

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Ways of the Heart

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**FIRST READING** from John Trudell, Native activist and artist (excerpt)

In the reality  
 Of many realities  
 How we see what we see  
 Affects the quality  
 Of our reality

We are children of Earth and Sky  
 DNA descendant now ancestor  
 Human being physical spirit  
 Bone flesh blood as spirit  
 Metal mineral water as spirit

We are in time and space  
 But we're from beyond time and space  
 The past is part of the present  
 The future is part of the present  
 Life and being are interwoven

We are the DNA of Earth, Moon, Planets, Stars...  
 We are a part of the memories of evolution  
 These memories carry knowledge  
 These memories carry our identity  
 Beneath race, gender, class, age  
 Beneath citizen, business, state, religion  
 We are human beings  
 And these memories  
 Are trying to remind us:  
 Human beings, human beings  
 It's time to rise up  
 Remember who we are

**SECOND READING** from Linda Hogan, Chickasaw poet and teacher

“Soul loss” is what happens when the world around us disappears. It is a common condition in the modern world. The cure for soul sickness is not in books. It is written in the bark of a tree, in the moonlit silence of night, in the bank of a river and the water’s motion. The cure is outside ourselves: in the mist of morning, the grass that grew a little through the night, the walking human in a world infused with intelligence and spirit.

**THIRD READING** from Akua Lezli Hope, African American poet (excerpt)

this is prayer ground  
 this is sacred water way  
 this is where First Peoples stand  
 this is where protectors stay.

## Ways of the Heart

I walk in the morning on the same path, the same trail in a little patch of woods near here, almost every day. I go with my dog and if I veer off the trail, even a step off the path to explore a rustle in the leaves or follow the song of a bird, she pulls me back to the one, true way. It's good to travel with faithful companions. It's dark now when we go; when there's no moon it's *very* dark, and so we go by heart. The stones and roots beneath our feet are familiar. We know the spaces where trees give way to clearing and where they close back in; we recognize the flattened grass, still warm, or melted snow, where deer were lying down, where they lie often, and have been lying down for a long, habitual time. In 16 years I've traveled hundreds of miles on the same ½ mile loop. Henry David Thoreau wrote of his home in Massachusetts, "I have travelled widely in Concord." I have travelled extensively in a very small patch of Mahtomedi. I know the way by heart.

Some mornings I go quietly; some mornings I listen to the news. This past week over several days I heard Amy Goodman from *Democracy Now!* reporting from Mandan, North Dakota, and from the Standing Rock reservation where thousands of people, water protectors, are resisting construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Every day she asks random people in the crowd, this swirling scene of women, children, men, marching, chanting on the land, or at the courthouse, "Why are you here?" She holds out her microphone to people who seem at first a little startled, but who, without exception, answer powerfully, bravely, with such articulate, steadfast conviction, that it resounds like testimony, like prophecy, like prayer. These are ordinary people and they're from all over the country; they've been camping in tipis and tents; they're tired, sometimes tense, out there, and definitely caught off guard, but when she says, "So why are you here?" they speak what they know by heart. They say things like:

*Water is life.*

*This land and the water running through it, over it, beneath it, is connected to all water and all land, and all things are connected, and all people.*

*I am here for the children, for your children, my children and our great-great- grandchildren.*

The people talk about geography, geology and oil; corporate greed and corporate law; the sovereignty of nations, the history of broken treaties. They talk about politics, about how the government refused to allow this pipeline to run close to Bismarck, because it simply wasn't safe to place it near a "populated" area. (It's not safe, so they'll put it by the reservation.) The people know the facts and lay them down with relentless cogency, but they speak an even deeper wisdom, every person interviewed, whom I heard in my walk in the dark close to here. They say, *what we're doing here is prayer. What we're doing here, whether we're chaining ourselves to pieces of machinery, or mapping legal strategy, or lobbying, or spending days and nights in jail, or singing at sunrise in the morning, what we're doing here – all of it - is prayer.* That word, over and over. They speak a deeper wisdom. They are speaking what they know by heart. One young man said,

*This water is what brought me here, and this water is what's going to bring our people back together, because this destructive, unnatural force that is trying to destroy this water is the same force that dismantled our homes back in the day during the Indian wars. But what we can know as Native people—not just Native people, but all people—is that we have to come back to that water. You know, we have to carry that love of that water in our heart, because that water is going to be here long after we're gone, just like the sacred rocks.*

One woman said,

*Indigenous people globally are all facing this environmental genocide by colonial people, the colonizers and the corporate greed that is happening. And the time is now for the shareholders and the investors to see what you are up against: the spirit and the power of the people, the beautiful prayers that are happening, the warriors on the front lines who are standing for land and life, not only for the sacred water here, but for water across the globe. And when this is over and we win this fight, I want my grandchildren to say and to know in their hearts and with their feelings, "My grandmother fought for me so I could be here today."*

These are direct transcriptions of their spontaneous words. I listen to this testimony, spoken so poetically and forcefully by people who know exactly why they're there, and I wonder what I would say or you would say on any given day if someone put a microphone in our faces and asked, "Why are you here?" *Why are you here, at this job, in this neighborhood, doing whatever it is you happen to be doing, with your day, with your time, with your whole history brought forward to this moment, why are you here and how did you get here? In whose footsteps have you traveled, in whose name, and under what authority?*

What can you say by heart?

