

**8<sup>th</sup> January 2023 – PLYMOUTH**

**Finding your centre – led by Rev Kate Whyman**

**1. INTRO MUSIC** 'Road to self', Aisha Badru (4'12")

<https://youtu.be/aCBnfMGImH4>

**WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome and good morning to you all. To those of you here in Plymouth, to those of you at home, and a special welcome to everyone joining us from Brighton and to anyone here for the first time. I think this is the last opportunity to wish you a happy new year!

We come here, as we do each Sunday, to create community, to reconnect with ourselves, with each other and with the divine - to that ultimate mystery of life, of love, of God.

The theme of this service is 'Finding our centre'. As Joseph Campbell wrote in the context of following your bliss or your star: *"There is something inside you that knows when you're in the centre—that knows when you're on the beam or off the beam.*

But let us begin our service by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do please light one with me if you are able.)

*LIGHT CHALICE* Words by Scott Taylor...

May the light we now kindle and the time we now share,  
anchor us to that inner flame, that sacred centre,  
which helps us remember who we were  
before the world told us who it wanted us to be.

May our time together clear the way  
for those memories  
and voices,

and friends  
that lead us back home.

## 2. **PRAYER** Maryell Cleary (adapted)

Divine Spirit

Knowing that we do not always live up to our best expectations of ourselves, let us in quietness seek the good that is already within us, that Inner Light or spark of the divine.

Knowing that we live in a society that falls far short of the ideal, let us in quietness consider one thing we could do from our hearts this week to aid someone suffering from want or injustice.

Knowing that the earth is our home and that humankind is not caring for it well, let us in quietness consider how we might be part of making our planet more a more healthful and happy place for all living things.

Knowing that each of us has some sorrow or worry hidden within, let us consider in quietness how we might reach out to one another with a smile, a kindness or an encouraging word.

Blessed be.

## 3. **FIRST Hymn 183 (P) We are daughters of the stars (piano only)**

We are daughters of the stars, we are sons of the earth;  
we are spinners and weavers in this web of life;  
and the joy that we weave reaches out beyond the stars  
and deep within the centre of our being.

We are daughters of the orchards, we are sons of the field;  
we are planters and reapers in this web of life;

and the vision that we weave reaches out beyond the stars  
and deep within the centre of our being.

We are daughters of tomorrow, we are sons of our dreams;  
we are planners and builders in this web of life;  
and the future that we weave reaches out beyond the stars  
and deep within the centre of our being.

*Music and words © Heather Lynn Hanson*

#### 4. **STORY Jewish Story**

On his deathbed Rabbi Zusya began to cry uncontrollably and his students and disciples tried hard to comfort him. They asked him:

“Rabbi, why do you weep? You are almost as wise as Moses, you are nearly as hospitable as Abraham, and surely heaven will judge you favourably.”

Zusya answered them:

“It is true. When I get to heaven, I won’t worry so much if God asks me, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Abraham?’ or ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Moses?’ I know I will be able to answer these questions. After all, though I was not given the righteousness of Abraham nor the faith of Moses, I tried to be both hospitable and thoughtful.

“But what will I say when God asks me, ‘Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya?’”

#### 5. **Parker J Palmer, from ‘Let your life speak’**

[There are] moments when it is clear — if I have the eyes to see — that the life I am living is not the same as the life that wants to live in me. In those moments I sometimes catch a glimpse of my true life, a life hidden like a river beneath the ice. And . . . I wonder: What am I meant to do? Who am I meant to be?

I was in my early thirties when I began, literally, to wake up to questions about my vocation. By all appearances, things were going well, but the soul does not put much stock in appearances. Seeking a path more purposeful than accumulating wealth, holding power, winning at competition, or securing a career, I had started to understand that it is indeed possible to live a life other than one's own. . . .

Then I ran across the old Quaker saying, "Let your life speak."

I found those words encouraging, and I thought I understood what they meant: "Let the highest truths and values guide you. Live up to those demanding standards in everything you do." . . .

So I lined up the loftiest ideals I could find and set out to achieve them. The results were rarely admirable, often laughable, and sometimes grotesque. But always they were unreal, a distortion of my true self—as must be the case when one lives from the outside in, not the inside out. I had simply found a "noble" way to live a life that was not my own, a life spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart.

Today, some thirty years later, "Let your life speak" means something else to me . . . :  
"Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen to what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."

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Religions are good at setting us ideals to live up to. I thought it might be worth reminding ourselves of the lofty values we hold in Unitarianism. The Unitarian Universalists (our American cousins) have 7 principles. They are easy enough to agree with, I think, and to aspire to, but I wonder which of them – if any – resonate with the inner you. Here they are...

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

As I say, I agree with them all – they are fine and noble aspirations. But I realised one of them feels intrinsically part of who I already am, rather than who I'd like to be. And that's number 4, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. I can't NOT do that. It's simply what I do, always, and is part of what makes me me.

I wonder what leapt out for you? Or is there another value altogether that shapes your life for you? And while you're pondering that let's lead into a time of quiet reflection by first singing our next hymn...

**6. 2nd HYMN 21 (P) Come and find the quiet centre**

Come and find the quiet centre  
in the crowded life we lead,  
find the room for hope to enter,  
find the space where we are free:  
clear the chaos and the clutter,  
clear our eyes, that we can see  
all the things that really matter,  
be at peace, and simply be.

Silence is a friend who claims us,  
cools the heat and slows the pace;  
God it is who speaks and names us,  
knows our being touches base,  
making space within our thinking,  
lifting shades to show the sun,

raising courage when we're shrinking,  
finding scope for faith begun.

