

16th October 2022: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Rev Kate Whyman – ‘Membership – what does it mean?’

1. **PRELUDE** – I belong – Namoli Bennet

<https://youtu.be/1UkVY7vGs9w>

2. **WELCOME & CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome to this morning’s service everyone, whether you are here in person or online, and however you are in this moment. We are here to worship – to give thanks and to ask for help if we need it; to be silent and to sing; to celebrate and to offer compassion; to be ourselves and to be in community together. And to pay attention – once again - to core of our being and to the divine. We are here to be present with ourselves, with each and with our god.

And today is about being present in a particular way – it’s about what it means to be a Unitarian and a member of this church. We had hoped to formally welcome Viv this morning. She actually became a member last year. But unfortunately she’s not very well this week and so we’ll have to do that another time.

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

Words by Margaret Kelp

As surely as we belong to the universe
We belong together.
We join here to transcend the isolated self,
To reconnect,
To know ourselves to be at home,
Here on earth, under the stars,
Linked with each other

3. **PRAYER**

Divine Spirit

We recognise that our community is made up of individuals and free-thinkers, from

different backgrounds and cultures, sexualities and genders, with our own particular gifts and foibles, our own unique life experiences. Some of us may see ourselves as misfits, or rebels, or dissenters. Here we give thanks for that diversity which enriches us and gives our community its strength.

We also give thanks for the freedom we find in togetherness. For the companionship we share on our own life journeys. For the openness and tolerance we strive for and the acceptance and welcome we feel within these walls.

Let us take a few minutes of silence to reflect on what it means to be here this morning, in this particular community, as it is, here and now.

Pause

And to pray for all who suffer oppression, or control, who live under tyranny. Those wherever they may be who are not free to make their own choices, or live according to their own consciences, or to worship the god of their own understanding.

Be with us all, always. Amen.

4. **HYMN** 172 (G) All are welcome here

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 James Turlle, words Peter Galbraith

5. STORY

Margaret Silf – that great collector and re-teller of wisdom stories – tells a folk story about a hen and a pig walking along the road together. They are enjoying the sunny morning and having a friendly conversation. As they turn a corner they notice a big poster by the roadside. It's an advertisement for the "Great British Breakfast", and features just such goodies as you might imagine: fried potatoes, tomatoes, mushrooms, and – first and foremost, of course – two fried eggs, a couple of sausages and a few rashers of sizzling crisp bacon.

"Ah", sighs the hen. "Doesn't it make you proud to be chosen to participate in such a wonderful institution as the great British breakfast?"

"Hmmm," replies the pig. "It might be 'participation' for you, but for me it's total commitment."

The moral, says Margaret Self, is that participation is free but commitment will cost you.

6. **READING: I Want To Be With People, by Dana E Worsnop**

I don't want to be with a bunch of people who think just like me.

I want to be in a beloved community where I don't have to think like everyone else to be loved.

I want to be with people who value compassion, justice, love and truth, though they have different thoughts and opinions about all sorts of things.

I want to be with independent-minded people of good heart.

I want to be with people who have many names and no name at all for God.

I want to be with people who see my goodness and dignity, who see my failings and foibles, and who still love me.

I want to be with people who feel their inter-connection with all existence and let it guide their footfalls upon the earth.

I want to be with people who see life as a paradox and don't always rush to resolve it.

I want to be with people who are willing to walk the tightrope that is life and who will hold my hand as I walk mine.

I want to be with people who let church call them into a different way of being in the world.

I want to be with people who support, encourage and even challenge each other to higher and more ethical living.

I want to be with people who inspire one another to follow the call of the spirit.

I want to be with people who covenant to be honest, engaged and kind, who strive to keep their promises and hold me to the promises I make.

I want to be with people who give of themselves, who share their hearts and minds and gifts.

I want to be with people who know that human community is often warm and generous, sometimes challenging and almost always a grand adventure.

In short, I want to be with people like you.

7. HYMN 68 (P) I dream of a church

I dream of a church that joins in with God's laughing
as she rocks in her rapture, enjoying her art:
she's glad of her world, in its risking and growing:
'tis the child she has borne and holds close to her heart.

I dream of a church that joins in with God's weeping
as she crouches, weighed down by the sorrow she sees:
she cried for the hostile, the cold and ho-hoping,
for she bears in herself our despair and dis-ease.

I dream of a church that joins in with God's dancing
as she moves like the wind and the wave and the fire:
a church that can pick up its skirts, pirouetting,
with the steps that can signal God's deepest desire.

I dream of a church that joins in with God's loving
as she bends to embrace the unlovely and lost,
a church that can free, by its sharing and daring,
the imprisoned and poor, and then shoulder the cost.

God, make us a church that joins in with your living,
as you cherish and challenge, rein in and release,
a church that is winsome, impassioned, inspiring;
lioness of your justice and lamb of your peace.

