

Congregational service 'What is spiritually significant for me'

Opening music: 'Sanctus' by Faure (Sheila's choice) 3 minutes 28 sec
Find it here: <https://youtu.be/6-i1ESIRKdA?si=hrvQoed8LTHfWbHI>

Welcome to each and every one of you, whoever you are and however you are feeling, and whatever you bring in your heart – joy, sadness, uncertainty or curiosity! You are welcome, whatever your faith or none.

You are especially welcome if you are joining us for the first time, whether you are here in the church building, joining us via the wonders of technology on Zoom, or watching the recording online later. Today we join in this Congregational service, when several people – quite a few actually - offer something, whether a hymn, piece of music, reading or prayer, which is spiritually significant for them. Its been my privilege to co-ordinate them and to read some of them for those who are not able to do so themselves. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this wonderful 'selection box' of spirituality.

We start, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice flame, as a symbol of our free religious faith. The words are by Rev Cliff Reed, one of my favourite Unitarian writers:

Chalice Lighting: *Words by Rev Cliff Reed with acknowledgement to JRR Tolkien*

This is the flame of the Spirit and this is the house of the Spirit's fire.

We come to sing our songs and tell our tales

We come to be quiet, wishing for peace and thought,

For this is the house of the Spirit's fire

Opening words: 'Take Time' By Roger Courteny from 'Gathering in prayer'

As we prepare ourselves for worship

Let us take time just to be quiet

(pause)

Let us take time to take breath and let the worries of the week slip away

(pause)

Let us take time to give thanks for all the good things in our lives

(pause)

Let us take time to think about those who can't be with us

(pause)

Let us take time to pray for those who need our help

(pause)

Let us take time to reflect on our own lives and what we need to do to live up to our highest ideals.

1st Hymn Green no 42 'A dream of widening Love'

Kathy's choice

We rest awhile in quietness,
The world not to forget,
But rather shape the silence
And words and thoughts we've met
To nobler ways of living,
To hope-filled truth, above
Our narrow selves, to seek one
Great dream of widening love.

We share a world where sorrow
And poverty and greed
Live side by side with privilege
Of wealth beyond true need;
Yet though we cannot alter
All ways of humankind,
We ask a strength within us
To right the wrongs we find.

We know that strength is weakened
By narrow truths and fears,
That still we claim true knowledge,
Deny the changing years:
Yet here, within the silence,
We question what we know,
That through more honest persons
All humankind may grow.

To find eternal Meaning
Deep in each passing hour,
To seek beyond the confines
Of our small powers, one Power,
Strength deep within our being,
Arise as hope and will:
Come, silent living Spirit,
With peace our spirits fill.

Music: 'Crüger' William Henry Monk 1823- 1889

Words: Frank S. Clabburn b.1947. Used by permission

Prayers: Prayer for others and ourselves:

Let us pause and hold in our thoughts & prayers those of our own church community and their loved ones, and all in our city, and throughout the wider world, all experiencing illness, difficult, sad or worrying times, whatever the causes.

We hold in our thoughts & prayers all whose lives have been lost or changed forever through violence due to political and social unrest, natural disasters, accident or plain misfortune. We think today especially of the continuing conflicts in many places, especially the recent civil violence in Iran and now the intervention by foreign powers. We pray for all involved and that those claiming to be their leaders be blessed with compassion and wisdom to

prevent further destruction. May those fleeing conflict, mostly the vulnerable: the young, the sick, women and the elderly, find sanctuary and peace. May the places to which they flee somehow find the strength and resources to provide what they need. May the fragile so called cease fire In Gaza be consolidated following the final release of Israeli hostages. We hold in our thoughts and prayers all 'prisoners of conscience' wherever they may be.

We hold in our prayers all whose lives and livelihoods been affected or lost by fierce storms and other environmental disasters around the world. Let us pray that the tensions within our own society, can be resolved through dialogue, and discussion, so that everyone, whatever their differences, may co-exist peaceably.

Let us pause just for a few moments in the quietness of our own thoughts, to consider both the blessings and the trials of our own lives, and dedicate ourselves to sharing our blessings and to doing what we can to ease the trials of others *AMEN*

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi (Prayer for Peace)

Gill's choice:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

The 7 Principles of Unitarianism

Linda's choice:

Our values

We affirm and promote seven core values, which we hold as moral guides. We strive to live out these values within a living tradition of wisdom and spirituality, drawn from ancient and modern sources as diverse as poetry, science, scripture and personal experience.

