

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

The Divine Hours

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING WHY I WAKE EARLY *Mary Oliver*

Hello, sun in my face.
 Hello, you who made the morning
 and spread it over the fields
 and into the faces of the tulips
 and the nodding morning glories,
 and into the windows of, even, the
 miserable and the crotchety –

best preacher that ever was,
 dear star, that just happens
 to be where you are in the universe
 to keep us from ever-darkness,
 to ease us with warm touching,
 to hold us in the great hands of light –

good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day
 in happiness, in kindness.

SECOND READING *from Thomas Kelly, Quaker. He wrote this in 1941.*

Our lives grow too complex and overcrowded. Even the necessary obligations which we feel we must meet grow overnight, like Jack's beanstalk, and before we know it we are bowed down with burdens, crushed under committees and commitments, strained, breathless, and hurried, panting through a never-ending program of appointments. We are too busy to be good partners to our partners, good companions of our children, good friends to our friends, and with no time at all to be friends to the friendless.

But if we withdraw from public engagements and interests, in order to spend quiet hours with the family, the guilty calls of citizenship whisper disquieting claims in our ears. Our children's schools should receive our interest, the civic problems of our community need our attention, the wider issues of the nation and of the world are heavy upon us. Our professional status, our social obligations, our membership in this or that organization, put claims upon us and in frantic fidelity we try to respond. But we're weary and breathless. And we know and regret that our life is slipping away, with our having tasted so little of the peace and joy and serenity we are persuaded life should yield to a soul of wide caliber.

The times for the silences of the heart seem so few. And in regret, we postpone till next week or next year that deeper life of unshaken composure in the holy Presence – the life where we sincerely know our true home is. We postpone, for this week, this day, this hour is much too full.

THIRD READING LET EVENING COME *Jane Kenyon*

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

The Divine Hours

Hello, sun in my face. Hello, you who made the morning, keeping us from ever-darkness, holding us in warm hands of light...

I know someone who memorized that poem and said it every morning in their bed before getting up. Whether there was sun or not, they said it to the morning light, cloudy, raining, shining, setting an intention, offering a prayer: *Watch now, how I begin the day in happiness, in kindness.* It felt obligatory, like a holy obligation.

And likewise, hours later: *Let evening come. Let dew collect and stars appear and let the wind die down. God does not leave us comfortless - we hope, we pray- so let evening come.*

You think of childhood prayers, "Now I lay me down to sleep," or one a colleague wrote for UU children in his congregation:

*Thanks, O Spirit, for this day,
Fill my heart with love, I pray.*

*In the morning, when I rise,
Let joy and beauty fill my eyes.
(Rev. Justin Oserman)*

There was a time when people marked the day like that, noticed morning rising, noticed night descending, noticed beauty, noticed light, set their purpose by the setting or the dawning of the sun, kept appointments all day long with God, with holiness, with nature. In Christian tradition, the Divine Office (known as *Opus Dei*, the work of God) is the oldest form of spiritual practice, marking the cycle of hours with tolling bells at sunrise, then six in the morning, nine, noon, three in the afternoon, six, nine, summoning the faithful to lay down their work for just a moment and take up other work. David Stendl-Rast, contemporary Benedictine monk says, “Bells or no bells, I pray. I let the silence drop like a pebble into the middle of my day and send the ripples out over its surface in ever-widening circles.” No matter how busy he is, he wants to be present, every day, several times a day, as eternity ripples through time.

