

Plymouth Unitarian Church Sunday 16th March 2025 'Beauty in the Ordinary'

By Mary Jones

All hymns are from 'Sing your Faith' aka 'The Purple Book'

Introduction

It is a with great delight I am back with you again in the city where I was born and have always loved, and in the church which introduced Mike and I to the faith with which we fell in love, Unitarianism! And how lovely to see you all, all so very welcome as we meet together, on this typical Sunday in March and we create another ordinary stitch in the ongoing, growing, tapestries of our lives, and in the life of Plymouth Unitarian Church.

Already, each of us has performed routine daily morning tasks, we woke, we stretched, climbed out bed, perhaps went straight to our familiar bathroom, then dressed, or went downstairs, in a favourite snug dressing gown, for breakfast, and then to our humdrum washing and dressing rituals. Then we donned the shoes, the coat, collected the house keys, maybe the car keys, the bus pass, and just in case an umbrella if we're walking here. A typical Sunday morning, early in an ordinary March, in a building, standing here, on this street in Plymouth as it has done for nearly 70 years. There's not much to write home about, we'd say.

So now, we can light, as is our Sunday norm, our chalice flame, standing in its familiar place,

We light this chalice flame in gratitude for the ordinary, with thanksgiving for non-eventfulness, with appreciation for familiarity, with a nod of approval to our everyday routines of rising, eating, doing, resting, for the ease and comfort of daily habits, and the simplicity of the humdrum of everyday life. As our time here today unfolds, may this flame illuminate for us, the extraordinary gifts of this unexceptional day.

And a short Prayer by John O'Donohue

No one knew the name of this day;

Born quietly from deepest night,

It hid its face in light,

Demanded nothing for itself,

Opened out to offer each of us

A field of brightness that travelled ahead,

Providing in time, ground to hold our footsteps

And the light of thought to show the way.

So may we find enough breath, sufficient nourishment, and abundant love to tread the way of each new day.

1st Hymn 147 'Spirit of earth root, stone and tree'

Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree,
water of life, flowing in me,
keeping me syable, nourishing me,
O fill me with living energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
Spirit of love, expanding in me,
Spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
Inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of love, softly draw near,
open my heart, lessen my fear,
sing of compassion, help me to hear,
O fill me with loving energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
Spirit of love, expanding in me,
Spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
Inspire me with living energy!*

Spirit of life, you are my song,
sing in my soul, all my life long,
gladden and guide me, keep me from wrong,
O fill me with sacred energy!

*Spirit of nature, healing and free,
Spirit of love, expanding in me,
Spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
Inspire me with living energy!*

Music: 'Leaving of Lismore' Traditional Scottish melody Arr by David Dawson

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Reading 1 'A love affair with life' – by Jeff Foster

I'm at home. Doing the washing up. All that exists in the universe is the chinking of plates, the glistening of bubbles, and the whoooosshhh of water as it shoots out of the tap. This fills every space.

The bowl is particularly dirty, covered in dried breakfast cereal - will take ages to clean. But the phone rings. Sink, bowl and dirty dishes are replaced by living room sofa, table and phone. "Hello?"

A voice from nowhere. "Hey Jeff!". It's my friend calling from London. But the sound of his voice happens here, in the room, not 'out there' in the world. He is here with me in this ever-present intimacy.

He has good news – a new job. And because in this moment, his world is my world, this news is good for me too.

No-body here, no-body there. Yet. "Wow, that is great news!" We fix a time to meet for coffee and I scribble down the details on a bit of paper.

I return to the kitchen. My hands move, the water runs, and the dirty washing up is replaced by carefully stacked plates, cups, knives and spoons, sparkling in the light from the window. There is only gratitude for the washing up liquid, the rubber gloves, and my friend's news - the play of life.

Ah, all that water, I need the loo! Quicker than a flash, a bathroom That's amazing. Need arises; toilet appears. Synchronised life. The heartbeat of the universe, and it's all so ordinary in its appearance.

Drying my hands I notice that the bath needs cleaning. Desperately. Well, there's no time like the present! Now there's total absorption with cleaning the bath. The scum must be removed! It's a matter of life and death!

I finish with the bath, return to the kitchen, smile at the completed washing up, grab a drink of water and in the living-room spot my scribbled note. Meeting my friend next week. Life is flowering everywhere, it is simply bursting at the seams: in the kitchen, the bathroom, the living room, even in somewhere called "London".

