

22nd January 2023 – PLYMOUTH

Chinese New Year – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. INTRO MUSIC Chinese Flute: Dizi (Chinese Flute): Yuenfen (2'58')

<https://youtu.be/SoI6me5rcil>

2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT

Welcome and good morning to you all. To those of you here in church, and those of you joining from home – or wherever you may be. I did think I'd finished wishing people a happy new year, but not quite...Happy Chinese New Year! This is a lunar new year, starting on the new moon that appears between 21 January and 20th February, so it's very early this year.

We gather, as we do each Sunday, to create community, to reconnect with our true selves, with each other and with the divine as we understand it - to that ultimate mystery of life, of love, of God.

This service will mark the Chinese New Year – and this year is the Year of the Rabbit – with stories and music from Chinese traditions. But it will also be an opportunity for us to practise seeing ourselves reflected in others and them in us.

But first we begin our service, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do please light one with me if you are able.)

LIGHT CHALICE

With this unifying flame we recognise that whatever our culture, our background, our belief, our circumstance, we all share in the essential one light that shines through each of us for the benefit of us all. Amen

3. PRAYERS

The first is by Dorothy May Emerson, Unitarian Universalist Minister (thanks to Joan Wilkinson for pointing out that this can be read as an alternative version of the Lord's Prayer).

*Universal Spirit of Love,
O God within each one of us,
whose power reaches to the stars,
whose love connects us one to another and to all creation –
we are one.*

We give thanks for the blessings of love in our lives and for the chance we have to love again and always.

May we feel the love inside us connecting with the love in each other and the stars.

Amen

Let us pause now to bring into our hearts and our minds' eye those who are suffering in any way at the moment. We include ourselves, those known to us, and those unknown to us.

We pray that we will all find solace and strength in difficult times.

And we remember too the joy and beauty in the world, which never goes away even when we are unable to see it ourselves.

For all life, for all beings, for everything everywhere we pray for peace and harmony, love and hope, and the opportunity to be what we were made and meant to be. The fullest and truest version of ourselves.

Blessed be.

4. **FIRST Hymn 175 (P)** To seek and find our natural mind

To seek and find our natural mind,
and suffering let go,
awake from night, behold the light,
find every life aglow;
awake from night, behold the light,
find every life aglow.

To seek and find compassion's law
and share the holy quest,
awaken to the cosmic awe,
find peace and be at rest;
awaken to the cosmic awe,
find peace and be at rest.

To seek and find community,
the love that will not cease,
begin today the joyful way,
walking the path of peace;
begin today the joyful way,
walking the path of peace.

Melody James Bain, arr. David Dawson; words © Richard Boeke

5. **FIRST Story**

According to legend, Chinese New Year started during the annual Spring Festival with a mythical beast called the Nian (a beast that lives under the sea or in the mountains). At this time of year the Nian would eat villagers, especially children, in the middle of the night.

One year, all the villagers decided to hide from the beast. But before they hid, an older man appeared before them and said that he would stay the night and would get revenge on the Nian. The old man put red papers up around the village and set off firecrackers.

The following day, when the villagers came back to their town, they saw that nothing had been destroyed. They assumed that the old man must be a deity who came to save them. However, they soon came to realise that the old man had simply discovered that the Nian was afraid of the colour red and terrified of loud noises.

So the tradition grew that, when New Year was approaching, the villagers would wear bright red clothes, they would hang red lanterns and red spring scrolls on windows and doors, and use noisy firecrackers and drums to frighten away the Nian. From then on, the Nian never came to the village again but – according to the legend – it was eventually captured by an ancient Taoist monk.

This may be a Chinese story, but it has resonances with many legends and fairytales. An unseen monster who comes at night and terrifies the townsfolk and eats the children. Yikes! I think we can assume there was no such actual being as the Nian, but the story taps into our natural fears of monsters and the dark and the unknown. But it also teaches us a valuable lesson, that much of what we fear is just in our imagination. And that whether real or imagined, monsters may quickly fade away when we confront them, and especially when we understand *their* fears too.

I wonder what ‘monsters’ are worrying you at the moment? And how you might face them? And might they possibly just fade away in the light of understanding?

By the way, I keep hearing a scratching sound behind the skirting board in my kitchen. So far I’ve been ignoring it... or trying to.

China is officially an atheist state, but it does recognise religions, and its culture has been shaped by Buddhist and Taoism. The following hymn is based on the Tao.

6. **2nd HYMN 142 (P) Shining through the universe**

Shining through the universe
runs the golden thread;
woven in along with white,
black, yellow, green and red.

Cooling water burning fire,
metal, wood and clay,
in the earth's five elements
the gold thread marks the Way.

If we try to pick it out
from the fabric fair;
when the threads are pulled apart
the gold's no longer there.

Under heaven, over earth,
north to southern pole,
if you trace the golden thread
the Way will calm your soul.

"Turn your feet along the Way",
sages taught of old;
live life well and tread the path
marked by the thread of gold.

Music © David Dawson, words © Roger Mason, based on the Tao Te Ching

7. **SECOND Story** The rabbit and the moon

We may see a man in the moon, but in China people see instead a rabbit. As this is the year of the rabbit, here's one story of how the rabbit came to be in the moon...

Three immortal beings decided to make a trip down to Earth to see how all the animals were behaving themselves. They disguised themselves as beggars and went around asking the animals for food. First, they asked the fox, who went out hunting and brought them back some meat to eat. Then they asked the monkey, who went climbing up into the trees to bring them fruit and berries. Finally, they asked the rabbit. The rabbit was very sad, because he knew that humans could not eat grass and straw, which was all he had to offer them. He was so upset that all he could think of doing was to throw himself into a fire so that he would be cooked, and the beggars would have roast rabbit to eat. However, because they were, in fact, immortal beings, the beggars could see what the rabbit was intending to do, and they stopped him before he could carry out his plan. Instead, to reward the rabbit for his selfless virtue, they turned him into an immortal Jade Rabbit and sent him up to the Moon to live with the immortal Chang-E as her companion and to help her make the elixir of life.

