

Ethics and The Book of Life and Love**Opening Music: 6:11 Relaxing Classics - Massenet Meditation**

Good morning, everyone. I welcome all of you here today in our Unitarian church; as well as those of you joining us for the first time; our regulars on zoom, those who will be watching this service as a recording and any other category I may have missed. You are all welcome in this special place. I hope you enjoyed the opening music. It was from the Massenet Meditation, played beautifully on the violin and piano.

Ethics and the Book of Life (and love) – It's not the simplest of tasks to conjure up a service title, any more than it is naming a newborn! I trust that the title I have chosen (Ethics and the Book of Life and love), has intrigued rather than put off any prospective member of the congregation! After much reflection I consider it is the one which most clearly encompasses my thoughts and research when preparing for this service. I am hopeful that the words you hear in the next hour will provide some nourishment, enrichment and food for thought as you all go forward in your lives.

I will ask Linda to light our chalice this morning. The chalice lighting is a symbol of our worship together in our free and liberal faith. It is the closest we Unitarians get to a ritual. It is an act that takes place at all Unitarian Services and Gatherings, wherever they may be held. Thank you, Linda. Words now from our Unitarian Booklet, Rejoice Together....

We light this candle to remind ourselves to treat all people kindly, because they are our brothers and sisters. We light this candle to remind ourselves to take good care of the earth, because it is our home. We light this candle to remind ourselves to live lives full of goodness and love, because that is how we will become the best men and women can be.

We will continue with Our Opening words taken from the same Unitarian booklet, Rejoice Together. These words are by William R. Murray.

There are days that have been given to us – let us rejoice and be glad in them. These are the days of our lives – let us live them well in love and service. These are the days of mystery and wonder – let us cherish and celebrate them in gratitude together. These are the days that have been given to us – let us make of them stories worth telling to those who come after us.

Our first hymn is from the PURPLE hymn book. Hymn 125 'One More Step Along the World I go'

Words and Music (Tune 'Southcote') By Sydney Carter 1915 – 2002 ©1971 Stainer & Bell Ltd. Used by permission

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 its 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 its 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 its 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 its 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 its from the old I travel to the new,
 keep me travelling along with you.

Some of you will have heard of Khalil Gibran, the great Lebanese-American poet, 1883 – 1931. He has written many articles and poems on love in all its forms. In particular today, relevant to my address, he wrote about the idea of "fond words left unspoken," particularly in the context of love, suggesting that what is "meant and not said" is a primary source of lost affection. His poem "A Wordless Song" also touches on this, describing a song of deep affection that is too profound to be put into words and remains "sung by the soul" instead of spoken aloud.

On Unspoken emotions in love:

Gibran suggests that misunderstandings and hurt feelings can arise from unspoken emotions, with the gap between what is "meant and not said" being a source of lost love.

On The power of silence:

He notes that the silence of unspoken thoughts and feelings can create a void that weakens connection.

And lastly some of Kahlil's words on Love and Equality:

My poor friend, if you only knew that the Poverty which causes you so much wretchedness is the very thing that reveals the knowledge of Justice and the understanding of Life, you would be contented with your lot.

I say knowledge of Justice: for the rich man is too busy amassing wealth to seek this knowledge.

And I say understanding of Life: for the strong man is too eager in his pursuit of power and glory to keep to the straight path of truth.

Rejoice then, my poor friend, for you are the mouth of Justice and the book of Life.

Be content, for you are the source of virtue in those who rule over you and the pillar of integrity of those who guide you.

If you could see, my sorrowful friend, that the misfortune which has defeated you in life is the very power that illumines your heart and raises your soul from the pit of derision to the throne of reverence, you would be content with your share and you would look upon it as a legacy to instruct you and make you wise.

For Life is a chain made up of many diverse links. Sorrow is one golden link between submission to the present and the promised hope of the future.

It is the dawn between slumber and awakening.

My beloved poor, the hour you spend with your wife and your children when you return home from the field is the earnest of all human families to come; it is the emblem of the happiness that will be the envy of all coming generations.

But the life that the rich man spends in heaping up gold is in truth like the life of the worms in the grave. It is a sign of fear.