Easy for monks perhaps – that’s what *makes* them monks – but I’m reminded of something I saw here several years ago, something I’ve shared here before. I was coming out of the building just at dusk, in winter, like this. No one was around. Just as I came out into the parking lot, a pickup truck whipped into one of the farthest spaces from the building and shut off its lights. I saw a guy get out, heard the car door slam, looked again, and he had disappeared. There was nowhere he could have gone. I waited a few moments. My car was on the far side of his truck, so I started walking slowly toward it, leaving a wide arc of space. I was glad I did this, because as I got closer to the truck and came around the front of it, I could see the man then. He was kneeling on a small piece of carpet laid right next to the front tire, facing the dead end of Maple Street, facing the east. He didn’t see me, or if he did, he gave no sign. He bowed his head till it touched the ground, then sat up and stood up and bowed again with his arms outstretched. This was a person at prayer. His truck was some kind of utility vehicle - I don’t remember the writing but he must have been a plumber or electrician working on a job in the neighborhood, which went longer than he’d meant it to, almost past the call to evening prayer. There’s an app for that. He was clearly not a monk, just a busy guy. He’d pulled in here, of all places, to unroll his mat, take off his shoes and cap and gloves (all laid out neatly beside him), and then and there he established holy ground, sacred space, time out of time on the threshold of the night. I came back to the building and stayed inside a while. It didn’t take very long – just about long enough for me to notice east and west, which I forget about sometimes; I’m not really oriented in space a lot of the time. I noticed the light, saw for the first time in weeks that 5:0 looks different in February than December. It was about long enough to take a breath or two, which can never be a waste of time.

It’s a strange thing, to wait while someone prays; to be around while someone is talking to God. It’s an intimate thing: there’s vulnerability there. Power is invoked and wielded. When someone is praying, it’s as if reality exists on two planes at once. I’ve come across people doing other things in our parking lot at twilight, but this was in some ways the most unexpected thing.

Can you imagine ordering your life, your day, every day, five times a day, around the call to prayer, at dawn, at midday, in the afternoon, and dusk and night? Can you imagine breaking time, so deliberately, so routinely, every single day, and finding space, shaping space to do it?

Muslim prayer is physical: you are on the floor, up and down; there's the washing of face, hands; there are prescribed motions and required words, and there is the understanding that millions of people around the world are doing this thing in synchrony with you. Can you imagine submitting (which is *islam*) – submitting control in this way that requires you, paradoxically, to be absolutely in control, aligning your body, and your heart, your will, in an ancient practice? Does it seem to you that it would be an inconvenience - or is there any way to imagine these stopping paces on the clock as exactly that, little islands of respite that seem on the one hand to be an escape from reality but may in fact be a return to it? It looks like a mind-numbing ritual, but maybe it shakes you awake.

True religion does not draw men [and women] out of the world, said William Penn, Quaker, but enables us to live better in it and excites in us endeavors to mend it.

Devotional prayer looks like mechanical recitation of memorized dead formulas but those who practice faithfully, in formal traditions and in ways of their own, will say it requires vigorous concentration, active humility, ready courage, and an energetic openness to forces beyond your own will.

Abraham Heschel, 20th century Jewish theologian, wrote in a memoir of his student days in Germany. Heschel became a prominent scholar and social activist in New York City, but he was born in Poland, in the late 1800's, into Hasidic life closer to medieval than to modern times. He writes about what it felt like as a young man suddenly to be cut adrift:

In those months in Berlin I went through moments of profound bitterness. I felt very much alone with my own problems and anxieties. I walked alone in the evenings through the magnificent streets. I admired the solidity of its architecture, the overwhelming drive and power of a dynamic civilization. There were concerts, theatres, and lectures by famous scholars about the latest theories and inventions, and [one day] I was pondering whether to go to the new Max Reinhardt play or to a lecture about the theory of relativity. Suddenly I noticed the sun had gone down, evening had arrived. From what time may one recite the Shema in the evening? I had forgotten God — I had forgotten Sinai — I had forgotten that sunset is my business — So I began to utter the words of the evening prayer. "Blessed art thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe who by His word brings on the evening twilight..."

Sunset is my business, he said. Let the stars appear and dew collect, the crickets take up chafing and let the wind die down. Let evening come. When did we lose the sense that sunset is our business, and morning and noon and deliberate breathing, in and out, are our business?

