

## **Edgar Mihas: 'Alternative Friendships'**

**31st July 2022**

THEME OF MUSIC: Exultation of the Divine through Christian and Sufi Islamic Music

INTRODUCTORY MUSIC: LVHF 2017 | W. A. Mozart - Laudate Dominum, KV 339 -  
Patricia Janečková - Sopran, (04:26) – to play a few minutes before the service  
begins at 11:00.

GREETING AND WELCOMING, followed by INTERFAITH AND SECULAR  
CALENDAR:

29-30.07.2022 – Islamic New Year;

30.07.2022 – International Day of Friendship, World Day against Trafficking in  
Persons;

01.08.2022 – Lammas (Christian), Lughnassad (Lammas) Wicca/Neo-Pagan, fast in  
honour of the Holy Mother of Jesus;

01-07.08.2022 – World Breastfeeding Week.

OPENING WORDS: We enter into this time and this place ..., by Rev Dr Linda Hart

We enter into this time and this place to join our hearts and minds together

We come to this place: the doors open, the heat comes on, biscuits are laid, the  
water heats, and you all come.

What is it that we come here seeking? Many things, too many to mention them all.

Yet, it is likely that some common longings draw us to be with one another:

To remember what is most important in life.

To be challenged to live more truly, more deeply, to live with integrity and kindness  
and with hope and love,

To feel the company of those who seek a common path,

To be renewed in our faith in the promise of this life,

To be strengthened and to find the courage to continue to do what we must do, day  
after day, world without end.

Even if your longings are different than these, you are welcome here. Even if you do not have the strength and the courage to pass along, you are welcome here. You are welcome in your grief and your joy to be within this circle of companions.

We gather here. It is good to be together.

#### CHALICE LIGHTING:

This Chalice forms an integral part of the Unitarian tradition. We light this chalice, symbol of the Divine Light within us and within everyone and everything.

May this gathering of friends for contemplation, meditation, mindfulness, reflection, prayer, and worship warm up hearts and enlighten minds. So be it.

#### OPENING PRAYER: A Prayer, by Rev Ant Howe

Eternal One, Life-Giver, Father, Mother, Companion, Lover and Friend,  
We come to you in these quiet moments, seeking that which is beyond ourselves.  
We make a sacred space; a time when we can express our hopes and our dreams.....

For the world: We pray that we would wisely use the precious resources we have been given; that we will be diligent stewards of the earth.

For the religions of the world: May there be understanding between religions. May we learn to worship in our own way, but to live in peace with those who worship differently.

For the people of the world: We pray for those whose lives are marred by poverty, lack of food or water. When we hear about these things happening in countries far away, may we never forget that these are our brothers and sisters. May we work to end poverty in among the people of the world.

For our Unitarian and Free Christian Movement: May we be rightly proud of our past achievements, but be aware that we cannot be complacent. At a time when fewer people feel the need to worship in traditional churches, may we be a beacon of liberal religion.

For ourselves: We pray that our faith will bring us strength; that our faith will give us a love for our fellow men and women. We pray that our faith will be real to us and that it will help us when we are faced with difficult times and tough decisions.

And, finally, we pray for those who are ill: those loved ones of ours who need our thoughts and prayers. We name them silently in our hearts ...

We dedicate our prayers to you, God, Divine Unity and we ask these things in your many names. Amen.

HYMN 62: Here We Have Gathered

PASSAGE for CONTEMPLATION, MEDITATION, REFLECTION: Meditation on Hope and Love in a Time of Struggle, by Alice Anacheke-Nasemann

In a world so filled with brokenness and sorrow  
It would be easy to lose ourselves in never ending grief,  
To be choked by our outrage,  
To be paralysed by the enormity of suffering,  
To feel our heart squeeze tight with hopelessness.

Instead, this morning, let us simply breathe together as we hold our hearts open.  
Breathing in as our hearts fill with compassion.  
Breathing out as we pray for healing in our world & in our lives.  
Breathing in, opening ourselves to the transforming power of love.  
Breathing out as we pray for peace in our world & in our lives.  
Breathing in as we hold hope in our hearts.  
Breathing out as we pray for justice in our world and in our lives.

May we know our strength.  
May we be filled with courage.  
May our love flow from us into this world.

Breathing in, we are the prayer.  
Breathing out, we are the healing.  
Breathing in, we are the love.  
Breathing out, we are the peace.

Breathing in, we are the hope.

Breathing out, we are the justice.

