

**23<sup>rd</sup> July 2023 – PLYMOUTH**

**Pause for thought, led by Rev Kate Whyman**

1. **INTRO MUSIC** 'The Dark Island', Poor Man's Corner

<https://youtu.be/chkGsvAcIW4>

**WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome to you all. You are welcome whoever you are, and however you're feeling.  
You are welcome here today, just as you are.

The opening music was called 'The Dark Island', by Poor Man's Corner, the local band on Papa Westray who I saw perform while I was there.

Let's begin our service, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do please light one with me if you are able to do so.)

*LIGHT CHALICE*

2. **OPENING WORDS/PRAYER** Richard S Gllbert

We meet on holy ground,  
for that place is holy  
where lives touch, love moves, hope stirs.

How much we need this moment before the eternal,  
The time to be in reverence before the ultimate,  
The pause that renews,  
The interlude that refreshes,  
The space that gives us room to be.

We meet on holy ground,  
Brought into being as life encounters life,

As personal histories merge into the communal story,  
As we take on the pride and pain of our companions,  
As separate selves become community.  
How desperate is our need for one another:  
Our silent beckoning to our neighbours,  
Our invitations to share life and death together,  
Our welcome into the lives of those we meet,  
And their welcome into our own.

May our souls capture this treasured time.  
May our spirits celebrate our meeting  
In this time and in this space,  
For we meet on holy ground.

3. **1<sup>st</sup> 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*

#### **4. STORY THE EMPTY CUP**

One day the Zen master Nan-in had a visit from a foreign scholar of Eastern religions who came to inquire about Zen. Instead of listening to the master, however, the visitor kept talking on and on about his own ideas and all that he knew.

After a while of this talking, Nan-in served tea. He poured the tea into his visitor's cup until it was full, and then he kept on pouring. The tea poured over the side of the cup, filled the saucer, and then spilled onto the table, the man's trousers, and the floor.

Finally, the visitor could not restrain himself. "Don't you see that it is full?" he said. "You can't get any more in!"

"Just so," replied Nan-in, stopping at last, "And like this cup, you are filled with your own ideas. How can you expect me to give you Zen unless you offer me an empty cup."

#### **5. STORY THE LITTLE FISH**

"Excuse me," said an ocean fish. "You are older than I, so can you tell me where to find this thing they call the ocean?"

“The ocean,” said the older fish, “is the thing you are in now.”

“Oh, this? But this is just water. What I’m seeking is the ocean,” said the disappointed fish as he swam away to search elsewhere.

“Stop searching, little fish. There isn’t anything to look *for*.  
All you have to do is look.”

**6. 2<sup>nd</sup> HYMN 35 (P) Find a stillness**

Find a stillness, hold a stillness,  
let a stillness carry me.  
Find the silence hold the silence,  
let the silence carry me.  
In the spirit, by the spirit,  
with the spirit giving power,  
I will find true harmony.

Seek the essence, hold the essence,  
let the essence carry me.  
Let me flower, help me flower,  
watch me flower, carry me.  
In the spirit, by the spirit,  
with the spirit giving power,  
I will find true harmony.

*Transylvanian melody, words by Carl Seaburg based on a Transylvanian text © Alan Seaburg*

**7. REFLECTION**

What are you seeking?

8. **SILENCE**

followed by...

9. **INTERLUDE:** Ave Maris Stella, Franz Liszt, The Sixteen

<https://youtu.be/8nnNB119RKc>

10. **ADDRESS**

I feel the need to re-meet you. To re-introduce myself. So that's what I'm going to attempt to do. Or start to do. Actually I started yesterday in Moretonhampstead. And I won't finish today. Aren't we always re-meeting each other, and ourselves, and rediscovering what is sacred for us?

Sabbatical is related to word sabbath, which means rest. In Hebrew the word Shabbath refers to God's day of rest after creating the world. So that's what I have had – a rest. A pause for thought. A shabbath. Though not after creating the world, obviously.

Apart from rest, I also wanted to do something with the time, but definitely didn't want to fill it up so that I was rushing from one place to another. So, I planned times when I was away and times when I was at home. The ebb and flow of that appealed to me – time to do and time to be.

The time went slowly, but in a good way. I felt like I had really had a long break, the way childhood summer holidays used to feel like forever. It was a bit like that. I understand that for all of you it probably seemed I was gone only for a short time. But there's something about changing your routine, and going to new places, and meeting new people, that slows time right down, and that was one of the aspects of this sabbatical I really appreciated. It was slow time. My memories of it are vivid and very much with me still.

I had time to think. When I was at home I journaled, and I did yoga most days, and I went for walks, I pottered on my allotment and in my garden, and had days out. My spiritual director had set me a question. Not one that required an answer, he said, but just a question to carry with me. And it was a good question, I think, and I did keep returning to it, even though I still can't necessarily answer it, or not definitively anyway. It's a question that sounds very simple on the face of it, but is actually quite profound. The question was 'What are you seeking?' Which presupposes that I was, in fact, seeking something. But then being a Unitarian always includes an element of seeking, does it not? And I *did* feel I was seeking something, but what was it? Over the weeks I found I answered this question in different ways at different times. Maybe you will too.

