

## 4<sup>th</sup> September 2022: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

### Will you still need me?

1. **PRELUDE** – When I'm 64 (vocals only) (2.34")

<https://youtu.be/Mhy8JLVu5IY>

2. **OPENING WORDS** by *Carolyn Owen-Towle*

Come into this house of worship. Come in bringing all of who you are. Rest and quiet your week-worn spirit, for you are here to touch again eternal springs of hope and renewal.

Calm your hurried pace. For this hour let the cares, the fretfulness and worry be set aside. Forgive yourself—you are so very worthy of moving on, of making new efforts, of trying again.

Know that you are not alone. There is strength and caring support for you here. You will find comfort if you but ask. Look around. You are a part of potential community. You can make it what you will.

Enter into this house of worship.

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)

May our chalice flame consume our regrets for the past,  
our fears about the future, and our worries about today.  
May it light for us a path of joy and peace.

3. **HYMN 43 (P) Gather the spirit**

Gather the spirit, harvest the power.

Our sep'rate fires will kindle one flame.

Witness the mystery of this hour.

Our trials in this light appear all the same.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.  
Gather in sympathy now and then.  
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.  
Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit of heart and mind.  
Seeds for the sowing are laid in store.  
Nurtured in love and conscience refined,  
with body and spirit united once more.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.  
Gather in sympathy now and then.  
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.  
Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit growing in all,  
drawn by the moon and fed by the sun.  
Winter to spring, and summer to fall,  
the chorus of life resounding as one.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks.  
Gather in sympathy now and then.  
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.  
Gather to celebrate once again

#### **4. PRAYER**

Spirit of Life I find you  
In those humble places.  
The quiet, still spaces where  
I am held in  
A love greater than myself.  
You are the wind in my breath;  
The fire in my soul; The subtle  
Heartbeat of creation all around me.

O God, your love is unimposing  
Yet firm and steadfast,  
Present to all those who would know your peace.  
You challenge me in my arrogance and  
Move me to listen deeply when I fail—  
As I always do—to see the fuller picture.

Spirit of Love, you find the gentle words  
To speak life into me and hold me when  
All else around me and in me feels broken.  
You remind me that I am loved  
And saved just as I am.  
Your salvation is found in living life loved.

Remind me of who I am; O Holy Mystery,  
Help me to see you in the small, everyday  
Moments where you are found.  
Grant me the wisdom to listen for you  
And seek you in those unlikely  
And unexpected places.  
Amen.

##### **5. STORY** 'Rabbit Looks For God' by Kelly Weisman Asprooth-Jackson

One day, a rabbit set out from the woods, carrying a question to all the other creatures that it met. The rabbit came first to a butterfly fluttering in an open field, and asked, "Friend butterfly, what can you tell me about the thing called 'god'?"

The butterfly thought for a moment, and said, "God is the guiding wind that blows me from this field to that one and points me to where the weather is warm and I can help the flowers bloom by flying from one to another." The rabbit thanked the butterfly, and continued on its journey.

Coming to a horse who was grazing at the other end of the field, the rabbit hopped up and asked, "Friend horse, what can you tell me about the thing called 'god'?"

The horse looked at the rabbit, still chewing away at the sweet grass and said, "God is the ground that holds me up, gives folks an open field to walk and run against and all this lovely grass to eat." The rabbit thanked the horse, and hopped further onward.

A little while later, it came to a slow-running stream, and peaking over the bank, the rabbit saw a fish. The rabbit dipped its mouth into the water to ask "Friend fish, what can you tell me about the thing called 'god'?" Then the rabbit raised its head back up and put one ear into the water to listen for the answer.

The fish replied, "God is the water I swim in: it surrounds me all the time, and gives me something to breath and move through. It's something that everyone needs to live."

The rabbit thanked the fish, bounded off again, and very soon after almost ran right into a tree. Craning its head upwards to look towards the very topmost branches, the rabbit asked, "Friend tree, what can you tell me about the thing called 'god'?"

The tree answered slowly, but without hesitating, "God is the light that feeds me and all of my neighbours and family; I spend all of my days reaching upwards towards it, and encouraging the shorter trees to do the same."

The rabbit thanked the tree, and, seeing that it was getting late in the day, set off home for the night. As the rabbit was approaching its den, its neighbour, the squirrel, called out from nearby, "Friend rabbit, after your day of asking the same question over and over, what can you tell me about the thing called 'god'?"

The rabbit thought for a while, and then said, "What I can tell you is that the butterfly cares deeply for the flowers, the horse wants everyone to have open fields to roam on, the fish knows everyone needs water to live, and the tree hopes its children will grow as tall as it has grown." And then the rabbit went down into its burrow, and slept for the night.