May we know our strength.

May we be filled with courage.

May our love flow from us into this world.

Amen, blessed be, may it ever be so.

SHORT STORY: The Magic Window, by Pedro Pablo Sacristán

Once upon a time there was a little boy who became very ill. He had to spend all day in bed, unable to move. Because other children weren't allowed to come near him, he suffered greatly, and spent his days feeling sad and blue.

There wasn't much he could do except look out of the window. Time passed, and his feeling of despair just grew. Until one day he saw a strange shape in the window. It was a penguin eating a sausage sandwich. The penguin squeezed in through the open window, said "good afternoon" to the boy, turned around, and left again. Of course, the boy was very surprised. He was still trying to work out what had happened, when outside his window he saw a monkey in a nappy, busy blowing up a balloon. At first the boy asked himself what that could possibly be, but after a while, as more and more crazy-looking characters appeared out the window, he burst out laughing and found it hard to stop.

Anyone wanting to stop laughing would never be helped by seeing a pig playing a tambourine, an elephant jumping on a trampoline, or a dog wearing a pair of glasses and talking about nothing except politics. The little boy didn't tell anyone about this because who would have believed him? Even so, those strange characters ended up putting joy back in his heart, and in his body. Before long, his health had improved so much that he was able to go back to school again.

There he got to talk to his friends and tell them all the strange things he had seen. While he was talking to his best friend, he saw something sticking out of his friend's school bag. The boy asked his friend what it was, and he was so insistent that finally his friend had to show him what was in the bag:

There, inside, were all the fancy-dress suits and disguises that his best friend had been using to try to cheer the little boy up!

And from that day on, the little boy always did his best to make sure that no one felt sad and alone.

FIRST READING: Muhammad Shirin Maghribi, the 14th-century Persian Sufi, wrote the following poem about such an experience:

That spiritual friend knocked at my door last night.

“Who is it?” I asked. He answered, “Open the door. It is you!”

“How can I be You?” I asked. He answered, “We are one, but the veil has hidden us in duality.”

We and I, he and you, have become the veil,

And how well this has veiled you from yourself!

If you wish to know how we and he and all are one,

Pass beyond this ‘I’, this ‘we’, this ‘you’.

SECOND READING:

According to Dr Alireza Nurbakhsh’s article in the Sufi Journal of Mystical Philosophy and Practice entitled *Friendship*, Rumi in his Mathnawi, tells the story of Dhu’l-Nun, a Sufi master who lived during the 9th-century and was put away in an asylum by his own people because they could not tolerate his strange behaviour. One day, a group of Dhu’l-Nun’s so-called friends decided to visit him. As they were about to enter his room, Dhu’l-Nun asked them who they were to which they replied that they were his friends. As soon as Dhu’l-Nun heard this, he began acting like a madman and cursed them, whereupon they all fled.

Dhu’l-Nun burst out laughing, shaking his head,

“Look at the hot air of my so-called friends.”

A true friend never feels burdened by the suffering of another,

The kindness of a friend is like a shell engulfing one’s suffering.

The sign of friendship cannot be found in good times,

It is at times of calamity and suffering that we come to know our friends.

A friend is like gold and one's suffering resembles fire.

Pure gold remains blissful in the midst of fire.

THIRD READING: The Dance of the Soul, by Hazrat Inayat Khan

I have loved in life, and I have been loved.

I have drunk the bowl of poison from the hands of love as nectar,  
and have been raised above life's joy and sorrow.

My heart, aflame in love, set afire every heart that came in touch with it.

My heart has been rent and joined again;

My heart has been broken and again made whole;

My heart has been wounded and healed again;

A thousand deaths my heart has died, and thanks be to love, it lives yet.

I went through hell and saw, there, love's raging fire,  
and I entered heaven illumined with the light of love.

I wept in love and made all weep with me;

I mourned in love and pierced the hearts of men;

And when my fiery glance fell on the rocks, the rocks burst forth as volcanoes.

The whole world sank in the flood caused by my one tear;

With my deep sigh the earth trembled, and when I cried aloud the name of my  
beloved,

I shook the throne of God in heaven.

I bowed my head low in humility, and on my knees, I begged of love,

"Disclose to me, I pray thee, O love, thy secret."

She took me gently by my arms and lifted me above the earth, and spoke softly in my  
ear,

"My dear one, thou thyself art love, art lover,

and thyself art the beloved whom thou hast adored."

