

# **WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

## **A Swept Threshold**

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016

**White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church**

*"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"*

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## READINGS

### *The Year as a House* by Jan Richardson

Think of the year  
as a house:  
door flung wide  
in welcome,  
threshold swept  
and waiting,  
a graced spaciousness  
opening and offering itself  
to you.

Let it be blessed  
in every room.  
Let it be hallowed  
in every corner.  
Let every nook  
be a refuge  
and every object  
set to holy use.  
Let it be here  
that safety will rest.  
Let it be here  
that health will make its home.  
Let it be here  
that peace will show its face.  
Let it be here  
that love will find its way.

Here  
let the weary come  
let the aching come  
let the lost come  
let the sorrowing come.

Here  
let them find their rest  
and let them find their soothing  
and let them find their place  
and let them find their delight.

And may it be  
in this house of a year  
that the seasons will spin in beauty,  
and may it be  
in these turning days  
that time will spiral with joy.  
And may it be  
that its rooms will fill  
with ordinary grace  
and light spill from  
every window  
to welcome  
the stranger home.

**The second reading is a poem by Marge Piercy, *The Head of the Year***

The moon is dark tonight, a new  
moon for a new year. It is  
hollow and hungers to be full.  
It is the black zero of beginning.

Now you must void yourself  
of injuries, insults, incursions.  
Go with empty hands to those  
you have hurt and make amends.

It is not too late. It is early  
and about to grow. Now  
is the time to do what you  
know you must and have feared  
to begin. Your face is dark  
too as you turn inward to face  
yourself, the hidden twin of  
all you must grow to be.

Forgive the dead year. Forgive  
yourself. What will be wants  
to push through your fingers.  
The light you seek hides  
in your belly. The light you  
crave longs to stream from  
your eyes. You are the moon  
that will wax in new goodness.

**The third reading is a poem by Rumi, *The Guest House***

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

## SERMON

One morning a few years ago,  
near this time of year,  
my wife and I awoke, with our baby,  
to a living and dining room filled with haze.  
It wasn't smoke, exactly –  
there was no smell of burning  
or anything particularly troubling about it.

It was just a haze –  
the light spilled in the east windows  
and you can see the sunbeams trace all the way across the room –  
with air particles dancing –  
and we thought,  
“hmm...this doesn't look quite right.”

It took us a little bit,  
after checking the more obvious heating elements  
and the furnace  
a quick Google search  
brought to us the culprit: the quiet, subversive expeller of toxins:  
the humidifier.

It was a combination of running it too much, and a dirty filter –  
nothing particularly harmful, but enough of a haze  
to be a little uneasy.

And it propelled us into a yearly tradition  
perhaps in your home, too –  
after the holidays gatherings of late December  
New Years Day comes  
like a light being turned on at the end of an evening party  
or a school dance  
all of the sudden the light shines a little brighter  
and is starting to come back again  
and shines on the clutter, the mess, the remnants  
of festivity and feasting and wrapping paper and ornaments  
like a haze.

And now it's time to clean –  
to clear the clutter and sweep the floor  
to open again pathways and places for movement  
and freedom and breath.

That same year, a fellow teacher at my wife's school, after hearing our humidifier haze story, said:

*oh yeah, the winter is too much for us – every Saturday, all winter long,  
for about an hour or two, depending on temperature,  
we open a bunch of windows –  
just to clear the air, the dust –  
to welcome in the crisp cold winter air  
and pretend, for a moment,  
they are like the breezes of summer –  
but the chilled air feels a little more refreshing and cleansing –  
to take away the haze.*

In its oldest sense, the word *resolution* from the 14<sup>th</sup> century means to break things down into smaller parts – a process of reducing things to more simple forms.

Unitarian Henry David Thoreau was on to something when he wrote *Walden*, writing, *“I went to the woods to live deliberately – I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.”*

The bright winter light of a New Years Day can do that – I remember taking down the Christmas Tree and decorations as a kid, soaked in New Years Day sun in our living room growing up – a little sad the holidays were over, and a little glad things were clean and fresh and a little more simple.

We've come out of a cluttered fall, I think – a cluttered year. Cluttered with political rancor, hard conversations with friends and family, horrific news cycles out of Aleppo, out of Minneapolis – it's like being surrounded by a haze, like a house a little too adorned with stuff – material and emotional and spiritual – just stuff – that seems so hard to get ride of, to sweep away.

And anyone knows you begins cleaning a messy room – the more you clean, the more you realize how messy the others rooms are.

It reminds me of a story that our Religious Educator Amy told last spring – about Chunda and his brother, Raj, who lived in a small village.

Above all else, Chunda admired his older brother, Raj who, at the age of 16, was a bright and brilliant scholar and was preparing to move to the city to study Buddhism at the monastery.

Chunda wanted more than anything in the world to accompany his brother, but he knew that part of the work of a student at the monastery would be to read, memorize and recite the lessons of Buddhism. This worried Chunda, because though he had a generous and kind heart, he was not a very skilled reader and worried that he wouldn't be able to memorize the simplest of lessons.

