

## 7<sup>th</sup> April 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

### Rev Kate Whyman – Taking care of our spiritual life

1. **PRELUDE** – ‘Sweet nothing’, Taylor Swift (3’12”)

<https://youtu.be/rn0brgg2Bpl?si=Zgise901f8x8ANuc>

## 2. **OPENING WORDS**

Welcome to you all, here in person and online. Special welcome to anyone here for the first time. We are each of us welcome, in our wholeness as well as in our brokenness.

In this community we support each other in our search for truth and meaning. This hour we share together is an opportunity for each of us to realign and reconnect with all that we hold sacred. It is an invitation to give thanks for the wonder of creation, to express awe and wonder in the universe, and to surrender to the mystery of life in the company of fellow seekers. Where we use the word God we invite you to bring your own understanding of the divine.

Let us begin this time of story, song, silence and inspiration by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.

(Do light a candle at home)

May this flame be a sign of our intention to set aside time in the week for ourselves, for our relationship with each other and for our god. May it be so.

3. **1<sup>st</sup> Hymn 11 (P) Blessed spirit of my life**

Blessed Spirit of my life,  
give me strength through stress and strife;

help me live with dignity;  
let me know serenity.  
Fill me with a vision,  
clear my mind of fear and confusion.  
When my thoughts flow restlessly,  
let peace find a home in me.

Spirit of great mystery,  
hear the still, small voice in me.  
Help me live my wordless creed  
as I comfort those in need.  
Fill me with compassion;  
be the source of my intuition.  
Then when life is done for me,  
let love be my legacy.

*Music and words © Shelley Jackson Denham*

#### **4. PRAYER**

This is a prayer called 'Help us to pray', and I invite you to say the words 'help us to pray' after each line.

Prayer is a chance for us:

To honestly reflect on our lives

- *Help us to pray*

To contemplate our deepest values and concerns

- *Help us to pray*

To be still and listen to the person we really are and the divine spirit within us

- *Help us to pray*

To access the pool of renewal, healing and forgiveness, which is always available to us

- *Help us to pray*

To gain the courage to step beyond our comfort zones and to love more fearlessly

- *Help us to pray*

To give thanks for the wondrous gifts we have been given

- *Help us to pray*

To share our hopes and concerns with other seekers of truth

- *Help us to pray*

To be silent, to empty our minds, and allow ourselves to be filled with love and joy.

- *Help us to pray*

To let the divine spirit flow through us

- *Help us to pray*

*Let us be silent now, and allow ourselves to be present here in the quietness.*

*May we allow anyone known to us who is pain or suffering of any kind to gently come into our hearts and our mind's eye. May they be bathed in light and love, and find comfort and peace.*

*And we open our hearts more widely and fully, to all those beloved souls who are unknown to us, wherever they may be in the world. We remember those who are unwell in body or in mind, those who are grieving, those living in fear and in war, or suffering under oppressive systems or regimes. May all living souls find solace, freedom and wellbeing.*

## 5. **STORY** The woodcutter's story

There was once a villager who wanted to get a job to support their family. 'They saw that there was a forest owner looking for someone to cut down trees.

They thought to themselves,

'You know what, I love being outdoors. I love using my body, I am physically strong. I think this job would really suit me.'

So, they went to the forest owner and said, 'I would like this job. I am big and strong, and I love being outdoors.'

The forest owner said, 'You're big and strong, I think you would be really good at this job. Please go out and cut down three trees. Here is your axe.'

The woodcutter went out and cut down two trees and then went back to the forest owner and said, 'I've cut down two trees.'

The forest owner said, 'That's great. I'd like you to do the same tomorrow.'

The woodcutter cut down two trees. Then the next day, the owner said, 'I'd like you to cut down two trees again.'

The woodcutter went out into the woods and cut down one tree and then it started to get too dark to work. At the end of the day they said to the forest owner, 'I've only cut down one tree today. But I'll come back tomorrow and start earlier.'

The next day they got up earlier, went to the forest but still only managed to cut down one tree. The day after they got up even earlier and still only managed to cut down one tree. Then they got up earlier still the next and they did not cut down even one tree.

