

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Little and Large

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

The first reading is by Charlotte Preston. Charlotte was a member here for many years, together with her family. She was an active leader here and a past president of the Board. She died in 2015.

This piece was written in 2014, when Charlotte shared it in a Sunday service.

We lost power in the storm last week, for just over an hour in the “dark” of a beautiful moon-lit snow scape. We lit candles. As my family did when the cold winds blew across the Kansas prairie when I was a child, I closed off the rooms we weren’t using to retain heat and keep off the chill of this gorgeous, deep-snowed wearying winter.

Mary and I built a fire in our hearth.

Our home was warm. We were safe together.

I think of what happens here, in this building, with this community, when any one of us finds our power is on the wane.

Where once we charged against social injustice, perhaps now we need a rest. It is OK. Let the charge move ahead from your community, even if, momentarily, not from you.

Where once you helped clear the outside paths, you no longer intend to whack buckthorn. Your joints are too creaky. Your energy level is too low. It is OK.

Here, in community, you have power because our community has power. We gift each other with the chance to rest an hour in the gentle glow of this chalice, lifted and held by the shapes of actual hands of actual people who have worshipped with us.

Rest here together, be revived here together. May your soul, if not your body, be renewed.

SECOND READING *Big Heart* *Anne Sexton*

Big heart,
wide as a watermelon,
but wise as birth,
there is so much abundance
in the people I have:
Max, Lois, Joe, Louise,
Joan, Marie, Dawn,
Arlene, Father Dunne,
and all in their short lives
give to me repeatedly,
in the way the sea
places its many fingers on the shore,
again and again
and they know me,
they help me unravel,
they listen with ears made of conch shells,
they speak back with the wine of the best region.
They are my staff.
They comfort me.
They hear how
the artery of my soul has been severed
and soul is spurting out upon them,
bleeding on them,
messing up their clothes,
dirtying their shoes.
And God is filling me,
though there are times of doubt
as hollow as the Grand Canyon,
still God is filling me.
He is giving me the thoughts of dogs,
the spider in its intricate web,
the sun
in all its amazement,
and a slain ram
that is the glory,
the mystery of great cost,
and my heart,
which is very big,
I promise it is very large,
a monster of sorts,
takes it all in—
all in comes the fury of love.

Little and Large

I read recently about a man in Ohio, a former executive, a former tech executive, who has separated himself entirely from media and news of all kinds – not just digital media, not just social media, not just a Facebook fast for Lent (which many people now practice) – but a complete and indefinite blockade. This man, in his early 50's, had not been particularly active politically, but he was shaken to his core after the election in 2016; he was unnerved, undone, beside himself with how shaken he was, how disillusioned, disheartened, disgusted – but more than that, he was filled with despair, such that you feel like the basement of your soul is slowly filling with waste water and you can't turn off the faucet. He felt like that, felt something toxic rising around him and within him, and because he lives alone, and because some time prior he'd retired from his corporate job, he has been able to erect a quiet, invisible wall. No news sites, no paper, no radio; headphones on in airports, filters up on websites. When he goes to his coffee shop, the baristas know not to speak to him of politics; when his family calls, they know. They don't like it, but they know. Sometimes he'll ask someone how the Cleveland Cavaliers are doing, but that's it. No tweets, no trolls, no presidential rants, no cat videos. School shootings, North Korea, the Arctic ice shelf, Russian spies, Rohingya refugees, the Syrian humanitarian catastrophe, the Oscars, the Olympics, Stephen Hawking, Stormy Daniels – he knows none of this. He reads books and spends his days studying the small acreage under and around his house. It's the site of a former mine, and painstakingly, with the help of local scientists and ecologists from the university, he is learning to restore the ruined land, the native plants, the habitat, the small pond and the little woods. He means to leave it to the state of Ohio as a trust when he dies; this work will be his legacy.

