

14th January 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Rev Kate Whyman - Taking stock (or facing our fears)

1. **PRELUDE** – Fantasia on Greensleeves, Ralph Vaughan Williams 4'40"
<https://youtu.be/n-DFeNixZv8?si=Cr5EJsLiH4vsbOot>

2. **OPENING WORDS**

Welcome to this morning's service, whether you are here in person or online.
However you find yourself this morning, you are welcome here, just as you are.

Our opening words are by Eric Walker-Wikstrom

Here, today, in this place and with these people,
May we listen so that we can hear;
May we hear so that we can feel;
May we feel so that we can know; and
May we know so that we can change ourselves and this world.
May the chalice we light,
Light our Way.

And so, as is our custom, let us begin lighting our chalice – and our way – as a
symbol of our free religious faith. (Do light a candle at home)

Rev Scott Taylor

We light this chalice in honour of first steps.
For beginning even when the path ahead is unclear.
For the courage it takes to trust
that the way will reveal itself
that light will come to clarify our vision
that friends will be by our side.

May the words, songs, stillness and common breath of this hour,
remind us that every step of the way
is never one we take alone.

3. HYMN 44 (P) Gives thanks for life

Give thanks for life, the measure of our days,
mortal, we pass through beauty that decays,
yet sing to God our hope, our love, our praise:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for those whose lives shone with a light
caught from the Christ-flame, gleaming through the night,
who touched the truth, who burned for what is right:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for all, our living and our dead,
thanks for the love by which our life is fed,
a love not changed by time or death or dread:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for hope that like a seed of grain
lying in darkness, does its life retain
to rise in glory, growing green again:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Music Ralph Vaughan Williams, words Shirley Erena Murray © 1987 Hope Publishing Co

4. PRAYER by Maureen Killoran

Blessed is this ground on which we stand.
Holy is this place.
Holy are the places of memory,
the places which have formed us,
where we store the icons of success and shattered dreams
and gather threads and pieces of what we would become. . .
Holy are the places of memory.

Holy are the places of the dream,
the places over the rainbow,
where all children are wanted and all people are fed,
where colors are the source of celebration
and youth and age come to the table as one. . .
Holy are the places of the dream.

Holy are the places of change and pain,
the places of our struggle,
where the rivers of our lives run white and fast,
and we hold on, hold on and grow. . .
Holy are the places of change and pain.

Holy are the places of connection,
the places where we risk our selves,
where hands touch hands, touch souls, touch minds,
and in awareness still, we change our lives. . .
Holy are the places of connection.

Holy are the places of becoming,
the places of clear vision,
where life and world are intertwined
and we can see forever in this moment
and give thanks. . .
Holy are the places of becoming.

Blessed is the ground on which we stand.
Holy — and whole-making— is this place.

Let us pause to bring in to our minds eye all those suffering who are known to us.

And those unknown, wherever they may be in the world, we remember those who are unwell in body or in mind, those who are bereaved and grieving, those living in war zones, or suffering in oppressive systems or regimes. We ask that all living souls find solace, freedom and wellbeing.

5. STORY 'The Stream' A Sufi story

A stream, from its course in the far-off mountains, passing through every kind and description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: "The wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream."

The stream objected that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert.

But the desert voice whispered, "By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over to your destination."

But how could this happen?

"By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind."

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how was one to know that one's identity could ever be regained?

"The wind," whispered the desert, "performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again."

"How can I know that this is true?"

"It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire."

"But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?"

"You cannot in either case remain so," the whisper said. When it heard this, echoes began to arise in the thoughts of the stream. Dimly it remembered a state in which it — or maybe some part of it? — had been held in the arms of a wind.

And the stream raised its vapour into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upwards and along, letting it fall softly as rain once they reached the roof of a mountain, many, many miles away, where it then became a river.

6. **HYMN:** 1 (P) A core of silence

A core of silence breathes beyond all words,
or else the words have little worth;
to 'heart' or 'soul' or 'spirit' it comes forth
(the words we name them matter not.)

And half the music lies within the pause
between the arches of the heart;
the print upon the page means less than ink
unless the white and black both speak.

The 'true religion' gathers up its text:
'In the beginning was the Word.'
But I seek quietness behind that start
and name it nothing, much less 'God'.

Words © Jim Reilly

7. **READING** – Rumi's The Guest House – 2 versions, in the manner of Lectio Divina, meaning 'Divine reading'. Rumi was a 13th century Sufi mystic who wrote mostly in Persian.

The first translation by Coleman Barks is the most familiar.

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Kabir Helminski is a Western born Sufi Shaikh in the Mevlevi Order. His version of the Guest House, first published in the Rumi Collection, Threshold Books, 1998. Notice the differences!

Darling, the body is a guest house;
every morning someone new arrives.
Don't say, "O, another weight around my neck!"
or your guest will fly back to nothingness.
Whatever enters your heart is a guest
from the invisible world: entertain it well.

Every day, and every moment, a thought comes
like an honoured guest into your heart.
My soul, regard each thought as a person,
for every person's value is in the thought they hold.

If a sorrowful thought stands in the way,
it is also preparing the way for joy.
It furiously sweeps your house clean,
in order that some new joy may appear from the Source.
It scatters the withered leaves from the bough of the heart,
in order that fresh green leaves might grow.
It uproots the old joy so that
a new joy may enter from Beyond.

Sorrow pulls up the rotten root
that was veiled from sight.
Whatever sorrow takes away or causes the heart to shed,
it puts something better in its place -
especially for one who is certain
that sorrow is the servant of the intuitive.

