

6th November 2022: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Rev Kate Whyman – ‘Why do we suffer?’

PRELUDE – ‘Burden’, Foy Vance

<https://youtu.be/DDz9r3TVeLM>

WELCOME & CHALICE LIGHTING

‘From Judaism, Christianity and Islam to Hinduism and Taoism, to Native American and Goddess religions each offers images of the sacred web into which we are woven. We are called children of One God and members of one body we are called drops in the ocean of God; we are pictured as jewels in the net of Indra. We inter-exist.’ *Buddhist and Eco-activist Joanna Macy*

Welcome all visitors and friends, both in the church and online, to this morning’s service.

Let us light this flame as a symbol of the light of our free faith. May it inspire and comfort us, and may the inner light of the spirit be kindled by our time together this morning.

PRAYER Jacob Trapp

Grant us to see things that bear the mark of the eternal
The beauty that lures with loving kindness
The transmutation of suffering into wisdom and understanding
The divine impulse given and received.

Give us to cherish life’s perishable beauty
That it may be imperishably present to us
And may we so pass through the things that are fleeting
As to be richer in the things that endure.

God of all Creation

We give thanks for this opportunity to spend time in this sacred place, this opportunity for each one of us to refresh our spirits, to remind ourselves of our own truth, to reconnect with the very ground of our being.

God of Life and Love we bring into our awareness those we love who are suffering, those who are ill or in anguish, those who need our care. We ask that they know in their souls the great comfort and gentle balm of your compassion.

We too ask for loving kindness. May we give it freely and accept it with grace. May we know the loving kindness of all creation and may it radiate from us into all parts of the cosmos.

Divine Spirit we give thanks for our time together. May it console and restore us, may it energise and inspire us.

Amen

The theme of this service is 'Why do we suffer?'. So if you are feeling low this morning, our first hymn we sing it especially for you.

HYMN 173 (P) Though gathered here to celebrate

Though gathered here to celebrate,
my spirit's burning low;
instead of serving, now I wait,
the breath of worship's not too late,
breathe, let the embers glow.

There have been losses on the way;
a parent, partner, friend.
At times I need to grieve and say,
'I'll live my life from day to day,
be near and help me mend.'

The stillness strips the mask away,
exposes lonely hearts;
self-pity must not have its way;
I'll live my life from day to day,
and now the healing starts.

Music © W. Frederick Wooden, words © Christine Doreian Michaels

STORY from the Buddhist tradition. Many thanks to Kay Millard for pointing out this version of it from 'When bad things happen to good people', by Rabbi Harold Kushner.

There is an old Chinese tale about the woman whose only son died. In her grief, she went to the holy man and said, 'What prayers, what magical incantations do you have to bring my son back to life?' Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her, he said to her, 'Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life.'

The woman set off at once in search of that magical mustard seed. She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, 'I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me.' They told her, 'You've certainly come to the wrong place,' and began to describe all the tragic things that had recently befallen them. The woman said to herself, 'Who is better able to help these poor unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?' She stayed to comfort them, then went on in her search for a home that had never known sorrow.

But wherever she turned, in hovels and in palaces, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune. Ultimately, she became so involved in ministering to other people's grief that she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that it had in fact begun to drive the sorrow out of her life.

READINGS

Teilhard De Chardin, the Catholic theologian and geologist

'Our faith imposes on us a right and a duty to throw ourselves into the things of the earth. Our consciousness rising above the growing (but still much too limited) circles of family, country and race shall finally discover that the only truly natural and real human unity is in the spirit of the earth. No evolutionary future awaits anyone except in association with everyone else. We are One after all, you and I. Together we suffer, together exist and forever will recreate each other.'

Bryan Stevenson, American lawyer, social justice activist

"We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. The ways in which I have been hurt—and have hurt others—are different from the ways [others have] suffered and caused suffering. But our shared brokenness connect[s] us.

HYMN 60 (G) Trust in life

We do not seek a shallow faith,
a God to keep us free
from trial and error, harm and death,
wherever we may be.

For none can live and not grow old,
nor love and not risk loss:
though life bring raptures manifold,
each one must bear some cross.

When future days seem but a mass
of menace more than hope,
we pray not for the cup to pass,
but strength that we may cope.

God grant us faith that when some ill
unwonted comes our way,

deep in our hearts, thy Spirit will
give power to win the day.

And if from fear of pain or strife,
calm peace we cannot win,
then give us faith to trust thy Life
invincible within.

Music by John Bacchus Dykes; words by Sydney Henry Knight.

REFLECTION 'Psalm for the wintered soul' Cynthia Frado

To the Weaver of Molecules, the Spinner of Stars
the Impulse that gives birth
to the Universe, to the Earth,
to Me

In the deepest, darkest night of my wintered soul
I wrap myself in the blanket
of my sadness and grief,
pain and suffering,
doubts and concerns,
fears and questions,
and look out from my wondering eyes
toward the Light that
dares to penetrate
the layers
of
blindness
that surround me.