It sounds so tempting, and so wise, this retreat from the furious front lines of our crazy time. He's doing worthy work; he still talks to his neighbors and looks out for them. He hasn't said it's permanent, though he says it might be. For now he's just in the present, right now and right there, fixing his focus, healing his heart, centering the soul.

It sounds beautiful and wise – and also wrong and immature, and irresponsible. How can a real citizen not be in the game? Although we know millions of people who are online all day long are not really “in the game” at all (well-informed, effecting social change, caring for the common good), still it's disturbing when someone walks away. Mostly, his practice reeks of privilege – and he's the first to admit that if he were an undocumented immigrant, he'd need to be tracking every day, maybe several times a day, how the law is changing, how public sentiment is swinging, so he could watch his step. If he were a man of color, his health care were at risk, or if he were a student crushed by mounting loans, or poor and needing social services (and those services were threatened, which they are), if he were not who he is, which is white and well off, he would have to follow the news as a matter of basic survival. For a lot of people, staying informed about certain things is like a kind of undercover surveillance of very hostile territory. And even if that's not our own circumstance, it seems like it's our job to stay awake and vigilant on behalf of everybody else.

In these disconcerting times, his practice seems so selfish, *and so tempting*. It seems somehow to signal something serious, something critical: to find a way or ways to step away, to center our intention, to notice our discombobulation and attend to it, the weariness of spirit, the sadness of

the soul, to step away sometimes, if not completely, if not forever, then sometimes just a little, on purpose, on time, and *in time*, before it's too late and despair changes us irreparably or cynicism hardens our hearts.

Ursula K. LeGuin, the visionary novelist who in her brilliant science fiction understood disturbing times and dystopian worlds – like ours – with uncanny concern and radiant hope, died last month. LeGuin was a poet as well as a novelist; in one piece, *Infinitive*, she said,

We make too much history.

*With or without us
there will be the silence
and the rocks and the far shining.*

*But what we need to be
is, oh, the small talk of swallows
in evening over
dull water under willows.*

*To be we need to know the river
holds the salmon and the ocean
holds the whales as lightly as the body holds the soul
in the present tense, in the present tense.*

There's something about that tension and that release of tension, the awareness that we make a lot of history, maybe too much history, more than we can rightly handle, as a species only partially evolved. (Ethically, we're only partially evolved). We make a lot of history, but our lives don't last that long. *What we need to be is the small talk of sparrows*, fully present in the present, to the beautiful world, the broken world; present to the soul within and to the circle of community that holds us. Her poem is called "Infinitive," suggesting infinity: *To be, we really need to know the river holds the salmon and the ocean holds the whales as lightly as the body holds the soul - in the present tense.*

Do you care for your soul for its own sake, entirely, for your own well-being, as if it were some kind of small and private possession, a jewel to protect, or do you care for your soul for the sake of something larger, more eternal, something shared?

I think of Charlotte Preston's words about this congregation, her words about and for the congregation, reminding us some years ago, as she often did as a leader here, that part of why a church exists is so that we can hold each other up. *What happens here*, she said, *in this building, this community, when any one of us finds our power is on the wane is this: we gift each other with the chance to rest in the gentle glow of this chalice, this chalice lifted and held by the shapes of actual hands of actual people who have worshipped here with us.* We make this space not just for ourselves, but for each other. And when we're tired and discouraged, weary and worn, laden with sadness or self-doubt or shame, we rest and are revived here, our soul may be renewed, because other souls, other bodies, other hands and hearts and minds are holding up the

roof. We stay strong for each other. Charlotte told us, “It’s OK.” *Where once you charged against social injustice, perhaps now you need a rest. It is OK. Let the charge move ahead from your community, even if, momentarily, not from you. Where once you helped clear the outside paths, maybe you no longer need to whack buckthorn. Your joints are too creaky. Your energy level is too low. It is OK. Here in this community, you have power because our community has power.*

