

**28<sup>th</sup> April 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS**

**Rev Kate Whyman – Our evolving journey**

1. **PRELUDE** – The long and winding road, Beatles

[https://youtu.be/fR4HjTH\\_fTM?si=MrNrpBhY3ayG9G7e](https://youtu.be/fR4HjTH_fTM?si=MrNrpBhY3ayG9G7e)

## 2. **OPENING WORDS**

Welcome to you all, here in person and online. And a special welcome to anyone here for the first time.

Today's opening words are **River Call (Manish Mishra Marzetti)**

Between rocking the boat and sitting down;  
between stirring things up,  
and peaceably going along,  
we find ourselves here, in community.

Each called from many different journeys,  
many different life paths,  
onto this river road.

Some are here  
because the rocking of the boat  
has been too much:  
too much tumult,  
too much uncertainty,  
too much pain.

Some are here with questions  
about where the boat is going;  
how best to steer it;  
where this journey ends.

Others are here  
as lovers of the journey,  
lovers of life itself.

Here  
in front,  
beside,  
behind,  
each a passenger;  
each a captain;  
doing the best we can.

“Rest here, in your boat, with me,”  
the river calls.  
“Listen to how I flow,  
the sound of life coursing all around you.”

Let the current hold you,  
let the current guide you;  
the river that gently flows through your soul, whispers:  
“Come, let us worship together.”

And now let's light our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.  
(Do light a candle at home)

May this flame be the light that guides us on our journey, that warms our hearts. and  
sparks our imagination. May it be our companion on the road and our beacon of  
hope.

The theme of today's service is 'Our evolving journey'.

### **3. 1<sup>st</sup> Hymn 195 (G) We limit not the truth of God**

*I like this hymn – except for its use of 'his'. I invite you to sing pronouns of your  
choice – feel free to mix them up a bit too – his/her/their/its – whatever you fancy!*

We limit not the truth of God  
to our poor reach of mind,  
by notions of our day and sect,  
crude, partial and confined.  
No, let a new and better hope  
within our hearts be stirred:  
the Lord hath yet more light and truth  
to break forth from his word.

Who dares to bind to partial sense  
the oracles of heaven,  
for all the nations, tongues and climes,  
and all the ages given?  
That universe, how much unknown!  
That ocean unexplored!  
The Lord hath yet more light and truth  
to break forth from his word.

Darkling our noble forbears went  
the first steps of the way;  
'twas but the dawning, yet to grow  
into the perfect day.  
And grow it shall; our glorious sun  
more fervid rays afford;  
the Lord hath yet more light and truth  
to break forth from his word.

The valleys past, ascending still,  
our souls would higher climb,  
and look down from supernal heights  
on all the bygone time.  
Upward we press; the air is clear,  
and the sphere-music heard:

the Lord hath yet more light and truth  
to break forth from his word.

*Music Mainz Gesangbuch, words from George Rawson*

4. **PRAYER** Thomas Merton

It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway, that you are always – *always* – invited to bring your own understanding to the word God. Maybe you believe in a personal God, or maybe for you 'source of all' or 'divine spirit' or 'ground of all being' or 'great mystery' are closer to your beliefs. For example. Here's the prayer...

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

To this may we pause to add the silent prayers of our hearts.

*(Pause)*

Blessed be.

5. **STORY** Emerging Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Journey by Rev. Seth Carrier-Ladd

A child grows up in a secular humanist Unitarian Universalist church. Reason and science are emphasized, his parents are atheists, and he naturally adopts an atheist belief system.

During his 'Coming of Age' year, this child, now a teenager, decides that he's agnostic. He writes: "When I see the beauty of sunsets, or mountain views, it makes me wonder. How did this all come to be? I don't think there's such a thing as God, but I'm not sure there isn't either. I just don't know."

In college, this teenager, entering into early young adulthood, discovers the sacred text of Taoism, the Tao Te Ching, and is captivated. "The Tao that is the Tao is not the Tao," reads one of the many English translations of the first line of this sacred text. The young adult's sense of trying to understand the unknowable deepens from this initial, and continued encounter.

In his late twenties, this young adult gently and tentatively begins to identify as a theist. He avoids using the word god, since it usually means something different to other people than it does to him. He has taken the concept of the Tao, and adapted it to fit his own understandings and experiences. Like his Universalist forbears, he believes Love is the true essence of the unnamable, unknowable mystery that is the universe.

Aged thirty now, our journeyer has what he can only describe as a mystical experience. Traveling on a ferry off the coast of Maine, he is overcome by an incredible sense of connection to the vastness of the ocean, and to all that is. He is unaware, until brushed by a passerby, that he has lifted up his arms overhead, open, in the universal posture of receiving. Joy, pure joy, goodness, love, fullness... there is no self, there is just connection, and expansiveness.