How did Chang-E come to be on the moon? – well that's another story.

This story of how the rabbit got to be in the moon has lots of resonances for me with wisdom stories, including stories in the Hebrew Bible. The three immortal beings disguised as beggars reminds me of the story in Genesis when three strangers appear to Abraham and he welcomes them, and then realises they are angels sent by God to bring news that his elderly wife Sarah is going to have a child. And you may remember that another angel stopped Abraham killing his son Isaac, once it was clear that he was indeed willing to make that terrible sacrifice, rather like the rabbit was prevented from throwing himself on the fire.

God – or other deities – do often take on human form in scriptures, sometimes to test obedience or to teach us the importance of laying down – not necessarily our literal

life – but more metaphorically our false life, in order to wake up to reality and a greater truth. There is a repeating theme of letting go of the ego, in order to find eternal life – which we might understand as life beyond death, or simply as the eternal now of this life.

Have you ever felt you were being tested in some way? Have strangers turned out to be angels? Many times, I'm sure! Have you been willing to let go of illusions, or obsessions, or fixations, perhaps, to live more honestly and faithfully, and more in harmony with the flow of life? In a way, it is the ongoing process of a spiritual journey, to let go of illusion and surrender instead to reality.

We come now to a time of reflection – of silence and music featuring Chinese zither (or guzheng) and flute (or dizi). But first I'd like to share the opening version of the Tao de Ching, written by the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who lived probably 600BCE) and is recognised as the founder of Taoism. It reads a little like a riddle – because it speaks of something impossible to define – and so I recommend you allow the words to simply flow through you, or over or around you. This translation is by Stephen Mitchell, who explains that 'darkness' can also be understood as 'the unknown'.

8. **Opening words from the Tao de Ching**

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.

The unnameable is the eternally real.

Naming is the origin of all particular things.

Free from desire you realise the mystery.

Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source.

This source is called darkness (unknowing).

Darkness within darkness.

The gateway to all understanding.

9. **SILENCE**

Let's enter the 'darkness' or the 'unknowing', in silence together.

10. **INTERLUDE:** 'The untamed' Chinese zither and flute

<https://youtu.be/UEAsZ29G00w>

11. **THIRD Story** (sometimes attributed to Buddhist or Taoist tradition)

Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer whose horse ran away. That evening, all of his neighbours came around to commiserate. They said, "We are so sorry to hear your horse has run away. This is most unfortunate."

The farmer said, "Maybe."

The next day the horse came back bringing seven wild horses with it, and in the evening everybody came back and said, "Oh, isn't that lucky? What a great turn of events. You now have eight horses!"

The farmer again said, "Maybe."

The following day his son tried to break in one of the horses, and while riding it, he was thrown and broke his leg. The neighbours then said, "Oh dear, that's too bad," and the farmer responded, "Maybe."

The next day the conscription officers came around to conscript people into the army, and they rejected his son because he had a broken leg. Again all the neighbours came around and said, "Isn't that great!"

Again, he said, "Maybe."

A story that reminds us we never know where things will lead or how they will turn out. And while I don't think we are expected to be as ambivalent as this farmer seems to be about his fortunes and misfortunes (after all this story is meant to jolt us into waking up, so it's exaggerated), nevertheless we can see the point. And I'm sure we all have experience that at least sometimes, what seems like a curse can turn out

to be a blessing, and vice versa. But more generally having a faith in the unfolding nature of life can help us flow a little more easily, perhaps, with what is actually happening rather than what we want to happen, or fear happening. So that rather than being blown hither and thither by what seems to a catastrophe one minute or a dream come true the next – we might be more centred and grounded. Perhaps we are more often able to take a deep breath and trust that all shall be well.

And I wonder what experiences of disappointment or disaster have you had that turned out to have been blessings in disguise?

What becomes clear to me, is that whatever our nationality or culture, we are all human beings trying to understand life. We are all storytellers and meaning makers. We have the imagination to see patterns in the sky and images on the moon, to make music and art, to write poetry and myth. We experience love and loss, youth and old age, and we develop traditions and customs over the centuries and millennia that help us make sense of living and dying, beauty and suffering, of it all.

But ultimately we live – all of us – in the unknowing. And we seek – whether in China or the UK – the light and the truth.

May it forever be so.

12. 3rd Hymn 30 (P) Each seeking faith is seeking light

Each seeking faith is seeking light,
and light dawns on our seeking,
when clashing tongues combine
to pray that light will shine,
and guide and gather all on earth
in peaceful greeting,

Each seeking faith is seeking truth,

for truth is lived by seeking,
and though our faiths conflict,
no dogma can restrict
the power of truth set free on earth
in honest meeting,

Each loving faith is seeking peace,
and peace is made by seeking
to spin the strands of trust
in patterns free and just,
till every family on earth
is in safe keeping.

Each living faith is seeking life,
and life flows through our seeking
to treasure, feel and show
the heart of what we know.
In every faith the Light, the Life,
is shining, speaking.

Music David Dawson, words Brian Wren © Stainer & Bell Ltd

13. **CLOSING WORDS** from Confucius (Chinese philosopher who lived around 500BCE)

"Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it."

"Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire."

"It does not matter how slowly you go so long as you do not stop."

Extinguish chalice

14. **VIDEO** 'Affections Touching Across Time' Luyifei, who plays the erhu, a traditional Chinese instrument with 2 strings.

<https://youtu.be/PD8ep3wGUjg>