What an adventure I've had in the past few hours! And all I did was move between my kitchen, bathroom and living room. There is so much to see and do here. How rich this life is. Yet to the world, probably doing these chores means nothing. But what really happened was my intimacy with all things. A story didn't happen – life happened.

2nd Hymn 21 '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 freed:
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.

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Music: Lewis folk melody, traditional, arranged by John L. Bell, b. 1949.

Reading 2 – extracts from 'The Little book of Humanism' by Andrew Copson and Alice Roberts

Each one of us is unique. A combination of genes that has never been seen before on planet Earth - a new 'experiment' in being human. And there is no archetypal human. You're just as perfect an example of Homo sapiens as the next person - as any person.

And the human species is the sum of its parts - all of that diversity. As well as thinking about what we can improve in ourselves, we also need to accept ourself for who we are, to practise self-compassion - accepting self with all our faults, frailties and foibles.

Each of us will become not just happier but more able to relate to others.

We have to be friends with ourselves before we're really fit to be a friend. Nobody else is responsible for taking care of one's interests, satisfying one's needs and desires, fulfilling one's chosen possibilities, making a job of one's life. Doing the best for ourselves can be the best we can do for others.

Making a kinder you, or me is like a craft - you can get better at it through practice. What can we do today to be a kinder person? Maybe try keeping a journal and writing down your daily kind-nesses. Reflect at the end of the week - have you made yourself a kinder person?

Perhaps our next **Hymn 167 speaks of this**— can we sing through life's joy and pain, can we remember, at least some of the time, we're only here on earth, once in this body, to live, to love and to be love.

3rd Hymn 167 'There is a place I call my own'

There is a place I call my own,
where I can stand by the sea,
and look beyond the things I've known
and dream that I might be free.
Like the bird above the trees,
gliding gently on the breeze,
I wish that all my life I'd be
without a care and flying free.

But life is not a distant sky
without a cloud, without rain,
and I can never hope that I can travel on without pain.
Time goes swiftly on its way;
All too soon we've lost today,

I cannot wait for skies of blue
Or dream so long
That life is through.

So life's a song that I must sing,
a gift of love I must share;
and when I see the joy it brings
my spirits soar through the air.
Like the bird up in the sky,
life has taught me how to fly..
For now I know what I can be
and now my heart is flying free.

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Short reflection – Surely it's not always possible!

Some years back, during a particularly challenging time in my life I discovered Eckhart Tolle's book, 'The Power of Now'. Totally uneducated about the present moment, but keen to try and find 'the now' I opted to focus on habitual ways, and changing them. First task - Make a cup of tea. Right hand lifts kettle left turns tap, so swop those. Oops a muddle, solution move kettle to left. Etc Next – walking up-stairs – which foot usually goes first, so change it, in fact change feet every 3 stairs. And so it went. I swopped sides on the sofa, moved the kitchen appliances and contents around. Poor Mike! And continued this for many months, somewhat relentlessly, life got much slower – and sometimes humorous. In London with the family, absorbed on the tube in another book about being in the present moment, the family got off, and I missed the stop and didn't notice till 2 stations later! I didn't live that one down!

15 years on I sometimes still do swop arounds and attempt to notice things in a fresh way. It remains my go-to resource in challenging times which as I age, seem to increase. Don't think I was warned about that! However, my brain is no longer surprised if suddenly I hang out the washing from right to left, hold my toothbrush in left hand, while trying out dear the late Michael Mosley's 'just one thing' – a few steps backwards, gentle squats while brushing teeth, balancing on one leg, and I'm currently writing 3 gratitudes each day on the bathroom calendar. They've included the duvet, my soft slippers, instant hot water, the art class, my granddaughters' giggle, – there'll be no need for repeats, the list can be endless.