Raj knew that there was more to Buddhism than reading and reciting text, and so encouraged Chunda to come along, even if it was to earn his keep at the monastery by working.

Chunda was persuaded, and off the brothers went to the city— Raj studied and Chunda worked.

After a while, Raj noticed that Chunda became sad; for it was Chunda's greatest wish to join Raj in his studies. One day, Raj sent Chunda to see the Buddha, the wise master of the monastery.

The kind man sat in silesnce with Chunda for some time, until finally the Buddha asked, "Chunda, you are a hard worker, are you not?"

"Yes, sir," replied Chunda  
"You do all that you do with all your heart and soul, do you not?"  
"Yes," replied Chunda once more

The Buddha continued, "I would like to give you a special job. I want you to sweep the temple hall each day, can you do that?"

"Oh yes, teacher" Chunda said, jumping up with delight.  
"That is something I can do well!"

"Very well then, Chunda. I will give you the job of sweeping the temple.

That is all that you must do, but as you sweep the floors,  
you must speak these lines to yourself, over and over:  
'sweep away the dust, sweep away the dirt.  
Sweep away the dust, sweep away the dirt.' Can you remember that?"

"Sweep away the dust, sweep away the dirt," Chunda repeated.  
"Yes, teacher, I can remember that because that is what I will be *doing*.  
Sweep away the dust, sweep away the dirt."

And so, Chunda set off to complete his work.  
Every day he swept the temple and recited his words:  
"Sweep away the dust, sweep away the dirt."

The more he said it, the easier the words were to remember.  
"Sweep away the dust, sweep away the dirt."  
The more that he said the words the more at peace he began to feel:  
"Sweep away the dust, sweep away the dirt."

One day, Chunda stopped, and the Buddha came upon him.  
"Share your thoughts," said the wise teacher.

"Master; you are very wise,  
and this task that you gave me was very simple;  
to sweep away the dust and the dirt in the temple.  
I wonder if there was another lesson that you meant for me to learn."

The Buddha smiled and nodded, "Yes, Chunda."

Chunda replied, "Dust and dirt cover what is beautiful and cloud what is clear and  
when I say these words, I feel at peace.  
So while I am sweeping away the outer dust and dirt in the temple,  
I am also sweeping away the inner dust."

The Buddha nodded once more,  
"tell me Chunda, what is inner dust and dirt?"

Chunda thought for a moment and replied,  
"Our inner dust and dirt is grasping; holding on to the past  
or wishes for the future,  
and maybe even holding onto what other people  
have told us over and over again.

But it all clouds what is beautiful and shining within us.  
When we sweep it away it is like uncovering a gift,  
a light that we can share with the world.  
Sweep away the dust, sweep away the dirt."



As the years passed, Chunda became known as the Broom Master.

Grab a broom, folks.

Grab a broom sturdy enough, strong enough,  
to not sweep things under the rug, to ignore the realities of the world –  
but to move and live in a way that sweeps away the clutter  
that fills your house, your heart,  
to the point of excess  
that makes it impossible to move freely  
impossible to find a pathway forward.

When you truly do a deep cleaning  
you don't sweep things under the rug –  
you put them in their place.

You notice them, perhaps, more fully –  
at least in our home –  
we notice and find things that seemingly vanished months ago –  
we find toys under the couch,  
dog fur – well – everywhere –  
we find crumbs under cushions or books under shelves –  
we see things more clearly,  
we notice the truth that has been around us all the time unseen –  
and we put them in their place.

Sweep away that which is unhealthy –  
clear out that which is in our way –  
and hold on to the things we have missed  
and find their rightful place –  
so that we might nourish joy and love instead of clutter and obscurity.

Don't ignore the mess – but don't let it clutter your spirit anymore –  
you can't breathe the toxic air  
of misogyny, xenophobia, racism  
that keeps filling our airwaves –  
we can't breathe that air and stay healthy and ready to face each new day  
without knowing where to find the clean air to renew us again.

A colleague recently was lamenting the political climate –  
and it is a climate that live and breathe –  
and how toxic and corrosive it can feel.

And we remembered –  
the new cycle, the harsh discord and rancor –  
we can't be breathing that all the time.

It is like waking and sleeping.  
When are you at your best, most healthy, most productive, most able to face the  
challenges of a day?  
When you're well rested.

When you breathe clean air,  
of good food and friends  
and you know the things that nourish you -  
when you breath in, and then breathe out –  
you have to rest, sometimes,  
from the newsfeed and the discord  
and ready your spirit with the clean,  
fresh air of beauty and love and hope  
to be able to keep your air mask on  
when the wider world is choked with smog.