We are driven to distraction by ten thousand large and small things, demanding things and enticing things, exciting, seductive, addictive, dutiful things, work things, play things, electronic things, political things. It takes such discipline to be still, to be non-productive for a moment, ineffective, inefficient, slothful. *Our obligations grow overnight, wrote Thomas Kelly, like Jack's beanstalk, and we are bowed down with burdens, crushed under committees and commitments, strained, breathless, and hurried, panting through a never-ending program of appointments. We are too busy to be good partners to our partners, good companions of our children, good friends to our friends, and with no time at all to be friends to the friendless. We*

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When the house is clean, we say. “When my desk is clear, bills paid, accounts balanced, my inbox empty, emails answered, kids asleep, laundry done, once I start eating less, exercising more, stop working, start working, then I’ll watch the moon come up, pray the Holy Hours, take a conscious breath. Then I will give thanks. Or make amends. Or forgive somebody’s trespasses, maybe starting with my own. Then I will tell my children, my parents, my friend, my enemy how I love them. When everything’s in order, in perfect order, I will begin. When everything’s under control, my own control, I will be ready.” The only trouble is, you may be very old by then, or dead.

Right now in our world, the challenges to the contemplative life, and our need for it, feel greater than they ever have. The continuous tsunami of late-breaking, catastrophic events is crushing to the spirit. We’re drowning in devastation. How in these times can you order the divine hours of your fragile, fleeting life? This is a spiritual question, but it’s practical also, because we’re in for the duration now, and this whole world, our country, our planet, needs everybody shining, clear and strong, grounded in conviction, love, humility, gratitude, and hope. We need to be not cynical, not jaded, not tired, not despondent or depleted, not self-righteous or reactive, or distracted - but constant, the way morning and evening are constant. How will you attend to your family, your work, your health, your spirit, your pre-existing commitments to service, and also attend to whatever new or renewed vows you’ve made in recent days, to resistance: to resist cruelty, tyranny, racism, greed, desecration, lies, with all your heart and soul? How do set your intention? We only have 24 hours, not all of them awake.

I deleted Facebook from my phone, said somebody last week. I’ll look on my computer but I don’t want it in my hand. Too close to my pulse.

Someone else said, I’m not watching any news, no streaming, no TV. Nothing on a screen.

Someone told me, I’m listening to the radio in the morning when I make coffee, and at night when I make dinner. That’s it. When I drive, I’m playing music now: no Morning Edition, no All Things Considered, no Marketplace, once I leave the house. I want to be well-informed, but I can’t afford to be this anxious and this sad. I listen twice a day.

Someone said, I’ve started reading a paper again, buying a *paper* paper on the way to work. The game I’m playing with myself is this: if a headline catches my eye, I have to read the whole article. No skimming. This is slowing me down. I only have time to read a few things every day, instead of a gazillion tweets.

One person said at a meeting here last week, “I am managing my emotional exposure.” This is someone well-abreast of politics and policy and current events, partly for her job and partly because that’s just how she’s wired: she wants to know what’s going on, and think about it, form opinions, be a public citizen. “I am managing my emotional exposure,” she said, “I’m lighting candles, and journaling again. It’s so small, this is so strange, but it helps me.”

Someone else said, “I am trying hard to listen, not to the news as much as to real people, people I know who voted with me and people I know who did not. I can’t do it all the time, but I’m trying to listen, especially when they say they’re wishing now they voted differently. I’m trying not to jump on them for that, but just to listen. It’s a different kind of news.”

One writer said last week, in a newspaper, ironically, “It feels as if we are living in a Superconducting Super Collider of news, with information bombarding us at head-spinning velocity.” That’s not new, of course, but in these first weeks of the new Administration, the acceleration has accelerated. He talks about anxiety, fatigue and “the misery quotient,” and quotes a journalism professor who says, “The news has become so addictive; it’s hard to step away even for a few hours, but the constant wash of uncertainties is emotionally draining and physically harmful- teeth damage from being clenched in anger or frustration, skyrocketing blood pressure, heart palpitations. I joke that we need trauma care, but I’m not really joking at all.”