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations.
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

From 'Fragments of Holiness' for 14th July

Ann's Choice

by Gertrude von Petzold 1876-1952, a Unitarian, first woman minister in any English denomination

We may not have revelations like the apostles of old, we may not have the experiences as the poets sing of, but we all have solemn times and seasons, when the grandeur of the universe opens itself to our view; when we seem to be overwhelmed by the majestic harmony of the world in which we live, when the sea and air and sky seem to call forth in us infinite longings for a 'world not yet realized'.

Yes, and there are those moments when we withdraw within ourselves- in the hush and silence of the night – when we review the past, remembering our successes and failures. When we realize how we have fallen short of the ideals of our youth and the aspirations of adulthood. Ah, friends, here and now let us look to the Infinite and the Eternal, whom no-one has seen at any time, except through the inspirations of beauty and the intuitions of the heart.

From Wordsworth's 'Ode to Immortality'

Christine's choice:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

 From God, who is our home

2nd Hymn Purple 199 'Weaver God, Creator'

Ann's Choice

Weaver God, Creator, sets life on the loom,
draws out threads of colour from primordial gloom.
Wise in the designing, in the weaving deft;
love and justice joined - the fabric's warp and weft.

Called to be co-weavers, yet we break the thread
and may smash the shuttle and the loom, instead.
Careless and greedy, we deny by theft
love and justice joined – the fabric's warp and weft.

Weaver God, great Spirit, may we see your face
tapestried in trees, in waves and winds of space;
tenderness teach us, lest we be bereft
of love and justice joined – the fabric's warp and weft.

Weavers we are called, yet woven too we're born,
for the web is seamless: if we tear, we're torn.
Gently may we live – that fragile earth be left;
love and justice joined – the fabric's warp and weft.

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Tune 'Noel Nouvelet' French Carol Tune Arr. David Dawson

The next 2 contributions look at the spiritual aspects of nature and of walking in the outdoors

'Trees' Delphine's choice:

I do love this,

It takes us out of the (materialistic, human centric) transactional relationship with the natural world, and acknowledges spirit

Also our connectedness with living beings that are not human, but share our life and who acknowledge their awareness of their spiritual yearnings and the nature of the sacred. Life itself.

There's the joy of recognising company.

To become aware of being part of that dense web of life is certainly uplifting to me

Delphine x

'Trees'

We move. We are 'The Standing Ones'

We are always waving at you but you seldom
Look up anymore. We're always moving – swaying
Back and forth and reminding you that you're small.
Our roots dig deep into your history. Our roots keep
You connected to the land, our tops to the Spirit World.
Like you, we are sacred. We are sentient, we have each a
Personality. We are community members with lives,
Feelings and needs. We are your breath and make the
Oxygen that you need to survive. We carry your food and
Medicine. We are the warmth of your fires and home
To the animals. We are the baskets, tools, paper and rope.
We are road maps; we get you home with the bend
Of a branch and lean of a trunk.
We are a thousand eyes but no voices
- Please be our voices'

'Strengthened in body and spirit – the power of walking' by Steve

We are almost into springtime in the Northern Hemisphere.

The official start date varies depending on whether you follow the astronomical, meteorological, or even the solar (Celtic) calendar – but whichever you prefer, the shift is undeniable. The days are growing longer, and warmer weather is just around the corner. Once the clocks change and April arrives, the difference becomes clear.

For many, this is a truly wonderful time of year. As Steve always says to himself at the beginning of March - I made it.

The dark, gloomy days of autumn and winter are behind us, and we can look forward to at least six months of (hopefully) drier, sunnier weather – time to rejuvenate both body and spirit. That said, as Brits, we do love to moan about the weather – and before long you will hear the familiar – it's too hot.

For Steve, the lighter evenings mean he can head out for a walk after work. Soon it will stay light until well after nine o'clock, making those evening strolls even more enjoyable. He has a regular rotation of routes – around the Hoe and Barbican, sometimes stopping for some fish and chips, out to Devils Point at Royal William Yard, and through Stonehouse and Devonport via Stoke into the city-centre.

In the warmer months, he also enjoys walking at SALTRAM and in Mount Edgumbe country park.

He uses an APP on his phone to track his distance and walking speed. Throughout spring and summer, he averages about 10 to 12 hours of walking each week – and even more when he's on leave. Even in winter he likes to walk – as long as it is dry. He usually listens to a podcast – usually one with a spiritual theme.

Walking is not only beneficial for physical health; it is also deeply nourishing for mental wellbeing – and that in turn, influences our spiritual health. It encourages mindfulness, something many of us struggle to practice. One of the most common mistakes we make is failing to live in the present moment. We dwell on the past or worry about the future.