Traditional melody, arr. David Dawson, words © Kate Compston

8. REFLECTION

Silence

INTERLUDE: Clíodhna Ní Aodáin - Anam Chara (Soul Friend)

<https://youtu.be/ZJJAQgCVBRQ>

9. ADDRESS Membership

I'm always being asked what is a Unitarian? Including by you. And I usually say it's a creedless religion. And I start with the name - Unitarian. I explain that our forebears couldn't find any evidence in the bible for God being 'three persons in one'. And they concluded that God was not a trinity, but was One. And furthermore and later on, others realised they couldn't find anything in the scriptures to support the idea that Jesus was the one and only son of God either. Jesus, they argued, was not the incarnation of God, but a teacher and a prophet. And such radical ideas were considered heresy for which people paid with their lives. Spanish theologian and scientist Michael Servetus was burned at the stake for his non-Trinitarian beliefs in 1553. Our own John Biddle – sometimes called the Father of English Unitarianism – was repeatedly imprisoned for publishing his anti-Trinitarian views and eventually died of ill health in Newgate prison in 1662.

That's some commitment.

But it isn't really our beliefs that define us. What's more important about the tradition that came to be called Unitarianism, is not so much the original theological argument, but more the commitment to thinking for ourselves. To being willing and brave enough to dissent from the prevailing view. To not simply believe what we're told to believe, or follow the herd, but to commit to being curious, and questioning, and open to changing our minds in the light of new evidence. In other words to following a free religious faith, not a creed or a dogma. To follow our own conscience, subject reason and not harming others; to consider in matters of faith (which of course can never be proved) what seems to chime with our own lived experience, and what seems possible rather than implausible.

So an important part of being Unitarian is to be a seeker. Someone who is always searching for truth and meaning, while realising that The Truth is always beyond human grasp. There is no destination to reach. The journey is more important. But there's another aspect to this faith too, which has become perhaps even more important and that's about being in community. We believe that we learn and grow towards wholeness – and closer to the divine – better together than alone. We recognised that we learn from each other and through our relationships with each

other. In community we find a place where each of us can contribute our gifts and our insights, and bring our strengths and our vulnerabilities. Here we may discover that we are nourished and nurtured and enriched as a result, not in spite of our diversity but because of it.

When I became a member of Brighton Unitarian Church in the year 2000 it felt like a big deal to me. I had never before found a church, or any other religious community (and I had looked) in which I felt I could belong and would give me space to grow. It was the first time I felt able to embrace my own spirituality with others without having to go along with stuff I simply couldn't believe. It was an amazing discovery for me, this hidden gem of a church that not only tolerated doubt and dissent but actively embraced and encouraged it. Even more amazingly it managed to hold it all of that in an atmosphere of mutual respect and kindness. I felt blessed and privileged to find such a place. And made the decision to become a member. Not usually given to labels, I found I was happy to call myself Unitarian.

I know not everyone wants to be a member and that's fine – and we respect that and never put pressure on anyone. You're all welcome. However, if you think you might be interested then I'd love to hear from you. There are a few barriers to entry. We ask that you've been attending reasonably regularly for at least 6 months; and we would expect you to know something about the tradition and be comfortable with its ethos and values; and yes there is a subscription to be paid, though that's negotiable. And there are some practical advantages to membership – like having a vote in our meetings, a key to the building, a parking permit for the car park, for example.

But the real benefit is surely the act of making a commitment to yourself and to your god – however you understand it – that you want to give time to your spiritual life and to make this your spiritual home, at least for the time being anyway. That you want to actively contribute to the care and the flourishing of this church – and of this community of beloved souls - and that you're willing and open to your own growth and flourishing too. That's what membership is really about. This place is only what we make it and what we bring to it, what we're willing to share and build together – with of course a little help from god and the universe.

So if you think you might be interested – whether you attend in person or online – let me know. I'm willing to arrange a gathering or two for people to have a bit more of a delve into what Unitarianism is and whether it might be right for you if there's enthusiasm for that.

10. **HYMN 167 (P) There is a place I call my own**

There is a place I call my own,
where I can stand by the sea,
and look beyond the things I've known
and dream that I might be free.
Like the bird above the trees,
gliding gently on the breeze,
I wish that all my life I'd be
without a care and flying free.

But life is not a distant sky
without a cloud, without rain,
and I can never hope that I
can travel on without pain.
Time goes swiftly on its way;
all too soon we've lost today,
I cannot wait for skies of blue
or dream so long that life is through.

So life's a song that I must sing,
a gift of love I must share;
and when I see the joy it brings
my spirits soar through the air.
Time goes swiftly on its way;
life has taught me how to fly.
For now I know what I can be
and now my heart is flying free.

Words and music by Don Besig, arr. David Dawson © Harold Flammer Music

11. CLOSING WORDS For Belonging, by John O'Donohue

May you listen to your longing to be free.

May the frames of your belonging be generous enough for your dreams.

May you arise each day with a voice of blessing whispering in your heart.

May you find a harmony between your soul and your life.

May the sanctuary of your soul never become haunted.

May you know the eternal longing that lives at the heart of time.

May there be kindness in your gaze when you look within.

May you never place walls between the light and yourself.

May you allow the wild beauty of the invisible world to gather you, mind you, and embrace you in belonging.

12. CLOSING VIDEO 'Home', Boyce Avenue

<https://youtu.be/E1XpJ2iGj4Y>