And generations to come shall learn of Sorrow and Poverty a lesson of Love and Equality.

Let us turn now to prayer, the first being AI generated and the second, words by Bruce T Marshall

1. O, Eternal Light, who writes our days upon the unseen scroll,

Teach us to walk with integrity upon the pages You unfold.

May our words be inked in truth, never smudged by deceit.

Let justice be our compass, and compassion our steady feet.

In the vast book of life, where each soul is a living verse,

Grant us wisdom to read the hearts of others before we rehearse.

May we honour each story – joy, sorrow, and striving –

Knowing every chapter has its holy surviving.

Let ethics be not rule, but rhythm –
A melody of fairness that breathes through our living.
When pride would steer us, let humility correct our course,
And when fear would bind us, let courage be our source.
O Author of Love, whose pen is mercy and flame,
Write within us the kindness that bears Your name.
Let love be the law inscribed on every heart,
The sacred reason we begin, the strength to never depart.
Forgive our crossings-out, our stains and tears,
For You see not failure, but learning through years.
May our final page shine with truth well told,
And our souls return to You – bound in love, and gold.

O Source of all wisdom and truth, guide our hearts toward what is just and kind. Let honesty dwell in our thoughts, and compassion shape our every choice.

Teach us to see each soul as sacred, beyond rank, creed or circumstance. May our actions mirror our ideals, and our words bring healing, not harm.

Grant us courage to do what is right, when silence would be easier. Let love be the measure of our duty, and integrity the path we walk.

Pause

2. In an unsettled world, we seek for a few moments to turn away from the noise and confusion in our lives. We seek to enter a stillness, a stillness that resides in the depths of each of us, a stillness that is at the centre of all that exists.

For a few moments, let us seek quiet – not the quiet that is absence of noise, for there is always noise. Rather, it is like the stillness of a friend listening, the noontime silence of sunlight on a lake, the silence of a new idea, a thought that makes the world pause, the quiet of growing plants, the quiet of a child sleeping, the silence that brings rest, the silence that brings renewal, the silence from which hope and love emerge.

In that silence, as we listen to the Humming Chorus by Puccini, we will discover the stillness that rests beneath the confusion and complexities of our lives, and to keep trust, as we move forward, in life itself.

Music - the Humming Chorus

It's time now for our morning Story (which, it has to be said, has become a bit of a ritual here in Plymouth)! Today's story is one taken from the Unitarian booklet: 50 Tales to Ponder by Derek Smith. It is entitled 'The Chinese Chalk Circle'. It's a story which relates to a mother's love and which will lead us nicely into my address after our next hymn. I have asked Steven if he will read it. Thank you Steven.

The old Chinese story of the Chalk Circle runs something like this. In olden days one of the provinces of China was invaded by enemy soldiers. The Lord Lieutenant of the province was arrested. His wife managed to escape, but she was so concerned with taking her fine clothes and jewellery with her that her baby boy could not be found. He was left behind, and no one knows what happened to him. Some months later the invaders were driven out of the province. The Lord Lieutenant had been killed, but his wife was still alive. She returned and went looking for her baby son, because he was now the heir to all the Lord Lieutenant's vast fortune of money, houses and lands. She searched everywhere, but could not find him. Eventually, in desperation she claimed that the baby boy of a poor woman who took care of silkworms was her son. The mother denied her claim, but the Lord Lieutenant's wife insisted, and took her claim to a judge. He listened to both women, each claiming to be the mother. Then he ordered a chalk circle to be drawn on the ground. The baby boy was then placed in the middle of the circle, and each of the two women was asked to take hold of an arm. At a given signal they were each to pull as hard as they could, and the one who managed to pull the baby out of the circle would be the winning mother. When the signal was given the Lord Lieutenant's wife, thinking of all the money and houses and lands, pulled as hard as she could, but the other woman, thinking of the child, refused to pull at all. The Lord Lieutenant's wife won easily. The judge then ordered a second contest to make sure. Again, the Lord Lieutenant's wife, with dreams of a fortune, pulled as hard as she could, while the woman who took care of silkworms, thinking only of the child, didn't pull at all. Again, the Lord Lieutenant's wife won. Then the judge picked up the baby and handed him to the woman who took care of the silkworms, and said, 'The child is clearly yours, because your love for him is such that you would rather let him go than have him harmed'

From the GREEN Hymnbook, Hymn 60 – Trust in Life

We do not seek a shallow faith,
A God to keep us free
From trial and error, harm and death,
Wherever we may be.