HYMN 119: O Source of Many Cultures

QUOTES: a/ "The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the  
strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing. The signs of

impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appears to be lamentably defective.” (Bahá’u’lláh)

b/ “What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.” (Aristotle)

#### REFLECTIVE ADDRESS:

It could well be argued that humanity has been facing a profound multidimensional drama, one aspect of which is a profound spiritual drama that requires both personal and collective transformation to occur simultaneously. This can only happen if each and every person comes, and is allowed to come, to terms with their own self and then to be at peace with the collective and with society as a whole. Yes, easier said than done you might say, but there has to be a starting point, and this is no other than friendship; friendship with oneself and friendship with others. But what exactly does friendship mean? Are there different types of friendship? In their work entitled “an exploratory study of friendship characteristics and their relations with hedonic and eudaimonic well-being”, Austen R. Anderson, Blaine J. Fowers (2019) discerned, among other things, friendship types and forms of well-being.

Aristotelian theory can contribute to the friendship and well-being literature by making differential predictions regarding how friendship types relate to the two forms of well-being. Utility friendships are consistent with the tendency in psychology to see friendships as sources of benefits or outcomes. This suggests a means-end approach in which friends are means to gain some desired benefits, which are the ends. If enjoyment is seen as an outcome of friendship activities, the pleasure friendships can also be seen as a means-end arrangement. It seems reasonable that some friendships will be defined primarily by the advantages or enjoyment they provide. Many studies have found links between the benefits friendships provide and health and wellbeing. Therefore, the more advantageous or pleasurable a friendship is, the greater the health and wellbeing benefits it should provide.

Psychological research often conflates the utility (benefit provision) of friendships with emotional closeness and pleasure. For example, Demir and Özdemir (2010) defined friendship in this way: “A friend is someone with whom you enjoy doing things together, count on to support you when you need it, provide support when he/she needs it, talk about your everyday life, problems, concerns, ideas, and

intimate thoughts” (p. 248). There is no attempt to distinguish enjoyment from social support benefits in the way that an Aristotelian perspective recommends. It is possible that friendships function in such a way that these two aspects are inseparable, but this is an empirical question that the Aristotelian viewpoint illuminates. Similarly, a widely used friendship quality scale, the McGill Friendship Questionnaire (Mendelson and Aboud, 1999), contains subscales assessing companionship, help, intimacy, alliance, emotional security, and self-validation. These scales are often summed into a single score or combined in a latent variable (e.g., Demir & Özdemir, 2010), making it impossible to separate the relationships between these various aspects of friendship and other variables (e.g. well-being).

Many investigations have used this conflated measurement approach to document the association between overall friendship quality and happiness or subjective well-being in **children** (Goswami, 2012; Holder & Coleman, 2009), **adolescents** (Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Raboteg-Saric & Sakic, 2013), **early adults** (Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Demir, Özdemir, & Weitekamp, 2007; Demir & Weitekamp, 2007), **middle-aged adults** (Wrzus et al., 2012), and **older adults** (Larson et al., 1986; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). The link between friendship quality and happiness has been explained through various indirect relationships with mediating variables including the satisfaction of psychological needs (Demir & Özdemir, 2010), perceived mattering (Demir et al., 2011), and a sense of uniqueness (Demir, Simsek, & Procsal, 2013), which offer some clues about how the respondents’ perceptions of friendships can help explain the relationship between friendship quality and happiness.

If there are different types of friendship, and two forms of well-being, as the Aristotelian perspective suggests, it stands to reason that there should be various pathways between friendship types and forms of well-being. One such pathway may be the 21<sup>st</sup> century real or at least perceived need to connect with friends almost 24/7, typically by means of social media platforms and other digital forms of communication. What can we really say to people in underdeveloped societies when they exclaim that they love their computer because their friends (from Europe) are in it? Are online friendships virtual or real? For some people, the reality of the electronic, virtual world is not very dissimilar to the difference between the reality of a dream and conventional reality. You may dream of being in a rose garden and, as



you are trying to pick a rose, a thorn pricks your finger, and you feel pain. In your dream, there and then, you did feel pain. Can the same not be exactly the case when you pick a rose in your own, earthly garden? How are we to say whether the dream experience is more 'real' than the conventional experience?

