

## 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2023: MORETONHAMPSTEAD Annual Service of Witness

### 1. OPENING MUSIC

Romance Op 22', Clara Schumann

### 2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT

Welcome to this 2023 Annual Service of Witness here at Cross Street Unitarian Chapel in Moretonhampstead on the moor. I hope you have all had good journeys, and are able to make yourselves as comfortable as possible in this beautiful space, which is also a working space for Katherine Miles, our tenant who makes these amazing willow sculptures, which feel like they are adding something special to our gathering.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

*Every particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole.*

3. **CHALICE:** Let us begin our time of worship by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.

**??? TO LIGHT THE CHALICE**

May this flame be a symbol of our witness to what is true and meaningful in our lives, and to what brings light and love in our amazing and troubled world. May this single, simple flame be our point of connection, with ourselves, with each other, and with our god.

Amen.

4. **FIRST HYMN: Here we have gathered**

Here we have gathered, gathered side by side;  
circle of kinship, come and step inside!  
May all you seek here find a kindly word;  
may all who speak here feel they have been heard.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Here we have gathered, called to celebrate  
days of our lifetime, matters small and great;  
we of all ages, women, children men  
infants and sages, sharing what we can.  
Sing now together this, our hearts' own song.

Life has its battles, sorrows, and regret:  
but in the shadows, let us not forget:  
we who now gather know each other's pain;  
kindness can heal us: as we give, we gain.  
Sing now in friendship this, our hearts' own song.

*Words © 1979 Alicia S. Carpenter*

5. **PRAYER** We come now to a time of prayer ...

Divine Spirit

Help set at rest our crowded, hurrying, anxious thoughts.

May the peace and quiet of your presence be with us and enter us fully.

Help us to let go, to open up, and to become receptive to all that is.

You know our inmost spirits,

the hidden unconscious life within us,

the frustrated desires

the unresolved tensions and dilemmas.

Cleanse the source of our being,

so that freedom, life and love may flow through us.

May we open our hearts and minds to this moment, here, now.

Blessed be.

Let us also call into the space the spirits of all those who have worshipped here; those who have been baptised or married here; those who are buried in the graveyard and all who remember them. We are here to bear witness to their lives and their legacy, as well as our own Unitarian journeys. May it be so.

6. **STORY: 'Hidden Treasure', retelling of a traditional East European story,**  
from *One Hundred Wisdom Stories*, by Margaret Silf

Once there lived an old Rabbi in a miserable little tenement flat in the city of Krakow in Poland. Rabbi Eisik lived in poverty with his wife and children. But through all the hard times, he had kept his faith and looked after his family as best he could.

One night he had a dream which he believed was a message from God. In the dream, he had a vision of a chest of gold, hidden beneath a particular bridge in the grounds of the royal palace in Prague.

At first, he hesitated to believe in what he had dreamed. But when he had the dream a second time, and then a third time, he decided to make the journey to Prague.

But when he found the bridge of his dreams, he saw that it was guarded day and night by sentries, and he didn't dare to start digging for treasure. Nevertheless, he came to the bridge every morning, and walked around it all day until evening.

Eventually, the chief guard, noticing the rabbi's odd behaviour, asked him, in a friendly way, whether he was searching for something there, or perhaps waiting for someone.

Something prompted Rabbi Eisik to tell the guard about the dream that had brought him all the way to Prague from Krakow. When he heard the story, the guard laughed. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'You poor old fellow with your worn-out shoes – you have tramped all this way for the sake of a dream!?' Well, more fool you. I can tell you that if dreams were to be trusted, then I'd be on the road as well, because I once had a dream that told me to walk to Krakow, and to search out a hovel in the poorest district, belonging to someone called Rabbi Eisik. There I was supposed to search the kitchen where I would surely find hidden treasure. Just imagine how I was supposed to find that treasure in a strange town, where there must be hundreds of Rabbi Eisiks!' And he laughed again.

Rabbi Eisik bowed graciously, and turned back home, to find the treasure hidden closer to him than he could ever have imagined.

**7. READING:** Extract from 'Long Life: Essays and other writings', by Mary Oliver

Once, years ago, I emerged from the woods in the early morning at the end of a walk and — it was the most casual of moments — as I stepped from under the trees into the mild, pouring-down sunlight I experienced a sudden impact, a seizure of happiness. It was not the drowning sort of happiness, rather the floating sort. I made no struggle toward it; it was given.