For none can live and not grow old,
Nor love and not risk loss:
Though life brings raptures manifold,
Each one must bear some cross.

When future days seem but a mass
Of menace more than hope,
We pray not for the cup to pass,
But strength that we may cope.

God grant us faith that when some ill
Unwonted come our way,
Deep in our hearts, they Spirit will
Give power to win the day.

And if from fear of pain or strife,
Calm peace we cannot win,
Then give us faith to trust thy Life
Invincible within.

Music: 'Beatitudo' John Bacchus Dykes 1823 – 76

Words: Sydney Henry Knight b 1923

ADDRESS:

Our readings this morning have reflected on, as in our first reading by William R Murray, the days of our lives, 'let us rejoice and be glad in them...', but moving on let us look more closely at the practicalities of our living and how through different lenses we see the world in relation to ourselves and our families.

I wonder, have you ever signed a card – a donor card that is? Like many of us I have reached and greatly surpassed the magnificent age of 70 yrs and with that milestone am required to renew my driving licence every three years. This, I have recently done. On the form for the renewal application, I am once again, as I was three years ago, asked that very same question, but try as I might, and as willing, as I think, I am, I nevertheless continue to defer ticking the box. This donor card that gives the medical profession permission to transplant bits of me, and you, into another person is powerful. A difficult decision, not to be undertaken lightly. It's a powerful document. Would you readily consent for your body to be used in this way? Yes, I know, once we are no longer alive, the pragmatic me agrees that it doesn't really matter - but in our hearts, and certainly in mine, maybe it does matter. I really don't know why I keep on deferring – but I do. Opposingly, if any one of us were very ill, say with a debilitating heart condition, or liver disease, or needing any other kind of transplant, would we wish to be an organ recipient? I am certain we probably would. Two questions requiring a huge amount of consideration and perhaps two very different and opposing responses depending on your emotions and which side of the fence, so to speak, you found yourself.

Recently I read a book of fiction by Jodi Picoult. She is an author that I am quite fond of, in spite of my first love of 'fact' rather than 'fiction'. She writes novels around real-life issues, one of which was inspired by the 'Human Genome Project'. She speaks about science that is only as ethical as the people who are researching and implementing it – and in the wake of such scientific advancement, what she felt was falling by the wayside – that is, the emotions involved in case scenarios, as mine in my constant deferment. but more of that later in my address.

Several years ago, as I was nosing around the bookstall at the Unitarian General Assembly Annual Meetings, I came across a book entitled 'The Book of Life' – A Personal and Ethical Guide to Race,

Normality, and the Implications of the Human Genome Project. The title sounded a little intriguing. After a quick browse through the pages, surprisingly I was hooked. So, adding yet another book to my shopping basket, all I had to do was pay for the goodies and carry my purchases home.

I do have an interest in things medical. I am fascinated by stories of survival, and circumstances surrounding life and death. I am fascinated by the uniqueness of life; what are the factors that make a new born baby grow into the full-grown adult with all his/her own character traits, strengths and weaknesses. The ability to fight off sickness and ill health, or not, as the case may be. What, in essence, makes an individual – individual?

It is said that genetics is the modern frontier in science. It is the place we now look when we want to understand the big questions: our place in the cosmos, the meaning of life. Not terribly long ago we thought the answer might lie 'out there', in space; now we look deep inside, into the nucleus of the cell. It is said that the new expansion of genetics and its body of knowledge are grounded in the political context of our time. Genetics puts all of the essence of life, all of its energy, majesty and power, into the nucleus of the cell. Genetics has become not just a science, but a way of thinking. Ruth Hubbard professor emeriti at Harvard and herself a biologist, points out that scientists are not detached observers of nature. They are constantly making decisions about what they will consider significant, and these choices are not merely individual or idiosyncratic, but reflect the society in which the scientists live and work.