I wonder whether any of you have been picking blackberries recently? I have, and I was pleased to discover this beautiful little poem by Gerda Mayer.

**POEM Lieselott Among the Blackberries** by Gerda Mayer

Caught on September's  
blackberry hook,  
her hands reach out  
for the sweet dark fruit;  
wholly under  
the blackberry spell.  
"Hurry up, Lieselott,  
it is late." (Plenty  
of time! She  
feigns deaf and dawdles.)  
Old woman tasting  
the last of the fruit,  
in sunny oblivion,  
in a still brightness.

**6. HYMN: 83 (P) Just as long as we have breath**

Just as long as I have breath  
I must answer, 'Yes,' to life;  
though with pain I made my way,  
still with hope I meet each day.  
If they ask what I did well,  
tell them I said, 'Yes,' to life.

Just as long as vision lasts,  
I must answer 'Yes,' to truth;  
in my dream and in my dark,  
always that elusive spark.  
If they ask what I did well,  
tell them I said, 'Yes,' to truth.

Just as long as my heart beats,  
I must answer, 'Yes,' to love;  
disappointment pierced me through,  
still I kept on loving you.  
If they ask what I did best,  
tell them I said, 'Yes,' to love.

*Music Johann G. Ebeling, arr David Dawson; words © Alicia S. Carpenter*

7. **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.

8. **INTERLUDE:** Hashirim asher lish'lomo (The Songs of Solomon): Yitgadal veyitkadash, Salamone Rossi (3' 58")

9. **ADDRESS**

This is the end of summer (for me) emotionally. When I come back from my music course in Ireland it is always the end of August and there is the distinct feeling of a new season coming. Yes, I know the equinox is not until 23<sup>rd</sup> this year, but personally I can't escape the sense of summer drawing to a close *now*. The evenings are noticeably darker earlier. The blackberries are coming to an end and the apples are ripening. The other evening I felt a little chilly for the first time in ages – maybe you noticed that too? And of course, as some of you know, it's my 64<sup>th</sup> birthday today, so another year – another new start – is beginning. I like this time. I enjoy the poignancy of one season ending and the simultaneous promise of another one opening.

The Beatles' song 'When I'm 64' was released in May 1967 when I was only 9 years old. And when the Fab Four themselves were still in their mid-20s. Goodness, 64 must have seemed truly ancient to us all then! And perhaps it's because of the song

that this year does feel like something of a milestone for me. Time for some readjustment, maybe.

Kathleen Dowling Singh, author of 'The Grace of Aging' writes: Adjusting our views of ourselves can take some time. Adjusting our views of our place in the world and of our further direction can also take some time... New questions emerge, often clamouring for attention. Who am I beyond the functions I have served? Who am I when the habits of a lifetime are stripped away? Who am I beyond the persona I've presented to the world and to myself? Who am I, bare?'

And we might add, as the song goes, 'Will you still need me?'

Some of you will have been making such adjustments for some time. For others they may still be on the distant horizon. But a life, if we are lucky, spans several decades, and they can't all be on an upward trajectory, at least not in the ways we grow accustomed to thinking of in our youth. We may spend the first half of our lives busily growing and learning and planning for 'the future'. But then we reach a point where the future diminishes, and is significantly exceeded by the past. What then?

Richard Rohr writes in his book 'Falling upward: A spirituality for the two halves of life' that:

"One of the best-kept secrets, and yet one hidden in plain sight, is that *the way up is the way down*. This pattern is obvious in all of nature, from the very change of the seasons and substances on this earth to the six hundred million tons of hydrogen that the sun burns every day that lights and warms our earth. Yet it is still a secret, probably because we don't want to see it. We don't want to embark on a further journey if it feels like going down, especially after we've put so much sound and fury into the going up. This is surely the first and primary reason why many people never get to the fullness of their own lives. The supposed achievements of the first half of life have to fall apart and show themselves to be wanting in some way, or we will not move further." An interesting thought, that the fullness in fact may lie in the demise.

You may wonder why I chose the story of Rabbit this morning. It is not obviously about aging after all. But it spoke to me of the busyness of a quest followed by a

quiet acceptance and a gentle emergence of different kind of understanding. A maturing, you could say.

I love the answers Rabbit got from the other animals about 'the thing called God'. There were mystical answers: God is the wind that guides us, the ground that holds us up, the water we swim in, the light that feeds us. And there were also the answers that spoke to how we might live well together: so we can help the flowers bloom, says the butterfly; so we can all be free to walk and run and eat, says the horse; so we can each breathe and move, adds the fish; so we can reach upwards and encourage others to reach up too, says the tree. These definitions of the 'thing called God' are all very subjective. They differ according to each animal's perspective, and way of being, they're relevant to its unique purpose in life. And yet each answer also holds something of universal truth about the nature of relationship with the divine. Rabbit, who might be you or me, scurries around questioning, but crucially is curious rather than argumentative. Rabbit seems to listen and accept the various personal takes on a question that none of us can – in truth – ever answer satisfactorily. There is a wise maturity in rabbit's final words to the squirrel. It has heard, and begun to understand more deeply, the ways in which the animals experience the divine in their lives. And that turns out to be definition enough.