I share these snapshots of my journey to lift up a characteristic of Unitarian Universalism that often remains undiscussed – we are constantly in process. Our understanding and beliefs about the world evolve over the course of our lifetimes. They emerge out of the interaction of our family context, our own experiences, our learnings of the realities of science and reason, the wisdom of wise men and women who have come before us, and so much more.

But emerge, over time, they do indeed.

6. **READING** Ralph Waldo Emerson, from 'Oversoul' from today's reading in 'A dream too wild', daily meditations from his writings.

The things we now esteem fixed shall, one by one, detach themselves, like ripe fruit, from our experience, and fall. The wind shall blow them none knows whither. The landscape, the figures, Boston, London, are facts as fugitive as any institution past, or any whiff of mist or smoke, and so is society, and so is the world. The soul looks steadily forwards, creating a world before her, leaving worlds behind her. She has no dates, nor rites, nor persons nor specialties, nor men. The soul knows only the soul; the web of events is the flowing robe in which she is clothed.

7. **READING** 'The road less travelled', Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.

**8. 2<sup>nd</sup> HYMN 64 (P) How can we confine**

How can we confine  
God within our mind,  
held within a creed  
humanly designed?

How can we be sure  
that the way we know  
is the only path  
that this God might show?

Surely such a joy  
cannot be contained  
by a single plan,  
humanly explained?

People of all faiths,  
let us all conspire;  
source and ground of life,  
answer our desire.

As we long to know  
answers to our plight,  
take us, lead our quest,  
dancing to the light.

*Music Peter Cutts, words Andrew Pratt © Stainer and Bell Ltd*

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

## 10. **INTERLUDE:** 'Wading deep water', Crooked Still

[https://youtu.be/QF86rjsnvNA?si=VADnk7FhI\\_YGXReH](https://youtu.be/QF86rjsnvNA?si=VADnk7FhI_YGXReH)

## 11. **ADDRESS**

I have recently been reading some of your own evolving spiritual journeys, and I have found them both really moving and enlightening. Our journeys are intensely personal and unique to us, aren't they, and yet they share universal themes. We all change – and are changed – by our experiences, we keep looking for ways to make sense of the world and the life we find ourselves in. We seek our place in it, again and again, we search for meaning in it, we look for acceptance and understanding. We yearn to belong.

Like many of you, my understanding and my beliefs have shifted a great deal along the way. From a child kneeling in church, straining to hear the actual voice of God who I fervently hoped would speak to me one day; to rejecting religion altogether when a newly converted Christian friend told me I would go to hell unless I believed what she did; to searching for something to fill the god-shaped hole that seemed to have opened up in my life during my 30s, and eventually alighting – by circuitous routes – at a Unitarian church at 40. Not that the journey stopped there – in many ways it was only just beginning, but now I was in the company of fellow seekers, which made all the difference in the world to me. And the journey continues still, and will do so, I hope, until the day I die. I seek hoping to find, but without ever knowing where that seeking may lead me next. That is, I suppose, the driving force of my life.

This Unitarian faith itself has also been on an evolving journey. It began as dissent, not from scripture itself, but from the doctrine of the Trinity, for which our early forbears found no evidence. People were burned at the stake for such radical views. But since then our movement has travelled far and wide. I'm not a historian, and this is not a history lecture. But I will mention in passing a few of the 19<sup>th</sup> century radical thinkers who have been influential to the way Unitarian thought has changed.

Joseph Priestly – better known as a scientist – was a Unitarian minister who came to see that science and religion could inform each other. William Ellery Channing, an



American Unitarian preacher in early 19th century, noted that 'We are told to love and imitate God, but also that God does things we would consider most cruel in any human parent'. He dared to preach the idea of having a gentle, loving relationship with God.

James Martineau, the eminent 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian theologian and minister in Britain, began to question the authority of scripture itself, and declared that "the last appeal in all researches into religious truth must be to the judgment of the human mind." Martineau's legacy is an emphasis on the role of intuition, the freedom of individual conscience, and an openness too to sources of wisdom outside of Christianity.

Theodore Parker, American Unitarian and Transcendentalist, began with quite traditional religious views but ultimately rejected all miracles and revelation and saw the Bible as full of contradictions and mistakes. He retained his faith in God but suggested that people experience God intuitively and personally, and that they should centre their religious beliefs on individual experience.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose words we heard earlier, also believed that religion must be based on intuitive individual connection with the divine. These were extraordinary people who were prepared say the unsayable in their time.