Can we trace back our intentions (the way we work, the way we pray, the ways we invest our time and energy and money and our soul, the ways we call certain things priorities, necessities, the ways we give attention each day to certain things and not to others)? Who have been your teachers, your mentors and exemplars? Can you trace your choices back through generations of ancestors who believed in certain things and passed on certain ways, ways of the heart? Yesterday there was a memorial service for a longtime member here who was a lifelong activist for civil rights and human rights. She grew up on a farm in New York State, was born in the farmhouse in 1930, and listening to her daughters talk about their mother, it was clear to me that the values she lived by, the virtues she embodied, she had carried with her always, from that farm and the people who built it. She walked a certain way because she came from a certain way.

Your ancestors could not have foreseen the complexities of our time, of course, nor the contour of your life, but are there principles and practices, orientations of the spirit, old and ancient ways that still hold you to your path, hold you to integrity and faithfulness, even in the dark? Do you see yourself, your work, your life, as a kind of ending point, the be-all and end-all of all things, a life unto itself, or is your story part of a much larger story – stretching backward, forward - and can you see in your mind's eye the faces of great-grandchildren whom you may never meet, people who will sit in these same seats 50 years from now, or more? Could you describe your

relationship to them in covenantal terms, as if they had a kind of claim on you? Can you imagine generations of descendants (biological or others) who will carry forward something of your vision, your intention, your religion, which is not yours at all, but which (at least to some extent) you've inherited? Even if they never know your name, they will understand that who they are and what they are, the orientation of their spirit, is a legacy that you bequeathed to them, as it was bequeathed to you, in stories handed down, and prayers, and scripture, whether written in books or sermons in stones, and water and wind. Can you imagine people in the future holding as holy what you now call holy – not stodgy doctrines memorized by rote, but ways of seeing, ways of being and behaving, ways of the heart, so familiar they can guide a person in the dark? Can you articulate those things? Can you speak of your religion not as some set of Sunday ideas, but as who you are through and through, thoroughly: an integrated, incorporated – which means, literally, embodied – way of being human? That's what I heard the people of Standing Rock telling Amy Goodman on the radio. Not just, "This is what I think about the Dakota Access Pipeline," not just "This is my opinion," but "This is who I am. This is the way of my heart. This is the covenant I keep, the path I walk, the content and the context of my prayer."

Annie sang to us just now, and David read, the words of John Trudell, activist and artist, native warrior and poet:

*In the reality  
Of many realities  
How we see what we see  
Affects the quality  
Of our reality*

*We are the DNA of Earth, Moon, Planets, Stars...  
We are a part of the memories of evolution  
These memories carry knowledge  
These memories carry our identity  
Beneath race, gender, class, age  
Beneath citizen, business, state, religion  
We are human beings  
And these memories  
Are trying to remind us:  
Human beings, human beings  
It's time to rise up  
Remember who we are*

This is about the covenants we keep with that which is eternal, infinite and true, the covenant we keep with God, whether you speak of God or not. It's keeping faith with earth and sky and mystery, a humble, ever-present reverence. Sometimes it shows up as delight, especially when we're children; it shows up as wonder when we're quiet; it shows up as conscience or as ethics when we're older, when we strive to be in right relation. It shows up in the covenants we keep with other people, living, dead, and not yet born; the traditions we honor and uphold; the values we speak through our actions; and all the promises, the sacred, familial relationships with other

living things, including people, to whom we would be true, whether they're part of your "family," your own tribe, or not. Who are your relations?

David also read from poet Akua Lezli Hope. An African-American woman, she has degrees from Williams College and Columbia University in psychology, journalism and business. She's a gardener, a saxophonist, a volunteer in prisons and parks, a third-generation New Yorker born in Manhattan who grew up in the South Bronx and in Queens, but her poem, her prayer right now, is for the people of Standing Rock, way out on the prairie, because her covenant is with the sacred earth, with the Missouri River, which rolls and meanders all over this land and underneath, and mingles with the salt water of her own Long Island Sound as surely it does with the salt water in her blood. Her covenant is with the land and the water and the people and the peoples' struggle, which is one struggle, in the end.