Walking gently anchors us in the now; in the rhythm of our steps, the steady pattern of our breathing, and the details of the world around us.

It can foster a stronger connection with nature and a sense of unity with the wider world.

The repetition of each step becomes almost meditative. The rhythmic movement soothes the nervous system, and many people find insight or inspiration arises naturally during a walk.

Quite simply, it lifts the mood.

A few weeks ago, Steve found himself in a truly foul mood over something that, in hindsight, was rather trivial – though it certainly didn't feel that way at the time.

He went out for a walk - more of a determined march, really. It was cold but dry, and on that blustery walk the wind seemed to clear away more than just cobwebs. Remarkably, by the end of the around 45-minute walk, his mood had shifted completely. He felt restored – back to about 95 per cent of his usual self. He was calmer, perspective had returned, and the world felt in balance again – well, almost.

Steve loves living in Plymouth mainly because of the sea.

We are incredibly fortunate to also have Cornwall right at our doorstep as well, home to over 300 beaches, and the longest coastline in Britain. We are actually truly privileged to live in such an area of outstanding natural beauty. Perhaps, though, we sometimes take the beauty of this region for granted and no longer pause to be awed by it.

The seaside brings more sunlight and less pollution, as the air is typically cleaner and fresher, with higher levels of oxygen.

The colour blue is naturally calming and peaceful. Simply staring at the sea can shift your brainwave frequency, gently lulling you into a serene, almost meditative state. Nature and the divine are truly interlinked.

Listening to the rhythmic ebb and flow of the waves can quiet an anxious or overactive mind, creating space for stillness and reflection. Sea air is rich in negative ions, which are believed to help alleviate depression and improve overall sleep quality.

Walking too has long been part of spiritual tradition. The Camino de Santiago in Spain has been travelled by pilgrims for over a thousand years, symbolising repentance, renewal, and transformation.

Other faiths also embrace walking as a sacred act.

The 52-kilometre circuit around Mount Kailash in Tibet is believed to cleanse karma once completed.

In Islam, the Hajj includes walking between sacred sites as an essential part of the pilgrimage.

So next time you are feeling low, or spiritually adrift, go for a walk.

It doesn't need to be far – you may just discover the uplifting, restorative power of putting one foot in front of the other.

Interval Music video: Max Richter 'The Departure' with cellos Poppy's choice:

A quote from Paul Brunton's 'Meditations for People in Crisis'
'Music can express the mystical experience better than language; it can tell of its mystery, joy, sadness, and peace far better than words can utter. The fatigued intellect finds a tonic and the harassed emotions find comfort in music.....'

To Practice This Thought: Be attentive to any mystical feelings that surface when you are listening to music.'

Poppy says

'One thing I find spirituality satisfying are musical scores - music, a universal language with the power to transcend us from the physical into realms of pure emotion, energy and spirit.

The most recent soundtrack to have impacted me is from an American TV show called 'The Leftovers'. I watched all three series in January this year, but it originally aired between June 2014 and June 2017. It is based on a book and focuses on how people react and cope after a global event where 2% (140 million) of the population vanish one day. The show's main themes are grief and faith as the characters come to terms with what has happened and being leftover.

I invite you to now listen to 'The Departure suite' by composer Max Richter - may you find it both grounding and uplifting.

<https://youtu.be/DYRUHAW-hu0?si=JKnfpbf8uftw4A> - 4 minutes 11 seconds

'A Second and Final Letter from God'

Christel's choice:

"Dear Humans,

God here again (and again, as always, via one of you). In my first letter, I asked you to stop trying to contact me and instead, to contact one another. The result was encouraging, and it increased my faith in your ability to change. Thank you for your understanding and effort. If you would like to have a far better 'prop' than I could ever be, then look to your best thoughts, your own and others', which you may be able to use to do some good. As this will be my final letter to you, I thought I would ask you to try to make some more changes.

You all know that you are but one of the many thousands of different animals living on the earth, but what many of you may not have realized is that, of all the animals you have been (and are), the most destructive. Ever since you evolved into humans, much of your behaviour has saddened me. If some of you are saying 'Yes, we have badly at times, but what about the synagogues, cathedrals, mosques, temples, churches and meeting houses we have built in which to worship you, and what about the wonderful music and hymns we have composed in order to glorify you?' my reply would be, 'You have done all of those things for the benefit of yourselves. My cathedral (mosque, temple or whatever) is the whole of the Universe and my music comes from the earth's thrushes, cicadas, frogs, donkeys, etc. and should I want more volume, I can always listen to thunder, monsoon rain, a volcanic eruption or a hurricane.'