So obscured is my vision
because of the trials and tribulations
of this life,
that it is Your fractal rays of
possibility and hope

that I seek
to inspire me
to emerge from this cocoon
that holds me.

Each luminescent ray
of Love and Hope and Possibility
is that catalyst which I need
to transform my thoughts and emotions
into fuel for that inner fire
which will dispel the darkness of my night,
which will help me to see
more clearly
the embers of love and hope and possibility
that dwell within me.

I long to be filled
with renewed energy and strength
to thrust new life
into these wings of my rebirth;
the fragile fragments of my life
the ingredients in the Alchemist's hand,
creating a new energetic substance
to course through my veins.

This womb of my becoming
has been one of struggle and transformation.
I was never meant to remain
in this confinement of darkness.
I was created to dwell
in the Infinite Light.

To the Weaver of Molecules, the Spinner of Stars
the Impulse that gives birth

to the Universe, to the Earth,
to Me

In the deepest, darkest night of my wintered soul
I shall look thru the window of my expectant eyes
toward the Source of my Being,
waiting as I do
for Your Alchemist's hand
to create within me
the change that is necessary
for the season of my rebirth.

I was never meant to remain
in this confinement of darkness.
I was created to dwell
in the Infinite Light.

Spring will come again,
this I know.
And I,
I will be ready for my emergence and unfolding,
that I might soar
ever higher
into my own Becoming,
into the Light of my own Transcendence.

Reawakened.
Renewed.
Reborn.
Silence

INTERLUDE: 'Comfort me', Mimi Bornstein
<https://fb.watch/gyBHz5OmQm/>

ADDRESS 'Why do we suffer?'

I have been thinking about suffering, and why we suffer, and the first thing I want to say is that I share my thoughts with humility. Theologians and philosophers down the ages have asked and attempted to answer this question and others like it. And more to the point all of us here have our own experience of suffering, so whatever I say – or quote – today it is all offered in a spirit of continuing inquiry. There are no easy answers.

Having said that, I think we all understand that at a basic level some suffering is unavoidable – in fact it's essential for our survival. The pain I feel when I accidentally put my hand on a hotplate is unpleasant but it certainly ensures I move it quickly and before too much damage is done. In that simple sense pain and suffering are built into our DNA, prompting us to respond appropriately when we're hungry, thirsty, cold, sick. (There is a rare congenital condition in which people don't feel any physical pain at all - and it's dangerous, for obvious reasons.)

We also know that we are mortal, though we're not necessarily at ease with that. And we all love – which inevitably means we also grieve. These are difficult truths about the nature of being human. Death and grief are challenging but we understand that they come with the territory. Ultimately we know there's no avoiding them.

If you're anything like me you probably cause some of your own suffering too. If you give yourself a hard time, have that critical voice in your head, or if you get too attached to things being a certain way and then they're not – well that's going to make things tough. Buddhism is particularly good at teaching ways to let go of patterns of thinking that hold us back or trip us up or cause harm to others.

But what's hardest to make sense of, I think, is the suffering that seems random, pointless, cruel even. The kind of suffering that may creep up on us, or come completely out of the blue, which doesn't appear to have a purpose, and doesn't feel part of the natural order of things. It's the kind that resonates with Jesus's words on the cross 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?', that howl of anguish, which perhaps we've all felt at one time or another. At its heart is the terrible feeling of abandonment, of incredulity, of 'why me?', or 'why them?' Of 'what have I done to deserve this?', or simply 'it isn't fair'. A life-changing accident or illness, a mistake

that has far-reaching consequences, the death of a child, betrayal, abuse, being caught up in a war, or a famine, or a flood. Whatever it may be that knocks us for six and turns our world upside down and shakes our faith. How do we make sense of *those things*? And where is God in any of it, if at all?

At such times it's certainly difficult to square belief in a god that is portrayed as both all-loving *and* all-powerful. If god loves me – or us – why would they allow such tragedy or atrocity to happen we may think? Some people answer by saying that everything has a purpose, and everything happens for a reason, it's just that we can't see the bigger picture. I suppose that could be true, and sometimes appears to in retrospect, but I personally don't find helpful. The biggest trauma in my own family's life was the severe and life-limiting disability of my younger brother. Telling my mother that there was some purpose or reason for his – and her – suffering would only have made her feel greater shame and distress than she already did. That she – and he – were being punished in some way for something without knowing why or for what. It would be yet more abandonment, this time by albeit well-meaning people.

The problem of suffering and evil is one reason people give up on the idea of God at all. Personally I'm not prepared to give up on an all-loving god. But I can let go of an all-powerful one. And the reason is that this miraculous, astounding, awe-inspiring universe can only exist, it seems to me, because it follows the laws of its own nature – the laws of physics, of chemistry, of biology – and these laws have consequences that even god (I'm going to say, perhaps controversially) can't interfere with because they are the very fabric of creation.

