

Plymouth Unitarian Church 14 April 2024 - 'A SPRING WAVE OF HOPE'

OPENING SONG: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beXW5s3ZCB4> (FAUN - Tanz mit mir (Duett mit Santiano) 01:52 (video-clip)).

OPENING PRAYER: We enter into this time and this place ... by Rev Dr Linda Hart

We enter into this time and this place to join our hearts and minds together

We come to this place: the doors open, the heat comes on, biscuits are laid, the water heats, and you all come.

What is it that we come here seeking? Many things, too many to mention them all.

Yet, it is likely that some common longings draw us to be with one another:

To remember what is most important in life.

To be challenged to live more truly, more deeply, to live with integrity and kindness and with hope and love,

To feel the company of those who seek a common path,

To be renewed in our faith in the promise of this life,

To be strengthened and to find the courage to continue to do what we must do, day after day, world without end.

Even if your longings are different than these, you are welcome here. Even if you do not have the strength and the courage to pass along, you are welcome here. You are welcome in your grief and your joy to be within this circle of companions.

We gather here. It is good to be together.

CHALICE LIGHTING: by Yvonne Aburrow

The flame consumes the wick,

Constantly changing and dancing

Sharing its radiance with us.

So may our souls be aflame with divine love

Sharing our radiance with others.

HYMN: 158 'The Flame of Truth is Kindled' (Purple Book)

Tune: 'Morning Light' George James Webb, 1803 – 1887.

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The flame of truth is kindled,
our chalice burning bright;
amongst us moves the Spirit
in whom we take delight.
We worship here in freedom
with conscience unconstrained,
a pilgrim people thankful
of what great souls have gained.

The flame of thought is kindled,
we celebrate the mind;
its search for deepest meaning
that time bound creeds can't bind.
We celebrate its oneness
With body and with soul,
With universal process,
With God who made us whole.

The flame of love is kindled,
we open wide our hearts,
that is may burn within us,
fule us to do our parts.
Community needs building,
A Commonwealth of earth,
We ask for strength to build it –
A new world come to birth.

PRAYER: something there is that doesn't love a wall by Rev Margaret Kirk

We see barriers erected between people of different lands,
We see sheets of steel and towers of concrete called Protection.
We see boundaries policed,
watch men, women and children running from hunger and persecution,
looking for a gap in the wall.....

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.....

We see walls of fear –
Fear of the young, fear of the stranger,

Fear of sexuality that is different, fear of the educated, fear of the poor,
Fear of the Muslim, fear of the Jew –
Fear upon fear, endless and perpetuating,
And we offer our silent prayer that solid walls of fear will crumble to dust.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.....

We hear the language of separation,
The jingoistic chant, the racial slur,
words of indifference and dismissal,
words arranged for the purpose of exclusion,
words that sting and taunt,
words that lie.

Let us find words that ring with love and truthfulness,
that reach out through the emptiness of separation.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.....

We see the deluded barriers of the mind protecting self,
We see relationships stripped of affection
as one person becomes closed to another.
We see people trapped in misunderstanding,
old hurts re-ignited,
bricks placed higher on the wall,
goodwill and trust suspended.
and we ask for boundaries that are not impenetrable,
through which light can shine and distance be dissolved.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.....

And when we need these boundaries for our own wellbeing,
Let us know them for what they are,
Use them wisely and kindly,
Recognising our own vulnerability and that of others –
So, each of us can find the space for retreat and succour,

find that peace that passes all understanding
and be renewed with strength and love
for the task of living life joyfully in communion with all others. Amen.

GUIDED MEDITATION: I invite you to close your eyes, and to choose something - a place, a concept, an object, a person - that you regard as sacred. What is the quality in it that evokes the sacred for you? What values or virtues does it represent? Are they values or virtues that find an echo within you? Is the sacredness an inherent quality of it? Or does it shine through it, as if its source is elsewhere? Just focus for a while on your sacred place, concept, thing or person. Allow its virtue to shine for you; hear its inner music, smell its perfume. [2-minute pause] Now let the place, concept, thing or person fade from your mind and just focus on the virtue itself and recognise its reflection in your own heart.

HYMN: 163 'Those Who Seek Wisdom' (Green Book)

Tune: Russia Alexis Feodorovitch Lvov, 1799 – 1871 Words: Richard Frederick Boeke b 1931

Those who seek wisdom,
Seek truth and courage,
Walk through the darkness,
Endure through the storm.
Those who meet wisdom
In youth or old age
Know that the wonder
Is always new born.

They know the vision
In words is spoken.
They live the vision
Without words indeed.
Touching with loving
In healing the broken,
Touching with dreaming,
With vision they lead.

Rise out of weeping,
Joy in this hour.
Sing out our greeting
In this new born day.

Now may our meeting
Rekindle the power
Of truth and courage
To walk in the Way.

SHORT STORY 1: the Power of Generosity (Buddhism)

Once there lived a rich man who was famous for his charitable acts. He always gave alms to the poor. A poor hermit happened to be his neighbour. The hermit was called the Silent Buddha, for he was an enlightened person and spent all his time in meditation.