The woodcutter went back to the forest owner and said, 'I'm sorry but I have only managed to cut down half a tree even though I got up earlier.'

The forest owner said, 'It's strange because you seem to be working so hard. I don't understand why you've only managed to cut down half a tree. When did you last sharpen your axe?'

'Well', said the woodcutter. 'I haven't sharpened my axe. I haven't had time. I've been too busy trying to cut down trees!'

## 6. **READING** by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

Spiritual practices have always been at the heart and soul of the world's religions, and they are also key elements of today's less organized spirituality movements.

They help us discover our deepest values, address our longing to connect with the divine, and propel us on the journey to wholeness, which are all aspects of spirituality.

Spiritual practices are specific activities you do to deepen your relationships with the sacred and the world around you. Practices help you connect to God (or whatever name you use to describe that ‘something more’ beyond yourself). They enable you to become actively engaged with your inner or ‘true’ self — the depth of your being. And they expand the breadth of your experiences, encouraging you to relate in a particular way to other people and the whole creation, including animate and inanimate beings.

‘We are what we practice,’ Jewish writer Avram Davis observed. ‘If we become angry a lot, then essentially we are practising anger. And we get quite good at it. Conversely, if we practise being joyful, then a joyful person is what we become.’ So we practise all kinds of things all the time, but the decision to do spiritual practices is intentional. These activities have meaning and purpose, and they influence how we live our lives.

7. **2<sup>nd</sup> HYMN 30 (P) Each seeking faith is seeking light**

Each seeking faith is seeking light,  
and light dawns on our seeking,  
when clashing tongues combine  
to pray that light will shine,  
and guide and gather all on earth  
in peaceful greeting,

Each seeking faith is seeking truth,  
for truth is lived by seeking,  
and though our faiths conflict,  
no dogma can restrict  
the power of truth set free on earth  
in honest meeting,

Each loving faith is seeking peace,  
and peace is made by seeking  
to spin the strands of trust  
in patterns free and just,

till every family on earth  
is in safe keeping.  
Each living faith is seeking life,  
and life flows through our seeking  
to treasure, feel and show  
the heart of what we know.  
In every faith the Light, the Life,  
is shining, speaking.

*Music David Dawson, words Brian Wren © Stainer & Bell Ltd*

8. **REFLECTION:** Let us come to a quiet time of reflection and contemplation.

*I invite you, if you would like to, to reflect on what you are doing intentionally to take care of your spiritual life? But as always you are free to use this quiet time for your own prayer, meditation or reflection.*

9. **INTERLUDE:** Nocturne No. 2 in E Flat, Op. 9 No. 2, Chopin

<https://youtu.be/EMbblaF8jNY?si=I3KiiwTayuhi91JP>

10. **ADDRESS**

I'd like to give you a couple of minutes to share someone sitting near you – preferably not the person you came with – just one thing that you do to take care of your spiritual life...Online you might like to unmute yourself, or write something in the chat box. Just share one thing that helps you ground yourself in relationship with the divine.

Thank you. (Steve to re-mute everyone)

The woodcutter's story was shared with us during the minister's so-called 'pre-conference' which I attended this week. This is 24 hours in which ministers gather ahead of the main General Assembly meetings in order to discuss business but also to have some positive input into our lives and our ministries.

I recognised the scenario of the woodcutter straight away. I have been busy myself recently and trying to fit more and more in. And I wonder whether also recognise the feeling of working harder, while becoming more and more tired and less effective. It can become a vicious circle. If we forget to sharpen our axe, that is.

Of course there are endless self-help books, podcasts, courses and more on how to find balance in our lives, and on the various ways we can nurture and take care of ourselves – it's a whole industry in itself. But sometimes the recommendations can feel like just more noise and more demands added to our lives. Now we're supposed to find time for pilates, and wild water swimming, and early morning walks, and so on and so on, until our days are even more stuffed with things we feel we ought to be doing, and probably aren't. So we get to add guilt to the list too. And this is against a background for many of financial strain, and for all of us the societal and world divisions and conflicts. 'Overwhelm' might be another to express the feeling.