The Human Genome Project is an international attempt to map the distribution of genes and chromosomes – it's almost as if the 'soul' has moved into the 'genes'. It's an attempt to reduce us to biology, an attempt to explain people, our physical and our social presence. The writer says that she could figure out the Human Genome Project, what it means to 'map' all of our genes onto their spots on the chromosomes, to read that, to compare genomes between groups of people and potentially even to make changes to those genes. She could figure out what it means and what to do about it, but if only she could get this one missing bit filled in: What is the meaning of life? What is the point? Who is the self? Mapping the genome just won't answer that question. It makes the answer urgent, but it does not and cannot answer the question.

Some people do feel they have an answer. For some it is answered in organised religious belief, for some in spirituality, but even without religion or spirituality there are still questions that resonate.

A few years before everything became 'genetic', the standard explanation was 'it's hormonal'. Hormones were the driving force in human behaviour. Nowadays, whatever we do seems to link back to 'genetic' tendencies. 'It's genetic' is often offered as an excuse or reason for 'good', 'bad' behaviour; can't lose weight; can't gain weight; got an 'A' in maths; got an 'E' in maths!! But all this is not what geneticists are calling genetic, fascinating although it all is.

Let's look at some interesting ideas: For example, how identical are identical twins? Like my sister and I, we were made of the same fertilized egg, in the very same woman, nestled in the very same womb, but in life going our separate ways, experiencing life differently. Twins are not the same baby twice. At birth they do not weigh the same; their rates of growth can be dramatically different. Placed here or there in the same womb in the same woman in the same environment, they're not having the same experience. Here isn't there and nothing is ever the same. They don't even have

the same 'genetic' diseases. You can't get away from the idea of chance. Why does one twin develop cancer or, say, diabetes and the 'identical' twin not? Because a cell split one way and not another? So, what therefore, is the point of mapping genes, of understanding genetics? But, then, every so often when people are seen suffering because of the consequences of some gene gone awry, which was the case with my daughter, I think it really would be a good idea if all these genetic abnormalities could be fixed. Perhaps good in various forms can come from all of this genetic research. The geneticists are making us confront the question when they take bits of DNA from here and put it there, moving it from one species to another, copying at will; when they graft and make hybrids; they are making us confront the question of where the line can be drawn. What, or who, can we create, and for what purpose?

It is something that mothers of this world know something about. Pregnancy is a powerful experience of feeling yourself become self and another. Looking then at the babe in arms with wonderment and concern at this new life that you have brought into existence. A mother holds a belief and a value and a commitment that this other little person is of intrinsic wholeness and worth. It's not a bad way for us all to approach each other. Children born with disabilities can still be loved as passionately by their mothers; maybe it's not what they wanted for their child, but it is what they have for their child, and it is what it is. Life is what it is, and you go on, and you love.

But why are we spending precious finances on creating a map? What is being looked for? The geneticist takes the individual person and de-constructs it into 100,000 separate instructions. 'This is you' he says! What constitutes an identity then? – surely not just these thousands of genetic parts. I am me – from childhood through adolescence, to all the changes of middle age and on into old age; with scars and bruises and losses, my identity as self holds firm. 'Self' might reside in a divine soul but not, as the scientists believe in a genome map. If, like me, you don't have the comfort of believing in an everlasting soul to fall back on, and if you don't place the self in the nucleus of the cell, then where, as individuals, are we? Where is the true self really located? When the author posed this question to a friend, the reply came back: 'Look in the mirror' 'There's the self'!

I return now to my book of fiction by Jodi Picoult. It's entitled 'My Sister's Keeper'. Jodi Picoult makes the point that science is only as ethical as the people who are researching and implementing it, and in the wake of such intense scientific advancement, what's falling by the wayside are the emotions involved in the case-by-case scenarios. Here, we return to the difficult and sometimes complex subject of becoming a donor, willingly, as ticking a box on my driving licence application form, or unknowingly, never mind unwillingly, as in the fictional book.