Time seemed to vanish. Urgency vanished. Any important difference between myself and all other things vanished. I knew that I belonged to the world, and felt comfortably my own containment in the totality.

I did not feel that I understood any mystery, not at all; rather that I could be happy and feel blessed within the perplexity — the summer morning, its gentleness, the sense of the great work being done, though the grass where I stood scarcely trembled. As I say, it was the most casual of moments, not mystical as the word is usually meant, for there was no vision, or anything extraordinary at all, but only a sudden awareness of the citizenry of all things within one world: leaves, dust, thrushes and finches, men and women. And yet it was a moment I have never forgotten, and upon which I have based many decisions in the years since.

**8. SECOND HYMN:** We celebrate the web of life

We celebrate the web of life,  
its magnitude we sing;  
for we can see divinity  
in every living thing.

A fragment of the perfect whole  
in cactus and in quail,  
as much in tiny barnacle  
as in the great blue whale.

Of ancient dreams we are the sum;  
our bones link stone to star,  
and bind our future worlds to come  
with worlds that were and are.

Respect the water, land, and air  
which gave all creatures birth;  
protect the lives of all that share  
the glory of the earth.

*Words © Alicia S. Carpenter*

**9. REFLECTION: A question for you:** What are you seeking?

And where might you find it?

SILENCE will be followed by music

**10. INTERLUDE:** *Blessings, John Rutter, Catryn Finch*

**11. ADDRESS: Small things like these**

I recently went on Sabbatical. I wasn't exactly seeking treasure. But I suppose I was hoping for some kind of insight, some new understanding, a shift in perspective perhaps – I was definitely seeking something though I couldn't exactly put my finger on what. I knew I wanted to spend some of the time away travelling, preferably in remote places, and some of the time at home. I felt that that balance would be important – to seek and to return, seek and return, like the ebb and flow of the tides.

I guess I discovered many things – or maybe nothing, depending on how you look at it – but this afternoon I wanted to share a renewed feeling I had for the beauty of small things. Not great visions, or huge revelations, but simply a revisiting and reappreciating of the joy and the divinity of small things and brief moments.

One of my trips was to a tiny island in the far north of Orkney officially called Papa Westray, but known as Papay to the locals (the name Papay means island of the Father – there was once an ancient monastery on the island).

Papay is a small but perfectly formed island, only about 4 miles long and roughly 1 mile wide. It's beautiful, wild, and has a remarkably strong and active community of around 85 adults and half a dozen children. It's a microcosm of organised living, with its own tiny airport, fire station, school (for the 6 pupils), post office, museum, neolithic remains, community shop, community centre with its own kitchens, miniature bar and film projector and sound system for its own local band, a tearoom, two churches – you name it, Papay seemed to have it, despite being mostly open moor and farmland, coast and sky. I stayed at the hostel, where everyone stays when they go there. It's a very welcoming place, clean, well-organised, easy-going, set up to make visitors comfortable and their time enjoyable. I loved it. I probably couldn't live there, though I fantasised about doing so – it's too far away, too dark in the winter, too windy all year round, and no trees – but the people who do live on Papay seem to genuinely love it and are rightly proud of it. It felt like a precious jewel dropped into the sea. It had an 'otherness' that was enchanting.

The island even has its own miniature (and even older) version of Skara Brae. The Knap of Howar is a pair of neolithic domestic dwellings overlooking the sea, spectacularly well preserved – into which you can walk and sit and reflect and take your time and not be bothered by anyone else. It's incredible to be there, and imagine what life might have been like there. But it contains another even smaller thing which put me in touch with its ancestral inhabitants in an

even more visceral way. The 'saddle quern', as it's called, is a large oval bedstone with a natural hollow, within which sits a smaller round stone called a rubber. It was used to grind grain. When I held the rubber stone in my hands and ground it against the bedstone, I felt as though I was inhabiting the body of someone who ground that same stone more than 5000 years ago. It was as though 5000 years instantly contracted into a single moment in which we felt like one being.

These kinds of shifts in perspective were an integral part of my stay. I had bought a decent pair of binoculars for the trip, I was particularly thinking of seeing puffins, which I did see, but also to spot and watch the movements of other birds such as black guillemots, eider ducks, razorbills, skuas, arctic terns and more. So many with their own Orcadian names too (tysties, dunters, bonxies, pickies and so on). The binoculars shrank distance in the way that the saddle quern had collapsed time. So I was able to see the details of their faces, and the patterns on their feathers, and their feet in detail and feel as though I was - almost - entering their world.