*Land protectors, land protectors, sing and pray...  
stop machines that plow the sacred into memory  
this is prayer ground  
this is sacred water way  
this is where First Peoples stand  
this is where protectors stay.*

You can stand that ground anywhere you choose to plant your feet. She's writing from New York to her relatives out west who are risking everything to defend not only their home place, but the whole home planet. The ways of the heart, the covenants that keep us, transcend small definitions. This is not about casual cultural appropriation, but deliberate intersectionality of healing and hope, the underlying allegiances to which you pledge your life. The ways of the heart, the covenants that keep us, transcend small definitions – and they must be readily articulate.

*Who are your people?  
What do you love and require and serve?  
Why are you here?*

I think of an article I heard this week, maybe you did, too, about Hmong farmers here who are growing all kinds of herbs and vegetables from Africa, because African immigrants, longing for the flavors and foods of their faraway home, came to the farmer's market in Minneapolis and gave them seeds, and asked if they could do it, asked if they would grow these strange things. The Hmong farmers said, "Sure!" and they grow things now in vast amounts that their own grandparents never tasted, never knew, but those ancestors would surely recognize the ways of sun and soil, and it was they who handed on old ways of the heart, connecting people far from home to an old, universal economy of land stewardship and commerce and kindness.

The covenants we keep transcend small definitions.

I think of young Palestinians, millennials, born into occupied land just as their parents were, *but not their grandparents*. These are people with a memory of freedom that has never been their own, but has been handed down. Through social media these young people have befriended

young people here, young American activists on the front lines of the movement for Black Lives. These week there was a post from Mohammed Alhammami, a young man in Gaza who has developed a storytelling initiative for Palestinian youth, helping them shape narrative out of their experience, tracing the ways of the heart, and knitting these 21<sup>st</sup> century threads, which seem so ragged, into a larger, more beautiful history. Mohammed wrote this week,

*Dear African American brothers and sisters,*

*I am not black, but like you, I am not white. I do not have the history of slavery you carry like a weight on your back from the day you are born. My ancestors weren't shipped in chains from Africa through the Atlantic, but in 1948 militias drove my family from our home, and I was born under the boot of occupation. I do not have to be black to understand the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." I am extending my hands to you. I want you to know that I hear you, I see you and I feel your pain. When the night is darkest, know that there are people out here, on the other side of the planet, who are raising their fists in solidarity.*

I love that. These ways of the heart, old ways, are like an invisible tracery of waterways and bloodlines, interlacing struggle and hope subversively, beneath the surface, the way groundwater runs through arteries, bringing life to this whole world. I love the photo posted this week of the first baby born at the Sacred Stones encampment. She sleeps in a traditional cradle, and wrapped around it, like a prayer shawl, is a Palestinian keffiyeh. The struggle is one struggle.

Long ago, and famously, someone said, "While there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." By "criminal element," he meant those who resist all wrongful laws and all oppression, who answer to the laws of love and justice. Reading those lines of Eugene Debs many years later, the writer Kurt Vonnegut said he had never known a more perfect exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount. This is the spirituality of solidarity. Whom do you called "blessed" – the peacemakers, the poor in spirit, those who are reviled or killed, rebuked or scorned, for being in the way? Whom do you leave out, on purpose or unconsciously? By what covenant, to whom and what, are you bound with all your heart? It's good to know in case reporters ask – or children.

There are ways of the heart that move among humans, I believe, as water moves: under the surface, often invisible, connecting us to those who came before and those who will come after and to one another, ways deeper than our geography or culture, but expressed through these, through language and art, through stories and scriptures and songs, through religion sometimes, tradition and ritual, all these ways of being in the world that express something deeper: what it means to be a human being, a small thing in a vast cosmos, made significant only by relationships. Covenants are lifelines that anchor us in time and space, and bind us to each other, to the earth, and God. These ways of the heart are woven by hand, and we spend our whole lives checking the lines, repairing frayed places, braiding in new threads of wisdom when they come, attending to loose ends. Covenants are the lifelines that hold us steady, hold us together and hold us accountable; they keep us on the path we mean to travel, remind us where we mean to go, especially when we're going in the dark.

Why are you here?

Who are your people?

In what great story is your own small story contained, and is that a story you know by heart?

Can you trace the lines of connection, the covenants that hold you and bind you,  
person to person,  
people to people,  
and people to land, to water and air  
and to stars and beyond,  
struggle to struggle  
and hope to hope?

Linda Hogan, writer and teacher, says, *“Soul loss” is what happens when the world around us disappears. It is a common condition in the modern world. The cure for soul sickness is not in books. It is written in the bark of a tree, in the moonlit silence of night, in the bank of a river and the water’s motion. The cure is outside ourselves: in the mist of morning, the grass that grew a little through the night, the walking human in a world infused with intelligence and spirit.*

“One must obey kinship rules,” say Diane Wilson and Ella Deloria. “One must be a good relative.”