The author had heard the true story about a couple who, by genetic intervention, had successfully conceived a sibling that was a bone marrow match for her older sister, a girl suffering from a rare form of leukaemia. The baby sister's cord blood cells were given to her older sister, who was still (several years later) in remission. But starting to wonder..... what if the big sister ever, sadly, goes out of remission? Will her younger sister feel in any way responsible? Might she torment herself with how she has let her whole family down? Will she wonder if the only reason she was born was because her sister was sick? Starting to look more deeply at the family dynamics and how stem cell research might cause such an impact, the author came up with her fictional story. She makes

the observation that she, personally, is pro stem-cell research – because there's too much good it can do to simply dismiss it. However, clearly, it's a slippery slope....and sometimes researchers and political candidates get so bogged down in the ethics behind it and the details of the science that they forget completely we're talking about humans with feelings and emotions and hopes and fears just like the sister of the fictional family. Jodi Picoult believes that we're all going to be pressured to think about these issues within a few years. Indeed, as I was, when recently renewing my driving licence. So, says Jodi, why not get in first with a book of fiction?

Each chapter is narrated in turn by the different characters in the story. Each clearly and emotionally telling the story from both the parents' individual angles; the angle of the first born, Kate; the older brother who, as a teenager went off the rails, feeling ignored within the family dynamic, and then we come to the first chapter which is narrated by Anna, the donor daughter. She was the child born for a specific purpose. She wasn't the result of a cheap bottle of wine or a full moon or the heat of the moment. She was conceived because a scientist managed to hook up her parents' genetic material to create a specific and precious combination. The parents 'chose' Anna specifically because she, or rather her stem cells, could save her sister, Kate, a leukaemia sufferer. As Anna says in that first chapter 'What would have happened if Kate had been healthy. Chances are, little old me would still be floating up in Heaven or wherever, waiting to be attached to a body to spend some time on earth. Certainly, I would not be part of this family. See, unlike the rest of the free world, I didn't get here by accident.' No, Anna was in effect a designer baby. She was born initially to only provide the stem cells for her sister, whether that is ethical or not, but it didn't stop there because later on in life her sister required blood transfusions, and bone marrow transplants, and so it went on, until Anna, at 13 years of age, with Kate relapsing, was now required to be a kidney donor for her sister. What happens next becomes the basis of the story. The author tackles head on the perceived and different emotions felt by each family member. The questions, the concerns, the ethics. Indeed, was it ethical for Anna to provide that kidney for her sister? Was it what Anna wanted to do? How was Kate feeling in all this, because without her none of these conversations would be taking place. Does she feel guilty? Does she actually want a transplant, or is she tired of having to live with all her health issues and constantly being in and out of hospital? How do the family members, the parents, the older brother, cope with all the emotive and ethical issues tied up in this drama? Do you think it was right that Anna should have been born to be a donor?

Reading the book leaves the reader experiencing powerful emotions, not least when the dramatic ending unfolds. No spoilers here.....

In conclusion, in the words I used to open this address, would you be prepared to be a donor – either alive (to save a dying family member) or dead (to give an unknown person the gift of life)? What would be your wish, and what moral, ethical and religious debate would you need to engage with to influence your decision? I leave you this morning with those thoughts – indeed also with all those unanswered questions. And still, I don't know whether or not to tick that box – I will likely defer another three years.

PURPLE: Hymn 83 - Just as Long as I Have Breath

Just as long as I have breath,
I must answer 'Yes' to life;
though with pain I made my way,
still with hope I meet each day.
If they ask what I did well,
tell them I said 'Yes' to life.

Just as long as vision lasts,
I must answer 'Yes' to truth;
in my dream and in my dark,
always that elusive spark.
If they ask what I did well,
tell them I said 'Yes' to truth.

Just as long as my heart beats,
I must answer 'Yes' to love;
disappointment pierced me through,
still I kept on loving you.
If they ask what I did best,
Tell them I said 'Yes' to love.

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Music: 'Nicht so Traurig' Johann G. Ebeling 1637 – 1676 Arr. David Dawson 2009. Used by permission.

Benediction: Rejoice Together – Page 74 – Philip R Giles

May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all whom we touch.

Closing music: 'Love is All Around'