Creation is so incredible and so much of it is beautiful, joyful, loving, astounding, isn't it? We (who are part of it) are also beautiful, joyful, loving and astounding so much of the time. But of course we are also vulnerable, complicated, flawed and broken - and we are part of an unimaginably complex web of existence that is so very much bigger than just us. We live alongside, and co-exist, and are wholly interdependent not only with each other, but with all forms of life, and all of its elements. That's the deal of being alive in this world. Bacteria and fungi and viruses are essential for the whole ecosystem but they can also make us sick. We are subject to the movements of the stars and the planets, the tides and the winds, the storms and the droughts. The sun that warms us but can also burn us. The rain that waters us and can also drown us.

In this glorious and awesome and sometimes frightening kaleidoscope life and things tumble and rumble along in ways that are not under our own control – and they inevitably land, at times, in ways that cause us immense sadness, pain, loss, confusion in ways that simply can't be reversed or prevented – even by god – in whom it all exists, however much we may wish and pray with all our hearts that they could be. When tragedy strikes it's not some deliberate act of god, it's not punishment, it's not callous – it just is. But reality can be an extremely hard pill to swallow.

For me, where god – love, and light, and spirit - come in is in what happens next. The god of my understanding weeps with us. We are not forsaken, though it may certainly feel that way. Help comes After a while, like green shoots finding their way through cracks in the pavement, the light begins to seep in. We let the pain be the pain, but still we're not alone. We can ask for help and guidance, for strength and courage, from god and the universe. And it comes most often in the form of other people who care, who have suffered themselves, who are willing to listen and support. It comes from those who nurse us, or counsel, or tend or treat us. It comes from those who take care of the practical things on our behalf, cook us a meal, go for a walk with us, clear up the mess, sort out the paperwork, or help us do it for ourselves. God comes in the patience and generosity, the kindness and empathy of others. Spirit enters in the silence. Peace comes in prayer. Love comes in a smile, or a hug. The pain may remain but the light has ways of returning, in what we make of our lives despite – or even because of - our troubles. And it returns when we find we're able to give back with more compassion and understanding, more gentleness and kindness than we had before.

I'll finish with some words which I find incredibly moving, which I think I may have shared here some years ago. They are worth repeating. They were written by author Cheryl Strayed in her wonderful agony column called 'Dear Sugar'. She was contacted by a man whose only son had been killed by a drunk driver who drove through a red traffic light. He signed himself 'Living Dead Dad'. Here is part of her reply.

'You are not grieving your son's death because his death was ugly and unfair. You're grieving it because you loved him truly. The beauty in that is greater than the bitterness of his death.'

'It's your life. The one you must make in the obliterated place that's now your world, where everything you used to be is simultaneously erased and omnipresent, where you are forevermore a living dead dad.'

'The obliterated place is equal parts destruction and creation. The obliterated place is pitch black and bright light. It is water and parched earth. It is mud and it is manna. The real work of deep grief is making a home there.'

'You go on by doing the best you can, you go on by being generous, you go on by being true, you go on by offering comfort to others who can't go on, you go on by allowing the unbearable days to pass and allowing the pleasure in other days, you go on by finding a channel for your love and another for your rage.'

'I'd give it all back in a snap, but the fact is, my own grief taught me things. It showed me shades and hues I couldn't have otherwise seen. It required me to suffer. It compelled me to reach.'

'Your grief has taught you too, Living Dead Dad. Your son was your greatest gift in his life and he is your greatest gift in his death too. Receive it. Let your dead boy be your most profound revelation. Create something of him. Make it beautiful.'

PS: The original letter and the full response can be found here:

<https://therumpus.net/2011/07/01/dear-sugar-the-rumpus-advice-column-78-the-obliterated-place/>

HYMN 195 (P) We sing a love that sets all people free

We sing a love that sets all people free,
that blows like wind that burns like scorching flame,
Enfolds the earth, springs up like water clear.
Come, living love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love that seeks another's good,
that longs to serve and not to count the cost,
a love that yielding finds itself made new.
Come, caring love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, unflinching, unafraid
to be itself despite another's wrath,
a love that stands alone and undismayed.
Come, strengthening love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, that wandering will not rest
Until it finds its way, its home, its source,
through joy and sadness pressing on refreshed.
Come, pilgrim love, live in our hearts today.

We sing the Holy Spirit, full of love,
who seeks out scars of ancient bitterness,
brings to our wounds the healing grace of Christ.
Come, radiant love, live in our hearts today.

*Music by Alfred Morton Smith © Estate of Doris Wright Smith. Words by June Boyce-Tillman © 1993
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CLOSING WORDS Serenity prayer

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

CLOSING VIDEO 'You can do this hard thing', Carrie Newcomer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRGnftH_g4I