

7th August 2022: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Creating safe space for ourselves

1. **PRELUDE** – Peter Mayer, Holy Now

<https://youtu.be/KiypaURysz4>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome into this sacred space, which we make holy by our presence. Whether you are here in person or online this morning, you contribute to holding the space for each one of us.

Opening words by Richard S. Gilbert

Come into the circle of caring.

Come into the community of gentleness, of justice and love.

Come, and you shall be refreshed.

Let the healing power of this people penetrate you,

Let loving kindness and joy pass through you,

Let hope infuse you,

And peace by the law of your heart.

In this human circles,

Caring is a calling.

All of us are called.

So come into the circles of caring.

And as is our custom, let us begin lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do light a candle at home)

We light this flame to mark the beginning of our worship together. May this flame hold us in our attention and our intention to create holy space together.

3. **HYMN 172:** Now open wide your hearts, my friends

Now open wide your hearts, my friends,

and I will open mine,

and let us share all that is fair,

all that is true and fine.

We gather in this meeting house –
people of many kinds:
let us, below the surface,
seek a meeting of true minds.

For in our company shall be great
witnesses of light:
the Buddha, Krishna, Jesus –
those gifted with clearest sight.

Like them, we seek to know ourselves,
to seek, in spite of fear;
to open wide, to all, our hearts –
for all are welcome here.

Music by James Turl, words by Peter Galbraith

PRAYER Harold Babcock

Let us be quiet, without and within.

Let the stillness be in us.

Let the silence hold us.

May we find the deep places of the soul and begin to let go of the distractions which
plague us.

May we let go of irritation, calm the confusion which inhibits us, let go of fear.

The quiet is within us.

The stillness is in us.

The silence will hold us.

There are deep places in the soul,

Here, may we find peace.

Amen

4. **READING** Erika Hewitt, from 'The Shared Pulpit'

Each worship service is a unique moment in a congregation's life. Gathering for an hour on Sunday is a physical reminder of the community we've chosen to call home. Worship is both a calling forth of our best selves and an expression of

acceptance of people as they are. It's a vessel in which we meet one another, again and again, to remind ourselves of who we are and who we wish to be.

Holding the space can mean many things. I think of worship as a container: a strong, spacious vessel into which each person places themselves and their needs, where they merge with the needs of others. That vessel needs to make room for what people bring with them, and to make a promise about the ways they'll be cared for. When the space is held carefully, there's room for everyone – and then some. When elements of worship are approached in a careless or exclusionary way, however, the vessel tips, sloshing on people's figurative toes.

It needs to be a 'safe enough' space, a place where we take appropriate risks and make ourselves vulnerable even as we challenge one another to grow.

STORY Island Chapel, Margaret Silf, 'One hundred more wisdom stories'

There was once a beautiful island. The islanders would walk along its shores every day. They listened to the waves crashing. They caught the wind in their faces. They tasted the salty tang in the air. They felt the sand between their toes, watched the seabirds soaring and swooping, and heard the breeze rustling through the trees.

They were so overawed by the beauty of their island home that they felt a deep desire to praise and worship its creator. So they built a little chapel in the middle of the island. But when they went inside their chapel, they were sad to notice that they could no longer hear the waves or the rustling of the wind, or see the seabirds wheeling, or taste the salty air or feel the kiss of the breeze or the caress of the sand between their toes.

To try to make up for this loss, they filled the chapel with their own words and songs in an attempt to recapture the magic of the mystery. But they disagreed about which words, which songs to use. Once united in community, they began to fragment into opposing factions. Gradually more and more of them stopped going into the little chapel because they didn't find the creator's spirit there.

One little girl, however, kept on coming back, to sit there in the silence and the stillness. Years passed and she became a wide old woman. Every day she rejoiced in the wind and the waves of her island home and every day she spent a quiet half-hour in the chapel. People began to ask her why she did this.

‘Well,’ she explained, ‘if I listen carefully to the deep stillness there in the chapel, I hear the wind and the waves, the seagulls and the trees, right inside my heart, where they can never fade or die, and the creator spirit invites me to take a walk inside my soul. And the spirit seems to whisper: ‘Outside, inside, I am everywhere: beyond you, within you, beside you, above you, below you, around you. There is nowhere that I am not. Be at home in me.’