I had an interesting conversation with our member Christine on Wednesday at the café about why we don't talk more about the meaning of life. It's a good question. We do talk about it, I think, but perhaps not directly, and not in ways that arrive at any answers. Because each of us is always finding new meaning, aren't we?, and re-experiencing what God means for us, and what our own lives mean to us *right now*. I used to hunger for answers when I was younger, I wanted definitions. I loved to argue and debate theology. But I have little appetite for that now. It's not that I've lost interest in God or in life or in meaning – far from it – it's just a feeling that I no longer find the divine by trying to pin it down with words.

Getting older inevitably brings loss, doesn't it, and that takes some getting used to. I'm only on the nursery slopes of that learning, I know. Some of you are already having to grapple with illness and bereavement and the loss of some of the capabilities and faculties you once had. There is sadness and even despair at times, I know, which feels inevitable and truthful. A necessary part of the process. But I've

also seen acceptance arrive and readjustments made, and a willingness to look in the mirror and be courageously honest about what life's realities are now. And I've certainly seen some of you embrace new opportunities that have opened up to you, including letting go and relaxing into being grateful for what has been and accepting of what is. Like Ralph finishing his memoirs in time for his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, in spite of his frailty and blindness. I see others of you continue to blossom in ways you'd never have considered before, too. I remember you, Thelma, shortly after coming out of hospital last year going on your first ever march and absolutely loving it! And I hope your hot air balloon trip this week brings joy and perspective. I hope I, too, can find moments of grace and adventure, freedom and fluidity of thought along my own journey into aging. Into what just might be the fullness of life,

Meanwhile, today, here we are, each at our own stage of life, each gradually maturing in our own ways. And meanwhile, however old or young we are, there are vital qualities we can all, always lean into: curiosity; generosity; wisdom; mischief; openness; and so much more. And meanwhile 'the thing called God' continues throughout it all. Continues to guide us to where we can be helpful; remains the ground that holds us up; is forever the water we swim in; and will eternally be the light we move towards until our dying breath, and maybe beyond, who knows? Like any good story, a life has a beginning, a middle and an end. And yes, we *are* needed, at every stage of it.

Let's learn to honour and embrace it all. *Blessed be.*

#### 10. **HYMN (P) 93 We laugh we cry**

We laugh, we cry, we live, we die,  
we dance, we sing our song.  
We need to feel there's something here  
to which we can belong.  
We need to feel the freedom just  
to have some time alone.  
But most of all we need close friends  
we can call our very own.

*And we believe in life,  
and in the strength of love,  
and we have found a need to be together.  
We have our hearts to give,  
we have our thoughts to receive,  
and we believe that sharing is an answer.*

A child is born amongst us and  
we feel a special glow.  
We see time's endless journey as  
we watch the baby grow.  
We thrill to hear imagination  
freely running wild.  
We dedicate our minds and hearts  
to the spirit of the child.

*And we believe in life,  
and in the strength of love,  
and we have found a time to be together.  
And with the grace of age,  
we share the wonder of youth,  
and we believe that growing is an answer.*

Our lives are full of wonder and  
our time is very brief.  
The death of one amongst us fills  
us all with pain and grief.  
But as we live, so shall we die,  
and when our lives are done  
the memories we shared with friends,  
they will linger on and on.

*And we believe in life,  
and in the strength of love,  
and we have found a place to be together.*

*We have the right to grow,  
we have the gift to believe,  
that peace within our living is an answer.*

We seek elusive answers to  
the questions of this life.  
We seek to put an end to all  
the waste of human strife.  
We search for truth, equality,  
and blessed peace of mind.  
And then we come together here  
to make sense of what we find.

*And we believe in life,  
and in the strength of love,  
and we have found a joy to be together.  
And in our search for peace,  
maybe we'll finally see:  
even to question truly is an answer.*

*Words and music © Shelley Jackson Denham 1980*

**CLOSING WORDS:** Michael Schuler

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.  
Question your convictions, for beliefs too tightly held strangle the mind and its natural wisdom.  
Suspect all certitudes, for the world whirls on—nothing abides.  
Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt and inquiry, let a corner be reserved for trust.  
For without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged. Amen

11. **CLOSING VIDEO:** 'Closer to fine', Indigo Girls

<https://youtu.be/HUgwM1Ky228>