Someone said last week he feels an edgy, almost aggressive tone at work, where his colleagues don’t talk much about politics, but they carry it in like a virus, and it is mightily contagious.

Recently, I found a little compass when I was cleaning out a drawer. I was just about to toss it, and then thought, “Wait. I need that.” It’s a cheap, brass compass with a needle, nowhere near as accurate, I’m sure, as the one on my phone, but close enough. So it’s in my pocket, or on a chain, and these past few weeks, several times a day, I take it out and find true north, and take a breath. I’m trying to remember that some few things in this world are unassailable. The points of the compass are among them. I’m hoping that hope itself is among them, the unassailable things. Divine hours, sacred directions, sacred intention, the rising of the sun and its going down – some things have been steady for thousands of years, guiding humans to the holy, and each other.

A colleague writes about a new website he’s found, called *fivecalls.org* which makes it seamlessly easy to call your own elected representatives on a whole range of current issues. He confesses that he’s not done that very much in the past, but now he is. “I have added a new spiritual practice,” he says, “to my prayer, mediation, exercise and journaling. Five a calls a day.” It’s like the Muslim call to prayer, or the Christian hours, or the blessing of the candles. “Will it make a difference?” he says. “To the future of our country, I’m not sure. In the part of my spirit where injustice is tearing a hole, I think so.”

I think of that question of Jesus, to his sleepy companions, those well-intentioned but easily distracted disciples. The crisis is upon him, the days are very dark, and he goes alone to a quiet place to pray all night, to think it through, to talk to God, to ask what will be asked of him, to orient in time and space. He asks them all to stay awake, but of course they don’t; they mean to but they can’t; they’re overwhelmed with weariness and fear. He finds them in the morning, and says to them, “Could you not watch with me one hour?”

In the confusion of the times, the uncertainty, the onslaught of fake facts and true truth, rumors and reactions and real actions, the uneasy, queasy fear of what will happen next and worry about what we ought to do or can, it is so easy to turn off, shut down, doze off, drift away into numbing routines, normalization, justification, depression and denial. It would be so tempting now to just go back to sleep – exactly when it matters most that we keep the watch and stay awake. What restores your soul, waters your spirit, keeps you sane and laughing (also crying)? What guides your feet and anchors you daily in gratitude, compassion and wonder? **Do that.** Whatever it is. Read that. Recite that. Pray that. Sing that. Find true north with that. Breathe that. Do that every day, once a day, five times a day, like a monk in his cell or with the devotion of a plumber in a parking lot at dusk

From W.E.B DuBois, the African American leader and reformer, from his book, comes a blessing for the rhythm of our days, from his book, *Prayers for Dark People*:

*This is the day, O God,
when the floods of thy World-Sunshine billow over our lives,
and the shimmer and shine of things make it seem good and pleasant to walk on green earth.
Let us enjoy all that Thou hast given us –
but let us do more than enjoy:
let us work while day dawns
and sow for the Harvest
and strive for that Inner Light,
which shall shine in the day when suns fail
and moons are dim
and the Joy of living seems trembling to the dust.
Give us this wisdom in this Thy day, O God,
and in thy night, rest.
Amen.*

-silence-

These words in closing come from John O'Donohue:

*No one knew the name of this day;
Born quietly from deepest night,
It hid its face in light,
Demanded nothing for itself,
Opened out to offer each of us
A field of brightness that traveled ahead,*

*Providing in time, ground to hold our footsteps
And the light of thought to show the way.
The mind of the day draws no attention;
It dwells within the silence with elegance
To create a space for all our words,
Drawing us to listen inward and outward.
We seldom notice how each day is a holy place
Where the eucharist of the ordinary happens,
Transforming our broken fragments
Into an eternal continuity that keeps us.
Somewhere in us a dignity presides
That is more gracious than the smallness
That fuels us with fear and force,
A dignity that trusts the form a day takes.
So at the end of this day, we give thanks
For being betrothed to the unknown
And for the secret work
Through which the mind of the day
And wisdom of the soul become one.*