Without the frown of clouds and lightning,
the vines would be burned by the smiling sun.
Both good and bad luck become guests in your heart:
like planets traveling from sign to sign.
When something transits your sign, adapt yourself,
and be as harmonious as its ruling sign,
so that when it rejoins the Moon,
it will speak kindly to the Lord of the heart.

Whenever sorrow comes again,
meet it with smiles and laughter,
saying, "O my Creator, save me from its harm,
and do not deprive me of its good.
Lord, remind me to be thankful,
let me feel no regret if its benefit passes away."

And if the pearl is not in sorrow's hand,
let it go and still be pleased.
Increase your sweet practice.

Your practice will benefit you at another time;
someday your need will be suddenly fulfilled.

8. **REFLECTION:** We come to a quiet time of reflection.

I invite you to take a moment to take stock of your own life at this moment.

What are your blessings at this time? *pause*

What are your sorrows right now? *pause*

What do you hope for? *pause*

What do you fear? *pause*

What is it that limits you? *pause*

And what will set you free? *pause*

Let us be still.

Silence

9. **INTERLUDE:** Les Barricades Misterieuses, Ordre 6, No. 5 (3'07")

https://youtu.be/_Q07D9YhRLQ?si=v3rRq3sUrfEsZGtp

10. **ADDRESS** 'Taking Stock – or facing reality'

The story of the stream is one of those wisdom tales that can be read on different levels. I wonder what you made of it?

Perhaps you heard it as a story about how to get through challenging situations. About what to do when we face a problem. Do we try to carry on regardless, doing what we've always done, or do we take a risk on doing something new?

Or maybe the story spoke to you of the interconnectedness of all life and the natural world. Perhaps it reminded you of the importance of recognising how we need each other to get through difficult challenges, and how we are all part of the great cycles and seasons of life.

Or did it seem to you to be a story about faith? It was a reminder, perhaps, that there is always help available to us if we're willing to listen out for its wisdom, and then act on that guidance.

Or maybe this is a mystical story that urges us to let go of our individuality – our egos – for only then can we find life's true meaning, in communion with the divine, with all that is.

To be honest, I think this story is about all these things and probably more. That is the great blessing of wisdom stories – they can be interpreted over and over again, and something new will almost certainly reveal itself on each reading.

The reason I chose the story for today was because I had called this service 'taking stock', which for me means 'facing reality', or looking at the facts and being prepared to see the truth of our situation. I felt that the stream in the story was being urged to 'take stock' by the voice of the whispering sands. The stream was being asked to face reality. Not to simply pretend everything would be all right and to carry on as usual. Not to panic either. But certainly not to sleepwalk (or sleep-run) into oblivion, or rather into 'quagmire'. Instead, the hidden voice of the desert was saying, 'Look, take notice, pay attention, here are the facts, and these are the choices. Carry on as you are and disappear, or let go of your fears and preconceptions and take a leap of faith'.

I think facing facts can be hard. Or let me be honest and say, I sometimes find facing facts difficult. It took me at least 2 years to do anything about a damp problem in my kitchen. I think I just hoped it would go away, but of course it didn't, it got worse. And then I panicked about it, imagining that it would cost a fortune to fix, or maybe couldn't be fixed at all, and then house might be unsellable, and ...on it went. Finally, I did find someone to look at it, and we made a plan, and it was expensive but not as bad as I thought. And I don't know whether the problem has been completely solved even now, but it's certainly better now than it was. And it was such a relief to stop imagining the worst. Because the facts, once I was eventually prepared to look at them, weren't as bad as I feared. And even if they had been, at least then I could

then have decided what best to do with the new information rather than just worry about what I didn't know.

Clear-sightedness feels to me like a spiritual attribute worth developing. A willingness to – as I said last week – clear away the debris of fear and anxiety and look at what's actually happening rather than what we assume or fear is happening, is part of what it means to be aware and awake to reality. It is part of living a spiritual life.

And even if, when we look at the facts, they seem – on the face of it anyway – to be bleak, then Rumi's poem can help us with that. Let's remind ourselves of the final 2 verses of *Kabir Helminski translation...*

*Whenever sorrow comes again,
meet it with smiles and laughter,
saying, "O my Creator, save me from its harm,
and do not deprive me of its good.
Lord, remind me to be thankful,
let me feel no regret if its benefit passes away."*

*And if the pearl is not in sorrow's hand,
let it go and still be pleased.
Increase your sweet practice.
Your practice will benefit you at another time;
someday your need will be suddenly fulfilled.*

Or in Coleman Bark's version...

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

It is easy to catastrophise, which does us no good. It's just as easy to bury our heads in the sand, which is also not helpful. But the prophets teach us to simply look, and listen, to be open, and to accept whatever comes, trusting that good will come out of it one way or another, and always remembering that we are not alone.

We are never alone.

11. 3rd HYMN 42 (P) In the light of days remembered

From the light of days remembered burns a beacon bright and clear,
guiding hands and hearts and spirits into faith set free from fear.
when the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

From the stories of our living rings a song both brave and free,
calling pilgrims still to witness to the life of liberty.
when the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

From the dreams of youthful vision comes a new, prophetic voice,
which demands a deeper justice built by our courageous choice.
when the fire of commitment sets our mind and soul ablaze;
when our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way;
when we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within,
then our promise finds fulfilment and our future can begin.

Music Jason Shelton, words Jason Shelton and Mary Katherine Morn, music and words © 2001

12. CLOSING WORDS by Adam Slate

Be kind.

Be brave.

Be just.

Be merciful.

Be hopeful.

This is how we keep the chalice flame burning
until we are together again to light it anew.

13. CLOSING VIDEO: Kate Rusby 'Here we come a-Wassailing'

<https://youtu.be/fZjQTCaJCEY?si=lnwCcJ5Pntf6YxvE>

14. NOTICES