And perhaps the problem is also in the word 'self' help. We are spiritual people, aren't we? What does that actually mean? I think for, Unitarians, it may not be so much about what we *believe* as about how we *connect* with the sacred – how we acknowledge and bring ourselves into relationship with that 'something bigger', that other dimension that takes us beyond merely ourselves. It's about developing a wider perspective: the practice of taking a step back and recognising there is something more, which we may or may not call God. It's about having faith, trusting in goodness, love, compassion. And practising these attributes so they become embedded in our lives.

For me, there are also a few well-known phrases that I return to often: 'this too shall pass' is a good reminder that whatever I'm feeling, it won't last for ever. And the mystic Julian of Norwich's famous 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well', reminds me that however difficult things seem, it will all work out some day, somehow. And 'Thy will be done' reminds me that I'm not in control of the world, and I don't always know what's best, and it may be better to hand my worries over to God or the Universe. It's a moment of surrender.

Our spiritual practices – our prayer, meditation, mindfulness and so on – are intentional exercises that help us learn to centre ourselves in life’s storms, to connect more closely with the divine spirit, and to become more grounded in what is real. Otherwise, as we heard in the reading, we may find that what we actually end up practising each day is chasing our tails, or being cross, or stressed, or just taking ourselves way too seriously. All of which make life more difficult to cope with.

I know many of you have busy lives – and I don’t want to add to your to do list – but I do want to invite you to consider whether you are still remembering to sharpen your axe? Are you doing at least *something* each day that helps you keep that essential perspective and connection, that may well not change the external circumstances of your life, but will help you deal with whatever life throws at you with more equanimity and gentleness. With more peace in your heart. With more of a sense that, whatever your circumstances, you are still - and always will be - held in love.

I recognise the stories we tell ourselves, that no, we simply can’t afford to take 10 or even 5 minutes in stillness and silence; that no, we can’t possibly take a break to go for a walk, or pray, or to do whatever it is that sharpens our axe. I know because I say those things myself. So I know what it’s like to – instead – end up practising being frazzled.

But actually reconnecting can be as simple as taking a deep breath. Or looking out of the window at the trees, or gazing out to sea, or up at the stars. It can just be a moment of pausing and stretching between activities, simply ‘checking in’ with yourself and the divine. Realigning yourself with God. ‘Hello God, hello universe’. It can be just taking any opportunities to say those small but essential prayers ‘wow’, ‘thank you’ and ‘help!’, as Anne Lamott wrote about. We all have time for that.

And then, almost effortlessly, we may find that we are honing our way of looking at, and understanding, life itself. We are forming, little by little, good spiritual habits, that will help to root us in the earth, in our bodies, and in our spirits rather than in our egos. We are practising our guiding principles of kindness, gratitude, openness, awe and humility, which are attributes we can bring to any situation. In short we are practising bringing ourselves into relationship with the sacred. In the end our spiritual



lives are about how we are in the world, the values and attitudes we bring to bear on all our joys and concerns, and our sense of place and belonging in creation.

And so I invite you in this spring season of hopefulness, however much you have to do, and whatever may be the struggles of your life, to keep remembering to sharpen your axe.

### **146 (G) True simplicity**

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free;  
'tis the gift to know just where we want to be;  
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.

*When true simplicity is gained,  
to greet all as friend we shan't be ashamed;  
to turn, turn, will be our delight.  
'til by turning, turning, we come round right.*

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free;  
'tis the gift to share our common destiny;  
and when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.

*When true simplicity is gained,  
To greet all as friend we shan't be ashamed;  
To turn, turn, will be our delight.  
'Til by turning, turning, we come round right.*

*Traditional Shaker song, arr. by David Dawson*

**CLOSING WORDS** 'Clearing' by Martha Postlethwaite

Do not try to save

the whole world  
or do anything grandiose.  
Instead, create  
a clearing  
in the dense forest  
of your life  
and wait there  
patiently,  
until the song  
that is yours alone to sing  
falls into your open cupped hands  
and you recognize and greet it.  
Only then will you know  
how to give yourself  
to the world  
so worthy of rescue.

**CLOSING VIDEO:** 'The bare necessities' from the Jungle Book  
<https://youtu.be/6BH-Rxd-NBo?si=x-VsX4LPJPaj5nMa>