Here you can retreat in place, with no need for a blockade. I believe that communities, families, congregations, countries, are strengthened, in fact, by their weaknesses. When you come in here wracked with grief, or guilt, or fear, and find some way to name it, out loud or honor it just by being present; when one of us arrives filled with emptiness, with loss, with exhaustion, and shows up, offers as a sacrament upon our common altar their vulnerability, the community is strengthened, because then others own it also; we recognize ourselves in that same cracked mirror, see in that story, or some strand of that story a strand of our own, and we hold it up, we carry it aloft as if on strong and sturdy shoulders, we hold each other up. Our little history becomes part of something larger; our own small soul is magnified. We say here that the purpose of this church is to *grow our souls and serve the world*, and you can’t do one without the other. You can’t serve the world or hope to save it when your spirit isn’t strong; you can’t be fully whole within unless a part of you is harnessed to the healing of the world. Here, when you are hurting, we invite you to come closer to the hearth that heals and holds us, and not to flee away; the house is made holy by your presence; it is sanctified, and fortified, by tears and doubts, as well as bravery and action - all these indications of humanity, mortality and grace.

I think of the man in Ohio, tending his garden and thus safe for a time, in a way, from the tumult of the world, the psychic and psychotic assault of the news and its implications. I keep bringing him up because as an introvert, I’m more than a little intrigued. (I’ve often said if the UUA had a monastery, I’d be in it.) As an introvert and as a person with a yet breakable heart, and some tenderness still beneath all the scars and the scabs, some wound-ability when I listen to the news, I’m drawn to his little house, his quiet land, his renunciation. But that man has missed out on some glimpses of terrible beauty - and these are the things that will fortify us. I think of Black Lives Matter: angry, loud, unapologetic, because no other expression of rage and grief could garner sufficient attention, could snap us awake, distracted as we are, to the gaping wounds of white supremacy. Through the wailing and the shouting and the crystal clear, razor sharp analysis of young people in the street, even the soul of someone not directly affected by police killings or mass incarceration or profiling, even *my* suburban soul could shift its solid shape, and become less precious, even porous, permeable, and part of something larger, something mighty, something strong and desperately brave. Or similarly Occupy, or Standing Rock, or #Me Too, or the movement for transgender inclusion, or the Poor People’s Campaign, rising now, or more recently, right this moment, the rise of these very young activists, children, seventeen year-olds, walking out of school, organizing, agitating, finding every way they can to say, “We’re *dying* here. Can’t you see that your children are dying, that your children are all children, and therefore your own soul is sick?” These are glimmers of terrible beauty, and they all look like separate situations, competing agendas, identity politics, and they are not. These movements are interrelated and interconnected, if not on the surface then deeper down at the level of groundwater, the taproot of the soul. In every instance we’re reminded by someone who’s been injured, someone bleeding, badly hurt, someone vulnerable, and therefore very brave, that the

integrity of the entire living organism is endangered whenever any part of it is disrespected, or denied. We're exposed to the brutality of injury but also to the shimmering resilience, the power of naming what's real and what's true. What arises then inside us isn't sympathy nor even empathy, but a flash of recognition like seeing an old friend, or a long-lost relative across a room, a flash of recognition that "this struggle – whatever it is – is my struggle, because human beings who are in fact my family, human souls who are by definition intertwined and tangled up with my own soul, are calling out my name." There's no place you can hide from that, and nor would you want to, because our strength, our life, is in communion. Our hope, our healing, our salvation, are in communion. We enter each story through different doors, obviously. The soul-sickness of racism has poisoned me my whole life long differently than it has any person of color, but we're all in the story. Somewhere the writer Alice Walker has a character say, "I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed." There's something in the naming, in the speaking and the hearing, that can save us, something in the holding all together, wide awake and fully present, even when the news is very hard.

A poet, John Welwood, says,

*Forget about enlightenment
Sit down wherever you are
And listen to the wind singing in your veins.*

He's not talking about escapism; he's talking about restoration.