5. **HYMN: 177 (G) We can become**

Community, supporting friends,
hands joined in unity...
Rejoice, my friend, in fellowship,
in living, full and free.

O let us live with humankind
as sisters, brothers, true.
We’ll share our joys, our sorrows share,
becoming as we do.

We all can grow. We can become
our finer selves set free...
Risk what we are, sure in our faith
in what we yet can be.

Music traditional adpt. by David Dawson, words by Doris Jeanine Stevens

6. **REFLECTION:** We come to a quiet time of reflection.

Here is a chance for us to hold space. Here are some candles and matches. You are invited to light one and, if you wish, to say just a few brief words for a joy or a sorrow in your life at this time. Please speak from the heart. The rest of us will listen as attentively as we can. We will not comment, or offer advice, or try to fix you. We will simply bear witness and hold you in this sacred space.

7. **INTERLUDE:** Widerstehe doch der Sünde, BWV 54, J. S. Bach (Transcr. by Víkingur Ólafsson)

https://youtu.be/nGXBudB_reM

8. **ADDRESS**

What does it mean to hold space?

Lisa Bovee-Kemper tells a story of her first night as a hospital chaplain when she was awakened by her pager and called to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

A baby girl – one of twins – had taken a turn and was not expected to survive the night. Medical staff rushed back and forth, trying everything they knew to keep her alive. Eventually, there was nothing more they could do and she slowly faded away. She says, ‘All I could do was watch and pray: I had no medical expertise, and the family was tangled in that faraway place of shock and grief.’

After a while, the little girl was placed reverently in her cot, next to her sister, and everyone in the unit circled around them and their parents. Everyone had a hand gently touching someone else. It was silent, save the distant beeps and trills of medical machinery, she writes.

Someone whispered to me, “Can you pray?” I had no earthly clue what to say. It was a profound gut-level panic, the knowledge that nothing I could say could alleviate the inexplicable loss.

But in that moment a space opened in my heart and in the room, and the light of truth shone in. Nothing could be fixed. All she could do was name the pain and hold space for it. “Lord, we are lost,” she prayed.

She later said: ‘To name and hold space. To speak the truth as best I understand it, and to hold space for it to bloom. That became the foundation of my ministry.

Heather Plett, author of ‘The Art of Holding Space’ says that holding space is what we do when we walk alongside a person or group on a journey through liminal space. We do this without making them feel inadequate, without trying to fix them, and without trying to impact the outcome. We open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgment and control.’

What is ‘liminal’ space?

Well Richard Rohr describes ‘liminal’ space as a ‘threshold where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown.’ Where our old world is left behind and we are not yet sure of the new existence ‘where genuine newness can begin’.

We may find ourselves in liminal space at any many times in our lives – whenever there’s an illness, a bereavement, or the breakdown of a relationship, an accident, or trauma of any kind. Or a rite of passage – a birth, puberty, marriage, moving house, coming out, changing jobs, menopause and so on. In each case there is a sense of being on a journey from what was known to what is yet unknown. A journey in which we are likely to be changed, transformed even, in some way. Having someone, or a community, who can walk alongside us at these liminal times may help to hold space for us as we travel through the highs and the lows of our lives.

What about coming here? You may not think of coming to church or chapel as being in a liminal space. Perhaps it feels comfortable here, safe, familiar, which is nice. But I think worship IS a liminal space if it’s done well, because this time and this space is qualitatively different from what we might call ‘normal’ life. We have come from our familiar places, and our own routines, and we have entered – whether physically or virtually – we have entered a different quality of time and space where the expectations are different and the way of being has a particularity.

When we come here we have allowed ourselves to be drawn out of 'business as usual'. There is a rhythm to what we do. We enter, we greet each other, we may chat a little and then sit quietly. A candle is lit and some words are spoken that call us into holy time. Holy space. A space which has been carefully prepared with flowers, with prayer, with music. As Parker J Palmer puts it, we invite 'the sacred into the space. Here we can lower our defences, show up with vulnerability and trust, and look deeply into each other's soul. Here something mystical can show up that is beyond words. It's here that we are on holy ground,' he writes.

'Something mystical can show up that is beyond words'.