In some ways I was seeking solitude, isolation even, and definitely a kind of simplicity. For my 'away times' I was drawn to remote islands, to the Scillies first of all, then later to Orkney. I wanted to strip everything away: the busyness, the usual stresses and concerns of my life, and see what might be left, if anything. That's what you do when you go on retreat, after all, and I was thinking of this time as a kind of retreat.

Seemingly out of nowhere I became fascinated by how humans evolved and what life might have been like for the very earliest people, when it was all and only about survival: hunting and gathering food, finding shelter, just trying to stay alive. As far as we know, life was like that from our emergence in Africa, possibly as far back as 2 million years ago, to as recently as 11 or 12 thousand years ago when people began to farm and create settlements. Of course, little is known or remains from those prehistoric times, but I've been devouring what information I can find in, what I think, has been part of a search for the essence of what it might mean to be human. Trying to whittle away the layers upon layers of socialisation and culturalization, and agriculture and industrialisation – to get to what feels like an almost mythical beginning back in the mists. I want to go to the Natural History Museum in London and lose myself there.

For similar reasons I had my DNA analysed and started investigating my ancestry. So, I've also been seeking my own particular roots, as well as the roots of being

human. As I was writing this it occurred to me I've been looking for a new origin story, probably one that isn't possible to find. I want to get inside the head of early homo sapiens. Or even inside their heart and soul. Who were they? What did they think, and how did they think it? Did they worry? Hope? Regret? Or did they only respond to danger, hunger, cold, thirst? What were we, in the beginning? What has been gained, and lost, over the millennia?

By the way, I discovered that, aside from being 59% Scottish, 19% of me is from Jersey in the Channel Islands, 17% hails from South West Ireland, and the remaining 5% is Welsh. I'm quite intrigued by the Jersey and Irish connections, as I wasn't aware of them, and want to explore them further. Another island trip beckons, then.

As well as solitude, I also craved company. Time spent with friends – quality time, not rushed time – was just as important as being alone. I needed the balance – that ebb and flow again, the rhythm, the contrast.

An image from a workshop I attended at GA back in April has also kept resurfacing. A story was told about the Canadian explorers who navigated what became known as the Mackenzie River in birch-canoes in search of a route to the Rocky Mountains. There came a point in their journey when they had to navigate the snow and ice-covered mountains ahead of them, at which point their canoes were not use and they had to put them down and work out completely different ways to travel.

The worship leader was making the point that we Unitarians need to find new ways to travel as congregations – that the old ways have got us to this point but really aren't any use for the future. We need new ways to travel. I agree with that.

But I noticed that I felt very clearly and strongly that in my personal life I didn't want to travel any further. I wanted to stay in my 'canoe' and explore where I was, and whatever I might have missed along the way. I wanted to stay put but go deeper into it. That feeling has stayed with me. I don't think I need to climb Everest or learn to unicycle – I'm lucky enough to have had a lot of adventures already – but I do want to journey through life more deeply and fully.

I know that this will involve living at a slower pace. It will require having more time, and making more space – whether it's for music-making, painting, friends, more time in nature (with my binoculars and hand lens, as I mentioned yesterday), paying more attention to the richness of the small things and the meaningful encounters, rather than having grand plans and projects. I think my days of wanting to 'achieve' in any conventional sense are over.

Before my sabbatical started I was, by chance (or maybe it wasn't by chance) given a book called 'The Untethered Soul' – some of you might have come across it, it's been around a while – and it has been my companion. In its own way, it is also about stripping back the layers that obscure the essence within, and has become part of my journey for now at least.

Towards the end of my sabbatical I spent a few days with a very dear Unitarian friend in Shoreham-on-Sea, in Sussex. On a beautiful walk along the Adur River, I asked her what she was seeking. She said that before she died she wanted to find peace in her heart. Peace in the heart. I like that.

I thought again about what I was seeking. Right now I'd say I want to live – and die – with my heart wide open, free of fear and embracing whatever is unfolding. That's my wish, it's what I'm seeking, and it will be my path for now. Maybe I'll meet you there.

#### 11. **THIRD HYMN 181 (P) Wake, now, my senses**

Wake now my senses, and hear the earth call;  
feel the deep power of being in all;  
keep with the web of creation your vow,  
giving, receiving as love shows us how.

Wake, now, my reason, reach out to the new;  
join with each pilgrim who quests for the true;  
honour the beauty and wisdom of time;  
suffer thy limit, and praise the sublime.



Wake, now, compassion, give heed to the cry;  
voices of suffering, fill the wide sky;  
take as your neighbour both stranger and friend,  
praying and striving their hardship to end.

Wake, now, my conscience, with justice thy guide;  
join with all people whose rights are denied;  
take not for granted a privileged place;  
God's love embraces the whole human race.

Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;  
brighten my pathway with radiance here;  
mingle my calling with all who would share;  
work toward a planet transformed by our care.

*Music © Barry Brown, words © Tom Mikelson*

## **12. CLOSING WORDS Barbara Hamilton-Holway**

Go now in peace.  
Deeply regard each other.  
Truly listen to each other.  
Speak what each of you must speak.  
Be ready in any moment to disarm your own heart,  
and always live as if a realm of love had begun.  
So be it. Blessed be.  
Amen.

## **13. CLOSING MUSIC** Abel Selaocoe & Yo-Yo Ma record Ibuyile l'Africa / Africa is Back

<https://youtu.be/ftoALly-nol>