*Feel the love, the longing, the fear in your bones.
Open your heart to who you are, right now,
Not who you would like to be,
Not the saint you are striving to become,
But the being right here before you, inside you, around you.
All of you is holy.
You are already more and less
Than whatever you can know.
Breathe out,
Touch in,
Let go.*

Come into this place. Forgive and be forgiven, heal and be healed. Let the heart rest, so the soul can strengthen and be magnified. Not coddled, but empowered.

Into this circle of community, we come with our sorrows and afflictions. We come in with chemical addiction, for example, sometimes coursing through our own bloodstreams and our bodies and our brains, sometimes in remission, sometimes very active and in play, almost always invisible. Just as frequently and more invisibly we carry the addictions of people whom we love: parents living and dead, beloved friends, siblings, our children and our grandchildren, some fully grown, some very young. Their names are spoken silently, they are shouted without a sound, into the silence of every Sunday meditation, and sometimes they're whispered aloud. Sometimes

there is no other reason to come here at all on Sunday, except to offer up those names in prayer, and receive them.

And likewise mental illness, in ourselves and those we love, equally invisible a lot of the time, and insidious therefore. It is everywhere throughout this room and this community – mental illness and depression.

And abuse, both in the past, and still, horrifically, ongoing.

We come with grief, and fear, over loved ones in jail,

or grown children, young adults, who can't find any way to be happy and safe. (You can't speak at coffee hour – how could you? Not when everybody else's kids are so strong and stable and successful, so awesome and so perfect...)

We come full of anxiety for parents, or spouses, or your own self, living with advancing dementia, or those terrifying tiny slips of memory that could gather any time into you-know-not-what-kind of storm – and it is scary. And unspeakable.

To this space and this circle we bring doubts about our health, or the health of those we love;

doubts of our self-worth,

and loss and grief abundant-

so many things, spoken and unspoken, so many overwhelming things. It's tempting not to come sometimes, not to step outside your door. It's tempting not to speak, in this space or in smaller conversations, whether because speaking makes something all the more real, or because it feels too shameful, you believe the thing is shameful, and solitude feels safer, silence feels much safer, and our souls then are blockaded in their loneliness, where the light of love can't penetrate.

There are times to go quiet, to withdraw, to retreat, times to turn down the volume, turn off the news, even your own news – but I do believe that strong communities are made so by their weakness - strong families, congregations, countries, able to name and speak and hear and hold in courageous love everything that must be held and owned and lived through, everything we must survive, everything we must defend, everything we must transform. We find maps of our own landscape in the stories of each other; our small souls, lonely, isolated, flickering, find their home in larger histories. I think of stories some of you have told me just this week, memories of parents who have died, these glimpses of elders who survived amazing things in their lifetime, not only with fortitude but with grace and integrity and joy, even through hardship, disappointment and loss, leaving legacies of how to be a person, how to be a family, how to show up in this world and shine your light so that others, when their lights go out, can see by it, and find their way.

From Anne Sexton comes the poem, *Big Heart*, and I think it means big spirit, big soul, fully present, in the only soil where souls can grow which is this common, ordinary ground:

*Big heart,
wide as a watermelon,
but wise as birth,
there is so much abundance
in the people I have:*

*Max, Lois, Joe, Louise,
Joan, Marie, Dawn,
Arlene, Father Dunne,
and all in their short lives
give to me repeatedly,*

*in the way the sea
places its many fingers on the shore,
again and again
and they know me,
they help me unravel,
they listen with ears made of conch shells,
they speak back with the wine of the best region.
They are my staff.
They comfort me.*

*They hear how
the artery of my soul has been severed
and soul is spurting out upon them,
bleeding on them,
messing up their clothes,
dirtying their shoes.*

*And God is filling me,
though there are times of doubt
as hollow as the Grand Canyon,
still [I am filled],
the mystery of great cost,
and my heart,
which is very big,
I promise it is very large,
a monster of sorts,
takes it all in—
all in comes the fury of love.*

May our little souls be brave enough to face the saving fury of that love.
May our little souls, one by one, find strength and solace in the larger spirit of community,
and in the larger love, the mystery, which transcends all our understanding.