I know that many of you have done some wonderful things, both as individuals and in co-operation with others. However, you need to spend much more of your time working to bring an end to your appalling history of torturing, maiming and killing one another and the destruction of one another's lands and buildings. Add to that, the increasing human population and the polluting of the earth's air, water and soil, and you have some idea of the range of your problems; problems which can be dealt with by you alone. I say 'you alone' because I have never helped you in the past and nor will I in the future; a decision I wisely made for your own good. You must surely have noticed that all the other animals have learnt to rely entirely on themselves and on one another; they have never sought help from me and so their world is entirely within them and all around them.

As I don't believe in miracles (and I hope you don't), I will wait patiently for any sign of a lasting change. Do not forget that I have an infinite amount of time but you do not. Once again, yours sincerely and I hope, helpfully, *God. via Peter Mavromatis'*

3rd Hymn: Purple no 167 'There is a place I call my own'

Gill's choice

Words and Music by Don Besig ©1979 Shawscape Press, Inc (ASCAP)

Tune: 'Flying Free'

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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.

'What is of spiritual significance to Me' by Marianne Beale

I just wanted to tell you briefly of 2 times when something has clicked a light on in me!
To set the scene, I grew up in a strongly Christian family as my father was a C of E clergyman.

About 55 years ago I had the wonderful experience of spending some time, mainly alone, in India and by chance one day I found myself up in the north east of India at a place that many here will have heard of because of its very special place in Buddhism, its called Bodh Gaya. It's one of the most important places of Buddhist pilgrimage because, legend has it, it was here that the Buddha obtained enlightenment while sitting under a Bo tree – which I gather is a sort of fig tree with heart shaped leaves.

There is a huge temple there, the Maha Bodhi temple so of course I went in and there I was astonished to see Jesus's words written up large in English "Love your neighbour as Yourself" or words to that effect.
Now I knew the Buddha had lived about 500 years before Jesus so how could this be? This was my first real understanding that the words Jesus is said to have used,

the commandments he told his disciples to follow were not unique to him, they were universal truths and these two great faith leaders were saying the same thing. I remember going outside and sitting under the Bo tree, a direct descendent (apparently) of the one under which the Buddha sat when he was 'enlightened', and letting these thoughts sink in and realising that Jesus was teaching what Buddha and probably many many others now unrecorded had also taught about how we should live.

Another pivotal moment for me happened about 30 years ago. My mother lent me a book she'd just read called "Putting away Childish Things" with the sub title "The Virgin Birth, The Empty Tomb, and other fairy tales you don't need to believe to have a Living Faith". It's written by Una Ranke-Heinemann, a German professor of Catholic Theology. (in 1987 the Catholic church declared her ineligible to teach theology after she pronounced the virgin birth to be a theological belief and not a biological fact!). One critic says of the book "The author seeks to unearth Jesus buried under the mountains of kitsch, pious phraseology and fairy tales of the centuries" Another critic says "Her book is a timely reminder that faith is often confused with belief and an acceptance of certain religious opinions. It demonstrates the futility of assuming that a religious message conveys factual information and directs the reader to its deeper purpose.

I found this book to be life changing, allowing me to think deeply, to question and not to be afraid of doing so, it helped to bring me on the long search to find a church where I felt comfortable, as you know I found it in the Plymouth Unitarian Church, a marvellous moment for me!

'Desiderata' By Max Ehrmann Linda's choice:

Go Placidly amid the noise and haste and remember what peace there may be in silence.

As far as possible, without surrender be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others you may become vain and bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself, especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit; to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and stars: you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God whatever you conceive Him to be; and whatever your labours and aspirations in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Be Cheerful. Strive to be happy.

Closing words: by Cliff Reed

God of our hearts, bless us as we part. Be with us as we face the quandries, fears and puzzles of the coming days. Send your peace among us, and through all our troubled world. *AMEN*

Extinguish Chalice

Closing Music video: John Beale's choice: John chose this because of the wonderful trumpet player (John played the trumpet at school and as a young man), and the male choir. It is a song of gratitude and praise to the divine Spirit, and it stirs his soul.

'ik wil zingen van mijn heiland christel isk weddingweens Mannen-koor'

Martin Mans (with Trumpet) 3 minutes 47 seconds

Find it here: <https://youtu.be/6suDujb7FL4>