Once he meditated for seven days and seven nights at a stretch without any food or water. When he awoke from his trance, he was very hungry. So, he went to the rich man to beg for food.

Mara, the God of Death, was jealous of the rich man's reputation and decided to stop him from giving alms. He wanted the Silent Buddha to die of starvation. When the rich man came forward to offer alms to the Silent Buddha, Mara lit a huge fire between the two. But the rich man was determined and trusting the strength of his good deeds, walked through the fire and, emerging unharmed, offered the Silent Buddha food. Mara was defeated and departed saying, "Indeed the power of generosity is great!" ... so is the power of HOPE!

SHORT STORY 2: The Four Candles - A Powerful Story of Hope!

If you've ever felt despair, suffered tragedy or generally gone through the harshness of life, this is a wonderful story that will lift your spirits ...

The Four Candles burned slowly. Their Ambience was so soft you could hear them speak...

The First Candle said, "I Am Peace, but these days, nobody wants to keep me lit."

Then Peace's flame slowly diminishes and goes out completely.

The Second Candle said, "I Am Faith, but these days, I am no longer indispensable."

Then Faith's flame slowly diminishes and goes out completely.

Sadly, The Third Candle Speaks, "I Am Love and I haven't the strength to stay lit any longer. People put me aside and don't understand my importance. They even forget to love those who are nearest to them." Waiting no longer, Love goes out completely.

Suddenly...A child enters the room and sees the three candles no longer burning. The child begins to cry, "Why are you not burning? You are supposed to stay lit until the end!"

Then The Fourth Candle speaks gently to the little child, "Don't be afraid, for I Am Hope, and while I still burn, we can re-light the other candles."

With Shining Eyes, the child took the Candle of Hope and lit the other three candles.

Never let the Flame of Hope go out of your life. With Hope, no matter how bad things look and are...Peace, Faith and Love can Shine Brightly in our lives.

READING: extract from an interview by Malte Conradi and Sarah Raich with the Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh on suffering, hope and good business (Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany), 8th June 2013)

Süddeutsche Zeitung: You have witnessed a lot of suffering in your life. How did you manage not to lose hope?

Thich Nhat Hanh: Yes, I have witnessed a lot of suffering, especially during the Vietnam war. At that time, I was helping to build a village for refugees in the demilitarized zone when it was bombed by the Americans because Vietcong were hiding there. So, we rebuilt it. Then it was bombed again. So, we rebuilt it again. Once again it was demolished. The third time we discussed if we should rebuild it again. It was my belief that if we gave up, people would lose all hope. So, we rebuilt the houses again a third time, then a fourth time and finally a fifth time.

Süddeutsche Zeitung: But where did you get the strength to do that?

Thich Nhat Hanh: We try to transform suffering into something good. Even a lotus flower needs mud in order to grow. It can't grow on marble. You have to recognise that there is a close connection between suffering and happiness. If you run away from suffering, you cannot find happiness. On the contrary, we should try to identify the roots of our suffering. Only then can we gain understanding and cultivate compassion.

These two things are the key to happiness. All the money and power in the world will not bring happiness unless there is understanding and compassion. The only thing that helps in the face of fanaticism, oppression, fear and anger is looking deeply into the mud in order to allow a lotus flower to grow. If you can recognize the suffering of your aggressor, you don't need to hate them.

MUSIC: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyMtlvOcojU> (J.S. Bach - Suite No. 2 – Badinerie)

REFLECTIVE ADDRESS: “everything has beauty but not everyone sees it.” ~ Confucius
Embracing Our Common Humanity With Self-Compassion

One of the most important elements of self-compassion is the recognition of our shared of inadequacy and disappointment are universal. This is what distinguishes self-compassion from self-pity. While self-pity says “poor me,” self-compassion recognises suffering is part of the shared human experience. The pain I feel in difficult times is the same pain that you feel in difficult times. The triggers are different, the circumstances are different, the degree of pain is different, but the basic experience is the same. Imagine what such triggers may be for any of us affected directly or indirectly by the conflict in Armenia, Cyprus, Gaza, Georgia, Kashmir, Kurdistan, Moldova, Sudan, Ukraine or anywhere else in our very troubled world.

Sadly, however, most people do not focus on what they have in common with others, especially when they feel ashamed or inadequate. Rather than framing their imperfection in light of the shared human experience, they are more likely to feel isolated and disconnected from the world around them when they fail. When we focus on our shortcomings without taking the bigger human picture into account, our perspective tends to narrow. We become absorbed by our own feelings of insufficiency and insecurity. When we are in the confined space of self-loathing, it is as if the rest of humanity does not even exist. This is not a logical thought process, but a type of emotional tunnel vision. Somehow, it feels like I am the only one who is being dumped, proven wrong, or humiliated, and so on.

