



April 2017 Monthly Theme

IMMANENCE

the practice of blessing the world

The intention of the themed year is to help Unitarian Universalists build a robust spiritual and ethical vocabulary. The themes are points of departure for religious liberals seeking to think, speak and act theologically, prophetically and prayerfully. The themes reclaim religious language, casting old terms in a new key to deepen spiritual grounding and sharpen moral reasoning. More at: wbuuc.org/themes or sign up for a circle at wbuuc.org/classes.

QUESTIONS

How do you experience the sacred in immanent (close), ordinary ways?

What practices help you notice and pay attention to the beauty around you?

How do we get back to blessing the earth as something holy and sanctified as opposed to only material and useful?

QUOTATIONS

Definition: Immanence 1. existing, operating, or remaining within; inherent. 2. of or relating to the pantheistic conception of God, as being present throughout the universe.

To live content with small means—to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion, to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich—to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly, to listen to stars and birds, babes and sages, with open heart—to bear all cheerfully—do all bravely, await occasions—never hurry; in a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common. This is to be my symphony.

- William Ellery Channing

The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. “

- Barbara Kingsolver

POETRY

Choose to Bless the World
Your gifts—
whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.
The mind's power,
the strength of the hands,
the reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining,
seeing, waiting

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
bind up wounds,
welcome the stranger,
praise what is sacred,
do the work of justice
or offer love.
Any of these can draw down the prison door,
hoard bread,
abandon the poor,
obscure what is holy,
comply with injustice
or withhold love.
You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more
than an act of will,
a moving forward into the world
with the intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition,
a confession of surprise,
a grateful acknowledgment
that in the midst of a broken world
unspeakable beauty, grace
and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness
that encompasses all life, even yours.
And while there is injustice,
anesthetization, or evil
there moves a holy disturbance,
a benevolent rage,
a revolutionary love,
protesting, urging, insisting
that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life
as a gesture of thanks
for this beauty
and this rage.

The choice to bless the world
can take you into solitude
to search for the sources
of power and grace;
native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into
community,
the endeavor shared,
the heritage passed on,
the companionship of struggle,
the importance of keeping faith,
the life of ritual and praise,
the comfort of human friendship,
the company of earth
the chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility, waiting

- Rebecca Parker

READINGS & EXCERPTS

And what would it be, as Rumi insists again and again, to realize that Gabriel is inside us? That Muhammad is inside us? That the means of arriving at God, and entering into God, are already inside us? These are not external characters, but all inside us.

Our beings are like a bird with two wings. We need both wings — the intellectual and the spiritual — to soar. One wing can elevate us to God’s presence. The other — this fierce and radical divine love — gets us to enter into God’s heart.

May we soar on both of these wings.

May we combine the intellectual and the spiritual.

May we not settle for heaven, but aspire to enter into God’s own presence.

- Omid Safi

What God? What love? Universalism asks me to look for something deeper than the purely intellectual and rational. It makes me take seriously other ways of knowing: the sensory, the emotional, the instinctive, the subliminal. My head must recede to make room for my heart. I go because it is a place where I am asked to be as humble as I am smart, as kind as I am free. In the space between, in the movement back and forth, like a pendulum finding its rhythm, lies the growth and the joy.

- Christina Conklin, *Immanence: Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art*

I’m aware there are ten thousand other versions of knowable transcendent God, many of them quite friendly, but knowing how easy it is for transcendent God to be coopted into the service of selfish human aims, I’ve tended in my life to seek God not in some otherworldly place, not in some higher realm, but right here, among us, around us, within us, infused in the dark, brown earth, thawing with the lake ice as winter turns to spring, sinking into to early April mud, tunneling with the earth worms, falling warmly with early April rain, rolling and crashing with the great ocean waves, rising and setting with the sun and the moon, coursing through our bodies, pulsing with our blood, beating with our hearts, breathing with our lungs.

I’ve longed for God to be nearby, close, present, immediate—like a friend, a parent, a grandparent, a spouse, a lover—a wise counselor when my way is unclear, a source of inspiration when my well runs dry, a muse for my creativity, a provider of comfort and solace when life is hard, a bringer of peace in the midst of chaos—a still, small voice, speaking from that place within me where I know my truth, where my conviction resides, where my voice is strong.

I’ve longed for a God not beyond knowing, not unapproachable, not in Heaven, not on Olympus, not in the underworld, but right here in meaningful human interaction: the helping hand, the smile, the caring gesture, the thoughtful gift, the offered prayer, the full embrace, deep listening, meaningful conversation, the good night kiss, “I love you,” “thank you,” “I miss you,” “I’m sorry,” “What can I do?”

I’ve longed for God not ‘wholly other’ but wholly familiar: in the music, the rhythm, the harmonies, the hymns, the silence spaces between the notes, the beat that goes on and on; and in the holy quiet, in the ritual words, in the heartfelt sharing, in the chalice flame.

I've longed for God not to punish and judge and condemn, but to urge us in all manner of ways to build the beloved community, to welcome, to include, to be curious and adaptable, to apologize and forgive, to work for a more just human society, to work for a more sustainable earth, to work on behalf of the generations to come, to love, to love, to love.

- Rev. Josh Pawelek, from *Radical Transcendence to Radical Immanence*

One tree is like another tree, but not too much. One tulip is like the next tulip but not altogether. More or less like people -- a general outline, then the stunning individual strokes. Hello Tom, hello Andy. Hello Archibald Violet, and Clarissa Bluebell. Hello Lillian Willow, and Noah, the oak tree I have hugged and kissed every first day of spring for the last thirty years. And in reply its thousands of leaves tremble! What a life is ours! *Doesn't anybody in the world anymore want to get up in the middle of the night and sing?*

- Mary Oliver, *Upstream*

If we look more carefully at the world around us, our eyes can be channels for the sacred. Seeing is both sight and insight. That's why many of our most profound memories are visual... Images have great importance in many religious traditions. To Hindus, darshan is a special way of seeing, translated as "seeing the divine image." Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion and Indian studies at Harvard, writes:

In the Hindu ritual tradition, darshan refers especially to religious seeing, or the visual perception of the sacred. When Hindus go to a temple, they do not commonly say, "I am going to worship," but rather, "I am going for darshan." They go to "see" the image of the deity. . . . Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine.

I am not going to claim that we Unitarian Universalists can learn to "take darshan," as the Hindus say. Ours is a radically different culture, with a radically different understanding of religion. But I believe that we can learn something from this way of seeing. We may begin to understand what looking for the divine image means.

I am convinced that there is such a thing as a theology of landscape, or geography. Our surroundings help us to form a vision of the divine, be it cruel or benevolent, abundant or austere. It is curious to consider what sort of a theology the Transcendentalists might formulate today, when industrialization and urbanization have changed so much of the rural landscape from which they took their inspiration. But I believe that they still would counsel us to be awake to see the divine in our surroundings.

We need to learn to look with the eyes of the soul. We don't need to go far. There is plenty to see wherever we are. We need only to cultivate the awareness of what we are seeing...

Turn off your cell phone, your computer, your television, all those supposed conveniences that are driving you to distraction. Clear the way to think about what you are seeing and how it relates to your life: your past, your present, your hopes for the future. Make a point of remembering what you are feeling. "To behold beauty now invisible," it is not enough simply to look.

- The Sacred in Images by Harold Babcock; UU World, Winter/2005; Expanded from a sermon preached to the First Religious Society in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in June 2005