Jeff Foster – our reading- also writes about a supermarket trip – the array of coffees, the blurb on the packet . "A sweet blend of Latin American coffees with a smooth, full-bodied flavour that can be enjoyed from dawn to dusk." Wonderful! The shampoo aisle, the colours, the shapes, "Great Hair, No Fuss!" "Put Shine and Dazzle Back Into Dry Hair! And as for the bakery aisle, the smell of fresh baked bread! A totally free sensation -doesn't cost a penny. Now as a busy person, I'm sure he can't do this all the time, but he suggests, when in a rush, harassed, or just fed up with things, it's good to pay attention to the sensations in our bodies, send them a deep breath or two. When life seems simply beyond us, forget beating yourself up, the hard times are living life too. It will change. Being in the now, is being aware of business, being present to our rushing, to a painful day, a bummer of a day, giving it a breath. It's absolutely being human. Practising noticing, rehearsing gentleness

with self, even dare I say it, really loving oneself whatever the mood, however the day. That's life, that's living, being here and the alternative? Well I'm certainly not ready for that yet. This unique collection of me/you-ness is never to be repeated. All the mini moments of each day reduced to micro-memories, dissolve into limitless little deaths of everything that's gone before. In every fresh moment we meet for the first time, we wave goodbye to the last one. That's the deal. Like having a secret love affair with life, that nobody will ever know. Nobody. No power in the world can threaten it. And it is always right here. Now.

Prayer

IN this moment, let us hold in love, in hope, in prayer, all those whose lives have always been ruled by oppression, hunger, war, who know no other life and those for whom life has changed, who long for an ordinary, humdrum life.

Those for whom there is no tap to turn on, just dirty river water, or none.

Women and girls for whom education is banned, who long to hold a book, a pen.

Those who rule and inflict these regimes, for whom the possibility of loving inclusivity, loving justice, non-judgemental living for all, has been obliterated by culture and fundamentalist, extremist religion, or a craving for total power.

Those for whom breakfast today was not their last meal, it was a handful of rice last Friday.

Those for whom there were taps, there were sofas, toilets and beds, there was family, and now all that lies mixed in rubble left by bombings. Those for whom, today, wherever they are, for whatever reason, life seems to be more like a living death.

We hold all these, in our love, our prayers, in our giving and actions, because we are radical Unitarians, who seek equality, justice, inclusion, love and peace.

Meditation Rumi to quiet background music. Yiruma:' Kiss the rain'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so6ExplQlaY>

Let us still ourselves. Calm our bodies and minds through steady, slow deep breathing. As we hear wise words from the medieval sufi poet, Rumi may we in continuing the calming breath, consider their meaning, imagine ourselves in that place.

We breathe in, we hold we exhale, and we repeat, and repeat.

Out beyond the ideas of wrong-doing and right doing, there is a field, I'll meet you there.

Breathe, contemplate, imagine.

Go find yourself first, so you can also find me. Go accept yourself first, so can also accept me

Breathe, contemplate, imagine.

It's your road and yours alone. Others may walk it with you, but no one can walk it for you.

Breathe, contemplate, imagine.

They say love opens a door from one heart to another. But if we have built no walls, how can there be a door.

And finally

Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, I am changing myself.

Closing words, adapted from Rumi, John O'Donohue and theologian and author Barbara Brown Taylor

May the potential of a new world, a fresh start be born with each breath.

For we can miss that newness, caught up in life's ongoingness.

New moments of life arise, continually, ever flowing like a river, but mistakenly, we see the same forever!

May we give thanks for arriving safely in a new day, to feel at home in life where the waves of possibility break on the shore of that dawn.

May each new morning never be merely a cosmic shrug, but another opportunity to see the extraordinary in the routine, to witness divine gifts in bread, in water, in the laundry, and in the moment, when we glimpse our own reflection, we sense love, like seeing an old friend.

When we look up into a clear dark nights this February, may we feel a huge cosmic hug as we stand on our planet earth and our human eyes observe a planetary parade across our sky, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, our moon. Now, this day, as they've been for over 4 billion years. A cosmic miracle, a cosmic hug.

Closing Hymn 183 'We are daughters of the stars we are sons of the earth'

We are daughters of the stars, we are sons of the earth;
we are spinners and weavers in this web of life;
and the joy that we weave reaches out beyond the stars
and deep within the centre of our being.

We are daughters of the orchards, we are sons of the field;
we are plasterers and reapers in this web of life;
and the vision that we weave reaches out beyond the stars
and deep within the centre of our being.

We are daughters of tomorrow, we are sons of our dreams;
we are planners and builders in this web of life;
and the future that we weave reaches out beyond the stars
and deep within the centre of our being.

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Tune 'Spinners and Weavers'.*

Closing music: Video 'This is the moment'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZNPdG3MQsE>