed even. When we may feel powerless. And anxious. Maybe unsure of who to trust and how to act. But the world keeps turning, and the sun keeps rising, and the seasons keep on cycling around and around. And here we are in May – May! already! – and it would surely be churlish and ungrateful of us not to notice and praise the extravagant beauty that is burgeoning everywhere about us. It would be shame not to allow it to really nourish and nurture us.

This is a wonderful time – the best time maybe – to embrace our intimacy with glorious nature, and to drink deeply from its generous well. It is the perfect time, too – when life may feel harsh and hard in many ways – for us to journey inwards into the limitless abundance of our own inner mystical selves. If we are to survive – and thrive – in conflicting and confusing times we can surely only do it by remembering who we truly are – and letting go of who we are not. By remembering we are divine beings. By embracing the spirit of the Green Man. By living in harmony with the earth from that still quiet centre within, where there are no divisions, and no pretensions. From where love grows naturally and light streams freely.

May has arrived bursting with its gifts of replenishment, refreshment, colour, exuberance, warmth and hope. And we need it, don't we? I know I need it.

The other day I sat in my kitchen with the backdoor open and let the sun stream onto my face. What an amazing feeling – a billowing feeling Mary Oliver calls is – and such an honest, direct and uncomplicated blessing. Me and the sun, with nothing at all between us except 93 million miles of fathomless space and some fresh air. Like being kissed by God.

On my allotment I'm back clearing again. I think I'm supposed to be growing things – and I am a bit – but mostly I'm trying to manage all the growing that's happening despite me. It's the usual brambles, nettles, ivy, grass mostly. They've gone rampant, of course they have, it's May! It amuses me to think I might be able to get the better of them. I can't, of course. But I enjoy the feeling of clearing space, and creating even a little order (temporarily). And I love being outside, even getting scratched and stung and sweaty and dirty. It makes me feel more alive and it certainly beats sitting at a computer. My lovely allotment neighbour Sarah, came over for a chat, and looked at the huge and growing piles of what I believe we now call 'garden waste' I was accumulating and inquired, very nicely, if I had a plan. Ha!

It's nice to have plans. But sometimes it's even nicer not to have plans. It's a relief, a respite. Perhaps you want to save the planet, end the war, stop discrimination, solve poverty, house the homeless, love the lonely, while also fixing the damp, keeping up with your friends, seeing your family, getting the washing done, going to work and paying the bills. I'd love to do all those things too. Perhaps it feels like there's simply no time for sitting in the sun or for creating a bit of space just for the joy of doing it and discovering what enters in. But we can't keep running on empty, flapping about manically, sometimes to little or no effect. Recently I watched a wasp buzzing loudly and hurling its tiny body frantically against my kitchen window, again and again, making such a lot of fuss and noise, achieving nothing except (I'm imagining) a sore head and a bruised ego, and all the while totally oblivious to the wide open door next to it. Ah! It was like looking in a mirror. (And yes, I opened the window and let it out.)

Perhaps more than anything at this time of year God asks us – implores us even – to stop and lift our gaze to the greater grandeur of the universe. Perhaps she is saying, though of course I can't be sure, 'It's not just about you and what you do, it's about ALL OF THIS (which in case you've forgotten includes you). Yes, you may watch the news and weep with sorrow, and scream with frustration, and shake your fists in anger at the state of the world. I understand. I weep with you and share your pain. But you are not alone! Just look at what you're part of!' And maybe he calls, 'Come and let your heart beat in rhythm with the universe, breathe with the tides, spin with the stars, grow with the grass, rise with the sun, burn with that bright flame inside you, sit in the silence and the mystery. Be one with the power and the thrum and the all-embracing love of the universe.'

And just possibly they add...

'For you are a beautiful soul.
This is still a beautiful life.
And together – *only together* - we can make it better.'

At least that's what I imagine.
Happy Beltane.

3rd HYMN: 42 (P) From the light of days remembered

From the light of days remembered burns a beacon bright and clear,
Guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear.

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.*

From the stories of our living rings a song both brave and free,
Calling pilgrims still to witness to the life of liberty.

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.*

From the dreams of youthful vision comes a new, prophetic voice,
Which demands a deeper justice built by our courageous choice.

*When the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin*

Words by Jason Shelton and Mary Katherine Morn

CLOSING WORDS Blessing from John O'Donohue

May you recognize in your life the presence
Power and light of your soul.

May you realize that you are never alone,
That your soul in its brightness and belonging
Connects you intimately with the universe.

May you have respect for your individuality and difference.

May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique,
That you have a special destiny here,
That behind the façade of your life there is something
Beautiful and eternal happening.

May you learn to see your self
With the same delight
Pride and expectation
With which God sees you in every moment.

May it be so.

CLOSING MUSIC Yo-Yo Ma – Prelude No 1, J S Bach – reminding us of our connection and
abundance of creativity.

<https://youtu.be/1prweT95Mo0>