Like it did for the woman in the island chapel, perhaps. It may not, but it might. In any case it becomes more possible here to be touched by grace, by spirit, by God. It is more likely, perhaps, that we might open ourselves up to the sacred, glimpse the divine, or be touched by spirit. Here we may reasonably hope to feel connection, and presence, and a sense of belonging. We come, perhaps, because we yearn to be whole and to help each other feel more whole too. This is a shared endeavour, a shared quest, a shared journey.

And so we come prepared, we are ready and willing to be transported, inspired, challenged, nourished, encouraged, healed even in some small way. There is a sense of possibility. And so yes, this is a liminal space. If we open ourselves to it, we may leave feeling at least a little different from how we came in. And that is because the space is held. It is held by the building (for some of us), it is held by our simple rituals, it is held most of all by our intention to be fully present: to ourselves, to each other, to the mystery, to the ineffable, to spirit, to the underlying hum and thrum of the universe. And to hear it in our own hearts.

Do you bring with you anticipation and a willingness to embrace whatever happens? Perhaps you find yourself softening into the space, knowing that you will be held and not judged.

Maybe you sense that there's more than just us here, there there's something else that's holding us all.

Perhaps you are able to breathe more easily in this space.

Maybe your senses are more alert to detail, to nuance, to wonder, to awe.
Just maybe you may find you need to say less and are able to listen more.

Two weeks ago I invited you to consider how we wanted to be together in this space. I gave you a list of words and invited you to consider which of them spoke to you most – or to add words of your own. I'm giving you that list again now, with some of the additional words you came up with added to it.

They are all words – as was pointed out by Edgar – that could be described as 'love'. But these words remind us of just some of the very many ways in which love can be expressed. I wonder, what have you been able to bring with you today that has helped you to hold this space? What might you be able to take in to coffee, and in to the rest of the day perhaps? Maybe some of what we hold in our intention here can travel with us and drip out through our actions and interactions later on.

It is easy – but I think wrong – to say that there's nothing that holds us together here in Unitarian worship. That we can believe what we like, that there's no depth. I have heard people say that and it saddens me.

Because I believe we have this great gift and opportunity. We can – when we choose to – we can hold space extraordinarily well. Uniquely we can hold it without judgment or creed. We can hold it inclusively with acceptance and respect. We can hold it in a way that recognises and honours the divine in each one of us. Held well, this space shines with radiant love. That is not nothing, and it is not commonplace. It is something exceptional. A holy, liminal space in which genuine acceptance and transformation can take place.

This is a precious, unique and healing a space.

It is space which we create and hold together, for ourselves and each other.

It is holy space.

Blessed be.

9. **HYMN (P) 208 When our heart is in a holy place**

When our heart is in a holy place,

when our heart is in a holy place,

*we are blessed with love and amazing grace,
when our heart is in a holy place.*

When we trust the wisdom in each of us,
every colour every creed and kind,
and when we see our faces in each others eyes,
then our heart is in a holy place.

*When our heart is in a holy place,
when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace,
when our heart is in a holy place.*

When we tell our story from deep inside,
and we listen with a loving mind,
and we hear our voices in each other's words,
then our heart is in a holy place.

*When our heart is in a holy place,
when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace,
when our heart is in a holy place.*

When we share the silence of sacred space,
and the God of our hearts stirs within,
and we feel the power of each other's faith,
then our heart is in a holy place.

*When our heart is in a holy place,
when our heart is in a holy place,
we are blessed with love and amazing grace,
when our heart is in a holy place.*

*Words and music, Joyce Poley, arranged by Lorne Kellett
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10. **CLOSING WORDS:** Vincent Silliman

A day,
yes, another day –
this day is ours:
its beauty, its promise,
its weight of sorrow and disappointment,
the brightness of its opportunity for doing and achieving,
of its opportunity for the deepening of love and understanding.
This day is ours, even as we make it ours
by the readiness and warmth of our appreciations,
for from it we shall receive according to the measure of our giving.
Let our giving be of ourselves, and from the heart.
May there be laughter in this day, and if there be tears, then generous tears.
Another day?
Ah, yes – a day.

11. **CLOSING VIDEO:** 'Tilted', Christine and the Queens

<https://youtu.be/9RBzsjga73s>

Lyrics include refrain: "I'm actually good. Can't help it if we're tilted"