In 1945, 13 British ministers (all men) wrote a pamphlet called 'A Free Religious Faith', which was an attempt to summarise a collective theology – a brave endeavour which hasn't been attempted since, as far as I know. They wrote: 'We do not believe that there is a complete and final revelation of God. We look upon religion as a spiritual adventure. We do not base our Church life on the acceptance of particular creeds. We do not profess to have a fixed and final answer to all the problems which beset us. And we take up this position not because we have little faith, but just because we have complete confidence that in the long run the search for truth can never lead us astray.'

Since then, of course, Unitarians have broadened their search to explore truth in other sources and other faiths, including Buddhism, Humanism and Paganism. Currently there is a resurging interest in social justice and in the importance of

building beloved community. But the process of evolution is not a linear one, there has been, and continues to be, much circling back and forth. And no resting point. No final position.

Which is true for many of us, I imagine. I wonder where are you in your spiritual journey? Could you put into words what you believe? Does it feel like a final, fixed position? Or are you still seeking? Or at least open to new insights that might change your perspective?

We have previously made a collection of people's journeys as well as snapshots of their beliefs and the writers and thinkers that have influenced them. But these too could evolve and be added to, and I think it would be a wonderful thing to do that. I have already invited those taking part in the Introduction sessions to write their personal journeys, and (they don't know this yet) I will also be inviting them to write their own brief theology. But I don't see any reason not to open up that invitation to all of you, whether or not you've done this before – because things change – we change – and our relationship with the divine, like any relationship, goes through different stages and phases. Everything is in constant motion.

It is, surely, a central tenet of Unitarianism to be questioning, enquiring, seeking, to remain open and receptive to new insights and revelations, while always practising careful discernment of what we believe using the guidance of our hearts, and minds, and intuition, but also drawing on the wisdom of each other.

And the same should be true for our church. It should not stay static or cling to old habits and ideas just because they're familiar or comfortable. Of course we need systems, like any other organisation, but they should be there in order to serve and support our evolving spiritual lives and the building of beloved community, rather than the structure itself.

We have a proud history of being willing to call out both self-serving structures and unquestioning belief. Our tradition is one that is prepared to rock the boat, challenge received wisdom, and speak the truth as we see it. We have been people willing to take the road less travelled.

Long may that continue.

### 12.3<sup>rd</sup> HYMN 125 (P) One more step along the world I go

One more step along the world I go,  
one more step along the world I go;  
from the old things to the new,  
keep me travelling along with you;  
*and it's from the old I travel to the new,  
keep me travelling along with you.*

Round the corners of the world I turn,  
more and more about the world I learn;  
all the new things that I see  
you'll be looking at along with me;  
*and it's from the old I travel to the new,  
keep me travelling along with you.*

As I travel through the bad and good,  
keep me travelling the way I should;  
where I see no way to go  
you'll be telling me the way, I know;  
*and it's from the old I travel to the new,  
keep me travelling along with you.*

Give me courage when the world is rough,  
keep me loving though the world is tough;  
leap and sing in all I do,  
keep me travelling along with you;  
*and it's from the old I travel to the new,  
keep me travelling along with you.*

You are older than the world can be,  
you are younger than the life in me;  
ever old and ever new,

keep me travelling along with you;  
*and it's from the old I travel to the new,*  
*keep me travelling along with you.*

*Music Sydney Bertram Carter, arr. David Dawson; words Sydney Carter © 1971 Stainer & Bell Ltd*

**CLOSING WORDS** 'If We Do Not Venture Out', by Marni Harmony  
*(adapted from the original)*

If, on a starlit night,  
with the moon brightly shimmering,  
We stay inside and do not venture out,  
the evening universe remains a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a cloudy day,  
with greyness infusing all  
and rain dancing rivers in the grass,  
We stay inside and do not venture out,  
the stormy, threatening energy of  
the universe remains  
a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a frosty morning,  
dreading the chilling air before the sunrise,  
We stay inside and do not venture out,  
the awesome cold, quiet, and stillness of  
the dawn universe remains  
a part of life we shall not know.

If, throughout these grace-given days of ours,  
surrounded as we are by green life and  
brown death, hot pink joy and cold grey  
pain and miracles—always miracles—

If we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out  
then the Fullness of the universe  
shall be unknown to us  
And our locked hearts shall never feel the rush of worship.

Let us venture out.

And if you're not sure which way to go – our closing music is 'Lean in toward the light'  
by Carrie Newcomer.

**CLOSING VIDEO 'Lean in toward the light', Carrie Newcomer**

[https://youtu.be/fxAUmNjWals?si=Fhz6Q5lw\\_3kQA64w](https://youtu.be/fxAUmNjWals?si=Fhz6Q5lw_3kQA64w)