And even when we are having a painful experience that is not our fault — perhaps we have been made redundant from our job because of the current economic downturn, for instance — we often irrationally feel that the rest of the world is happily employed while it is only me sitting at home watching re-runs all day. Or when we become seriously ill, we may feel like sickness is an abnormal state that “should not” be happening. Once we fall into the trap of believing that things are “supposed” to go well, we tend to think something has gone terribly amiss when they suddenly do not. Again, this is not a conscious thought process, but

a hidden assumption that colours our emotional reactions. If we were to take a completely logical approach to the issue, we would consider the fact that there are thousands of things that can go wrong in life at any one time, so it is highly likely — in fact inevitable — that we will experience hardships on a regular basis, but we tend not to be rational about these matters; instead, we suffer, and we feel all alone in our suffering. We lose (all) hope.

The recognition of common humanity entailed by self-compassion also allows us to be more understanding and less judgmental about our inadequacies. Our thoughts, feelings and actions are largely impacted by factors outside of our control: parenting history, culture, socio-economic, political, genetic and environmental conditions, as well as the demands and expectations of others. After all, if we had full control over our behaviour, how many people would consciously choose to have anger problems, addiction issues, debilitating social anxiety, an eating disorder? Many aspects of ourselves and the circumstances of our lives are not of our intentional choosing, but instead stem from innumerable factors that are outside our sphere of influence. When we acknowledge this reality, failings and life difficulties do not have to be taken so personally, and hope does not have to abandon us.

As Einstein once said: “A human being is part of the whole, called by us ‘universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” This is the key to discovering hope. As we saw in our story: “The Four Candles - A Powerful Story of Hope!”, the Fourth Candle – speaking gently to the little child – said: "don't be afraid, for I Am Hope, and while I still burn, we can re-light the other candles." Like the little child who With Shining Eyes took the Candle of Hope and lit the other three candles, so we could keep alive the Flame of Hope not only in our own life, but also within our circles of families, friends, acquaintances, and beyond. As that short story had it, With Hope, no matter how bad things look and are ..., Peace, Faith and Love can Shine Brightly in our lives.

MUSIC FOR MEDITATION/REFLECTION/CONTEMPLATION: peaceful Sufi music: ney (04:46)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUpqiQs4crw> (video-clip)

PRE-OFFERTORY PRAYER: The purpose of the church is to encourage all who gather here to grow more generous in spirit and in action. This is the great end of all the world's faith traditions: to bring the human being closer to the divine by acts of creation and compassion. After the end of the service, please consider making a generous offering allowing Plymouth Unitarians to exercise that all-important generosity of spirit, an offering that will support this self-supporting congregation. The gifts of money of the congregation will be received most gratefully after the end of the service, on your way to having refreshments in the hall.

POETRY: 'Of History and Hope', by MILLER WILLIAMS (1999)

We have memorized America,
how it was born and who we have been and where.
In ceremonies and silence, we say the words,
telling the stories, singing the old songs.
We like the places they take us. Mostly we do.
The great and all the anonymous dead are there.
We know the sound of all the sounds we brought.
The rich taste of it is on our tongues.
But where are we going to be, and why, and who?
The disenfranchised dead want to know.
We mean to be the people we meant to be,
to keep on going where we meant to go.

But how do we fashion the future? Who can say how
except in the minds of those who will call it Now?
The children. The children. And how does our garden grow?
With waving hands—oh, rarely in a row—
and flowering faces. And brambles, that we can no longer allow.

Who were many people coming together
cannot become one people falling apart.
Who dreamed for every child an even chance
cannot let luck alone turn doorknobs or not.
Whose law was never so much of the hand as the head
cannot let chaos make its way to the heart.
Who have seen learning struggle from teacher to child
cannot let ignorance spread itself like rot.
We know what we have done and what we have said,

and how we have grown, degree by slow degree,
believing ourselves toward all we have tried to become—
just and compassionate, equal, able, and free.

All this in the hands of children, eyes already set
on a land we never can visit—it isn't there yet—
but looking through their eyes, we can see
what our long gift to them may come to be.
If we can truly remember, they will not forget.

HYMN: 264 'Spring Buds of Hope' (Green Book)

Tune: Lucerna Laudoniae David Evans 1874 – 1948. *From the Revised Church Hymnary, 1927, by permission of Oxford University Press*
Words: William Wolff. *Used by permission of Janet Wolff and the Hodgin Press, Los Angeles.*

In the springtime of our year
Silver buds of hope appear,
Will they blossom? Will they grow?
We who plant the seed must know.

Tender shoots thirst for the sun,
Surging with each day begun.
Banish darkness, hate and fear:
Golden fruit will soon appear:
Golden fruit will soon appear.

Welcome, children, welcome here,
Silver buds of our late year.
May our harvest still increase
Joys of fellowship and peace.
May our harvest still increase
Joys of fellowship and peace.

CLOSING WORDS: We extinguish the chalice here that it might glow gently in our hearts.
May it light our path as we leave this place. May it guide our way until we are together again.

Extinguish the Chalice Light

CLOSING SONG: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOvsyamoEDg> (FAUN – Federkleid)

04:17 (video-clip).