It starts, as with Thoreau, with simplicity -  
Poet C.D. Wright says it like this in these excerpts from her poem *Living*, reminds us  
that we all need, sometimes, to focus on the small corner of our own world – with a  
little wider commentary here and there – but we attend to the needs and the life at  
hand. She writes,

***If this is Wednesday***, return library books,  
pick up passport form, cancel the paper.

***If this is Wednesday***, mail B her flyers and K her shirts.  
Doctor appt. at 4.

*After last month with B's ear infections, can't bear sitting in damn doctor's office.  
Never a magazine or picture on the wall worth looking at.  
Pack a book. Ever since B born, nothing comes clear.  
My mind like a mirror that's been in a fire. Does this happen to the others?*

***[If this is Wednesday]***, meet with honors students from 1 to 4.  
*At the community college I tried to incite them to poetry.  
Convince them this line of work anything else.*

*No matter where I call home anymore, feel like a boat under the trees. Living is  
strange.*

***If this is Wednesday***, it's trash night.

Friends, it's trash night.

Take out the trash.  
You can't let the garbage pile up.  
That's not good for anyone.

Attend to the trash by finding it's right place – by noticing it and knowing when it reaches that unhealthy odor and presence – making garbage the only thing you can notice.

A call to simplicity, as the Quakers call it,  
or to mindfulness as the Buddhists call it,  
or to ancient practices of Sabbath –  
holy rest  
a sacred centering  
frees us from intensity  
the frenetic-ness  
of a world constantly *on* –  
the old monasteries have something to teach us to –  
*ora et labora*  
*work – and pray.*

A practice of Sabbath rest  
of sweeping out the dust, the dirt, the clutter,  
can help us notice, a bit more –  
the moments of beauty, the glimpses of glory in our midst  
that have been there, hiding in plain sight, the whole time.

Perhaps it is because I have two little girls in my own home, now,  
or perhaps because of the political season this past year,  
or for whatever reason –  
a member of the worship committee shared this poem this late fall  
and it has stuck with me –  
from Josephine Jacobsen, entitled, *you can take it with you:*

*2 little girls who live next door  
to this house are on their trampoline.  
the window is closed, so they are soundless.*

*the sun slants, it is going away;  
but now it hits full on the trampoline  
and the small figure on each end.*

*alternately they fly up to the sun,  
fly, and rebound, fly, are shot  
up, fly, are shot up up.*

*one comes down in the lotus  
position. the other, outdone,  
somersaults in air. their hair*

*flies too. nothing, nothing, noth  
ing can keep keep them down. the air  
sucks them up by the hair of their heads.*

*i know all about what is  
happening in this city at just  
this moment, every last  
grain of dark, i conceive.  
but what i see now is  
the 2 little girls flung up*

*flung up, the sun snatching them,  
their mouths rounded  
in gasps. they are there, they fly up.*

I know all about what is happening in this city, she says, at this moment – every grain of dark – but what I see is 2 little girls dancing in the sun – flying.

You can't notice things like that through the haze.  
You can't notice things like that with the tired eyes  
which have not rested or stopped  
from the scrolling laments of the world.

To have the strength, the clarity,  
the healthy open spirit to greet the harshness of the world  
with fierce compassion and massive love –  
to begin to build the peaceable kingdom again –  
to protect the child being born into this world –  
we have to be there for each other  
and part of that is helping each other  
not suffocate in the toxic air  
but to find the clean air – to breathe it in deeply –  
to sweep away that which is clogging our lungs –  
it is not neglect to take a break from the barrage of horror in the world  
to breathe deeply and find your center.

In fact – that is what is required of us.  
To sweep the threshold  
to rest, to breathe, to take a little break –  
to call each other to simplicity and mindfulness  
to practice Sabbath for a time each day –

to take in what is happening in the world,  
and to put it in its proper place  
for what you can hold in your spirit right now.

There's something fitting about it being called a news *feed* –  
and those you know farms, you know:  
it's not good to be on *full feed* all the time –  
you have to take it easy or you'll get sick –  
you can't always be feasting – sometimes you have to fast –  
and sometimes fasting from some things  
allow you to feast on other things  
that have been too obscured to notice.

Grab your broom.  
And start sweeping the threshold,  
for a graced spaciousness,  
for a new guest you might now welcome,  
open the window and let the crisp air come in  
to clear the haze and toxic air we have been breathing  
as if it were normal.

Clear the air  
clear the path  
open the window  
so you can see the sunlight  
blessing the children  
playing on the trampoline, in the snow –  
mindful of all that is happening in the world, yes –  
all the broken, hard realities –  
but put them in their rightful place  
don't let them fill up your heart and spirit and home  
making it so there isn't space enough to freely move  
to freely breathe;  
to survive the toxic air,  
we need to breathe the clean air  
of love and hope and beauty.

Grab your brooms –  
fly up in the sunlight, open the window –  
it's time again to breathe.

## **BENEDICTION**

Let us turn into the new year –  
a swept threshold,  
a new moon waxing in goodness –

Let us breathe deeply, and live simply,  
and care for our souls  
so we can care for all souls –

And be able to receive the blessing  
of the clear air and light  
of a new day -  
open the window of your heart  
and let the New Year sun  
burn away the haze  
and fill your life  
with air you can breathe.