And one day on a walk on the east coast of the island, scanning the sea, I spotted three fins – two large and one small – moving in characteristic semi-circles and realised I was watching a pair of Risso's dolphins with a young calf, and was transfixed by the sight of them. Disappearing and reappearing and disappearing and reappearing over and over again. There is such a heart-stopping intimacy in sharing unexpected time with wild creatures – such an immense privilege. One feels – I felt – the presence of the divine in each encounter.

This little hand lens was also fantastic, for observing the lichens and the rare – and also tiny – purple and yellow *Primula Scotia* flowers that were still in bloom up on the high ground. Again, the lens made it possible to peer into the intimate world of petals and stamens and feel connected to another form of life, knowing we were sharing the same source of spirit.



Such minute details are as captivating and as awe-inspiring to me as gazing at the stars, and have a similar effect of taking me out of this world – not literally, since they are all very much of this world – so rather I should say out of the world of my own head, and away from my usual patterns of thinking and seeing. The changes in visual perspective make for changes in attitude and understanding that are difficult to express in words, though a poet might make a better job of it. But I felt them deeply and experienced them vividly and had, and continue to have, a transformative power that transcends time and distance. I frequently felt goosebumps as I was writing and remembering these moments.

Since I've been home, I've continued to recall moments stood watching an impossibly gradual sunset, or grey seals playing in shallow turquoise waters, or a fulmer literally laying an egg on the grass in front of me, and I have been seeking out small and magical things in my own environment. Of course, they abound, but it takes practice and intention to find them. Remembering to pay attention, and always to carry my binoculars and hand lens with me helps. But I've also found moments of connection pulling potatoes and onions out of the ground with my bare hands, making my own tahini and humous, playing cello in an impromptu ensemble, painting watercolours with a friend.

This Chapel is a gem itself. I've heard it called a jewel on the moor. I came here recently on a daytrip to Dartmoor. I wasn't meant to be working, but then it didn't feel like work to be here and to meet up and share time and tea with Katherine whose sculptures we see around us. She also plays with perspective. When I was here she was making an enormous lion for Paignton Zoo, so big she had to make the head separately or she wouldn't have been able to get the animal out of the door. Making the lion larger than life was a bit like looking at it through a magnifying lens, but also she was seeing through the lens of her imagination as she used the natural bend and flex of the willows to shape the curves of muscle and sinew. It's always a delight to spend time here, and soak in the atmosphere of the place, to walk or sit in the

grounds, enjoy the wild flowers, ponder the grave stones, connect with the history and the energy of the place. I encourage you to do so before you leave.

I returned home hugely grateful for my trip. Sometimes we have to go away to appreciate what we have. Whatever I was seeking, it's all here. Under my nose. I only have to remember to pay attention, and divine reveals itself everywhere.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Hymn** The best things

I learned it in the meadow path,  
I learned it on the mountain stairs –  
the best things any mortal hath  
are those which every mortal shares.

The air we breathe, the sky, the breeze,  
the light without us and within;  
life with its unlocked treasures,  
God's riches, are for all to win.

The grass is softer to my tread  
because it rests unnumbered feet;  
sweeter to me the wild rose red  
because she makes the whole world sweet.

Wealth won by others' poverty –  
not such be mine! Let me be blest  
only in what they share with me,  
and what I share with all the rest.

We learn it in the meadow path,  
we learn it on the mountain stairs –

the best things any mortal hath  
are those which every mortal shares.

Music John Ambrose Lloyd, words Lucy Larcom

**CLOSING WORDS** Elizabeth Tarbox, 'Morning in Zuni' (which is in New Mexico)

'I had quite forgotten how to pray so far from home, away from the sacristy of sea and shore, but then I watched a boy chopping wood. He swung his axe easily, slicing the pinon logs that were twisted and bent like the hieroglyphs of an ancient language.

The slopes behind the boy were buttered with sage-brush and sunrise, and his face was shining with morning chores. And for a few precious moments, I stood at his altar and caught the dimensions of his cathedral.'

**CLOSING MUSIC**

Holy Now, Peter Mayer