My own experience shows that like can be truly enriched and even enlightened by online, virtual friendships which offer a unique opportunity to connect with people who otherwise would have remained totally unknown to me. Many a time, such friends feel in very similar ways that this is the case for them, too. We can share almost everything friends can share, but not in established conventional ways ..., but ... being already in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would not be unthinkable to claim that online, virtual friendships, together with the media which enable and facilitate them, have now also become an established convention in many tangible and concrete ways. Perhaps, at the very least, we should refer to them as 'alternative' friendships since the concept of a virtual friendship has also become part of our relatively recent history, particularly during the years of the current pandemic.

As stated in the quote by Bahá'u'lláh at the beginning of this reflective address, not only are we currently going through extremely challenging times, but also the systems we have in place appear to be "lamentably defective", as Bahá'u'lláh rightly pointed out. Conventional friendships, alternative friendships, any kind of genuine, healthy and uplifting friendships, can become an anchor of stability at a time when moving sand appears to be the default option. May this Islamic New Year offer possibilities for anyone who wishes to build bridges, seek friendships, engage in promoting peaceful coexistence among different beliefs, cultures, faiths, religions and traditions. However, this requires mutual respect between individuals and groups, unconditional love and unconditional upholding of human rights worldwide. May I wish you a Happy Islamic New Year and International Day of Friendship!

MUSIC FOR CONTEMPLATION, MEDITATION, PRIVATE PRAYER and/or

REFLECTION: Ney ile Hasretinle Yandı Gönlüm (03:25)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LALb12UCIPc>

OFFERTORY PRAYER:

As, at the end of this service, you will be making your generous contributions for the church which may have meant so much to you, for the church which meant so much to those who came before you, and for the church which will probably mean so much to people you will never know, let us give thanks in advance for the generosity, loving-kindness and support. We pray that all gifts of money, together with all other gifts, will go towards supporting Plymouth Unitarians and the many services they offer to the wider community. So be it.

HYMN 219: You are the Song of my Heart

POETRY: Friendship, by Henry David Thoreau

I think awhile of Love, and while I think,  
Love is to me a world,  
Sole meat and sweetest drink,  
And close connecting link  
Tween heaven and earth.

I only know it is, not how or why,  
My greatest happiness;  
However hard I try,  
Not if I were to die,  
Can I explain.

I fain would ask my friend how it can be,  
But when the time arrives,  
Then Love is more lovely  
Than anything to me,  
And so I'm dumb.

For if the truth were known, Love cannot speak,  
But only thinks and does;  
Though surely out 'twill leak  
Without the help of Greek,  
Or any tongue.

A man may love the truth and practise it,  
Beauty he may admire,  
And goodness not omit,  
As much as may befit  
To reverence.

But only when these three together meet,  
As they always incline,  
And make one soul the seat,  
And favorite retreat,  
Of loveliness;  
When under kindred shape, like loves and hates  
And a kindred nature,  
Proclaim us to be mates,  
Exposed to equal fates  
Eternally;

And each may other help, and service do,  
Drawing Love's bands more tight,  
Service he ne'er shall rue  
While one and one make two,  
And two are one;

In such case only doth man fully prove  
Fully as man can do,  
What power there is in Love  
His inmost soul to move  
Resistlessly.

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Two sturdy oaks I mean, which side by side,  
Withstand the winter's storm,  
And spite of wind and tide,

Grow up the meadow's pride,  
For both are strong

Above they barely touch, but undermined  
Down to their deepest source,  
Admiring you shall find  
Their roots are intertwined  
Inseparably.

PRAYER: Prayer for Strength and Guidance

Eternal Spirit, in friendship with others and in loneliness, I give you my worries and my concerns. I ask for your guidance and your support in my efforts to make friendships as meaningful as they could possibly be. You see it all, the outer circumstances, the inner turmoil. I know that you understand my life, that sometimes my heart weighs heavy with trouble. Right now, I lay all these things before you. I breathe in, safe in the knowledge that I am held by the whole universe. I breathe out, knowing that I am held secure in your presence. You are all truth, you are overflowing love, you are a beacon of hope and a fortress of faith. Eternal Spirit, I choose to be attentive to your language, the silence, for it is in silence that inner voices become audible, as I journey onwards with you. So be it.

CLOSING WORDS: Now, by Andrew Usher

Now, through the rain and the sun,  
Go your ways with gladness:  
With Love in your hearts,  
Peace in your minds  
And Beauty touching your soul.

INSPIRATIONAL VIDEO-CLIP: The Sufi Order: Islamic Sufi Dhikr Circle (02:19)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjZqvy\\_aMRU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjZqvy_aMRU)