In the Spirit let us travel,  
open to each other's pain;  
let our lives and fears unravel,  
celebrate the space we gain:  
there's a place for deepest dreaming,  
there's a time for heart to care;  
in the Spirit's lively scheming  
there is always room to spare.

*Traditional melody, arr. John Bell, words by Shirley Erena Murray © Hope Publishing Company*

## 7. **SILENCE**

## 8. **INTERLUDE:** 'The moon's song', Olivia Fern

<https://youtu.be/ADDtO1R6YL4>

## 9. **ADDRESS**

What do we mean by 'finding the centre of ourselves'? To say we are centred often means we feel in harmony, in balance, grounded, in the moment. Not about to fly off the handle, nor to nod off either. There is a strong sense of being fully present and awake.

I am also using the idea of our centre being our essential nature. Our authentic self, if you like. That place where we are truly ourselves, where we are who we *really* are rather than merely a version that's expected of us. Perhaps you might think of this truthful centre as your soul. Our souls never lie.

We arrive on this earth with central essence within us, don't we? Those of you with children or grandchildren will know this better than I do – a new baby doesn't enter the world as a blank sheet, does it? Each child arrives with its own god-given unique nature, with its own gifts and its own limitations too. You and I also arrived this way – way back when, or backalong as we say here in Devon. We landed on this planet naked in every sense - without artifice of any kind – we just as we were.

But of course – from the moment we're born - we begin to be shaped by our experiences. And some of what we learn over the years enables us to develop and channel our gifts, and manage our limitations, in ways that help us flourish and thrive. But clearly quite a bit of growing up has quite the opposite effect – our lives quickly become focused on trying to meet other people's needs and society's expectations of us, and along the way I think most of us also learn to feel shame and guilt. We learn to compare ourselves with others and consequently are left with feelings of insecurity, inadequacy and self-doubt, even if that sometimes masquerades as over-confidence. It can soon become weirdly difficult to do to what surely should be the simplest thing in the world – to be who we truly are. Do we even know what that would look like?

And since this whole process of losing sight of our centre is normalized it tends to go largely unnoticed. If we're not careful we simply forget who we are.

A couple of things I noticed this week feel relevant...

For example, it was reported that more people than ever before are identifying as not being heterosexual. This is unlikely to be because there are more LGBTQ+ people than before, rather that increased social acceptance has enabled more people to live their authentic selves. They've not had to act on the outside in a way that contradicts a truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside. What a relief – and isn't that what we all yearn for in our own ways?

But then I witnessed two white council workers who were chatting in the park, casually ordering their black colleague to move a full wheelbarrow of earth, before continuing their conversation. I could see the man wasn't happy. He even said to me 'I thought slavery was over'. 'It's always like that,' he told me. But he doesn't

complain - just takes his wages and gets on with it. But I wonder what having to deny his true worth day after day does to him. And what does it do to any of us to be treated as lesser in some way? How do our own souls cower in the face of being demeaned and undermined?

And on a lighter note, the journalist Rory Cellan-Jones has been posting updates of his adopted rescue dog Sophie from Romania on Twitter. Sophie, who's a year old, had been abandoned and fostered before being brought to the UK by a charity. But she is extremely nervous and timid and currently spends her time hiding behind the family's red sofa, coming out only occasionally, when tempted by snacks. The family have been advised not to try to rush her, but instead to be patient. To wait and give her time. She'll come out when she's ready and feels safe enough to do so.

And that story reminded me of a different quote by Parker J Palmer, this time from his book 'A hidden wholeness', in which he writes:

'If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth we must remember: the soul is like a wild animal -- tough, resilient, and yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself.'

As Valarie Kaur who writes: *The loudest voices in the world right now are ones running on the energy of fear, criticism, and cruelty... But I must not lose myself at the feet of others. My most vigilant spiritual practice is finding the seconds of solitude to get quiet enough to hear the Wise Woman in me.*

At the end of a life it would be easy to have regrets of all sorts. But like Rabbi Zusya, the one that concerns me most is not why was I not a better person, or why was I not more like Jesus or Buddha, perhaps.

No, I was sent here to be Kate. So the question will be 'Why was I not more like Kate?'



What better to do in January then, in the rain and the dark, than to move our attention for a while from the chaos and shoutiness of the outer world into the quiet fertile ground of our inner world where our real centre is. To listen, and be patient, and see whether our god-given souls – our true selves – might venture forward with something to say to us, and reveal the way forward, when given the time and the space to do so. For only when we find our true centre, and act from that place, will whatever we do flow from spirit and be touched by grace.

**10. 3<sup>rd</sup> Hymn 208 (P) 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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I wanted to close with words that are probably familiar to many of you but which I always find inspiring. I found a recording of them read by Odetta, the American singer and civil rights activist. She has a beautiful voice – both singing and speaking – that seems to come from her own soul. So please enjoy hearing her read words by Marianne Williamson.

**CLOSING WORDS** 'Our deepest fear', Marianne Williamson

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness  
That most frightens us.  
We ask ourselves  
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually, who are you *not* to be?  
You are a child of God.  
Your playing small  
Does not serve the world.  
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking  
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine,  
As children do.  
We were born to make manifest  
The glory of God that is within us.  
It's not just in some of us;  
It's in everyone.  
And as we let our own light shine,  
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
As we're liberated from our own fear,  
Our presence automatically liberates others.

Wonderful.

We are coming to the end of our service now. After I extinguish the chalice, there will be our closing credits followed by Odetta singing 'This little light of mine', which you are invited to join in with wherever you are. Then we will have our notices followed by tea and coffee and breakout room for those who'd like to chat online.

Blessed be to you all.

**Extinguish chalice.**

**11. CLOSING VIDEO** 'This little light of mine', Odetta

<https://youtu.be/cMaWsfLYQko>