

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

If You See Something, Say Something

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING from Annie Dillard

We are here to witness the creation and abet it. We are here to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but, especially, we notice the beautiful faces and complex natures of each other. We are here to bring to consciousness the beauty and power that are around us and to praise the people who are here with us. We witness our generation and our times. We watch the weather. Otherwise, creation would be playing to an empty house.

SECOND READING from Marge Piercy

This is the blessing for rain after drought:
 Come down, wash the air so it shimmers,
 a perfumed shawl of lavender chiffon.
 Let the parched leaves suckle and swell.
 Enter my skin, wash me for the little
 chrysalis of sleep rocked in your plashing.
 In the morning the world is peeled to shining.

This is the blessing for sun after long rain:
 Now everything shakes itself free and rises.
 The trees are bright as pushcart ices.
 Every last lily opens its satin thighs.
 The bees dance and roll in pollen
 and the cardinal at the top of the pine
 sings at full throttle, fountaining.

This is the blessing for a ripe peach:
 This is luck made round. Frost can nip
 the blossom, kill the bee. It can drop,
 a hard green useless nut. Brown fungus,
 the burrowing worm that coils in rot can
 blemish it and wind crush it on the ground.
 Yet this peach fills my mouth with juicy sun.

This is the blessing for the first garden tomato:
 Those green boxes of tasteless acid the store
 sells in January, those red things with the savor
 of wet chalk, they mock your fragrant name.
 How fat and sweet you are weighing down my palm,
 warm as the flank of a cow in the sun.
 You are the savor of summer in a thin red skin.

This is the blessing for a political victory:
 Although I shall not forget that things

work in increments and epicycles and sometime
 leaps that half the time fall back down,
 let's not relinquish dancing while the music
 fits into our hips and bounces our heels.
 We must never forget, pleasure is real as pain.

The blessing for the return of a favorite cat,
 the blessing for love returned, for friends'
 return, for money received unexpected,
 the blessing for the rising of the bread,
 the sun, the oppressed. I am not sentimental
 about old men mumbling the Hebrew by rote
 with no more feeling than one says gesundheit.

But the discipline of blessings is to taste
 each moment, the bitter, the sour, the sweet
 and the salty, and be glad for what does not
 hurt. The art is in compressing attention
 to each little and big blossom of the tree
 of life, to let the tongue sing each fruit,
 its savor, its aroma and its use.

Attention is love, what we must give
 children, mothers, fathers, pets,
 our friends, the news, the woes of others.
 What we want to change we curse and then
 pick up a tool. Bless whatever you can
 with eyes and hands and tongue. If you
 can't bless it, get ready to make it new.

THIRD READING from Lucille Clifton

won't you celebrate with me
 what I have shaped into
 a kind of life? I had no model
 born in babylon
 both nonwhite and woman
 what did I see to be except myself?
 i made it up
 here on this bridge between
 starshine and clay
 my one hand holding tight
 my other hand; come celebrate
 with me that everyday
 something has tried to kill me
 and has failed.

If You See Something, Say Something

Some years ago on a Sunday morning Winona LaDuke came and spoke to us here. She gave two completely different presentations at 9 and at 11, both extemporaneous and challenging and strong, each in its way calling us out to honor the earth, to cherish the sacred by cherishing justice. She spoke about water, land, geography, race, history, and in the middle of one of those talks she said, “I want to give you the names of the moon.” It’s important to notice what time it is, and where you are in relation to where other things are, to be oriented in time and space, and so in the middle of a sermon about water and land and native rights, she picked us up and carried us around the great wheel, naming the moons of the Anishinabek year in ancient words and English words, beginning with where we were, which was April:

These are the Moons of Renewal and Growth: Moon When Ducks Come Back, Moon of Making Fat (of making animals pregnant), Moon When Leaves Turn Green

The Warm Moons: Moon of the Good Berries, Moon When the Chokecherries Blacken, Moon of the Harvest

The Moons of Change: Moon of Browning Leaves, Ricing Moon (which is where we are now), Moon of Falling Leaves;

The Cold and Dark Moons (four of these, not three as with the others): Moon When the Deer Shed Their Horns, the Moon of Hard Times, the Moon of Popping Trees (when trees crack from cold), Moon of Sore Eyes (Snow Blindness)...

She named them all for us, and then the wheel came round again to *the Moon When Ducks Come Back*... In different parts of the Midwest there are variations on these names, as different communities mark different events and lift up different matters of importance. It’s a lovely practice to do this yourself, to mark the year and see what you notice, notice what you name (although to do this by yourself is a very different thing from doing it, from holding it, within a whole community). It was beautiful to hear the moons of the Lakota people named in this space, bringing the outside inside just a bit, bringing the past of this place to the present, and reminding us that the relationship of people to time, like the relationship of people to land, is and has always been a crafted thing, a chosen thing.

Sacred traditions everywhere and always teach that certain premises are pre-existent: *this is how the world was made, this is how time and space and mountains and rivers began, how night and day and the seasons and weather all work. These are the names of things and the ways of things, and this is how thou shalt dwell among them.* Sacred traditions, like science (or including science), lay all this out- and then people decide, in every culture, every region, every religion, how to hold the relationships. We choose what right relation looks like and feels like, what we will honor and call holy. There are thirteen moons in the Lakota calendar, twelve in our own, and in each case, as in others, elsewhere, people at some point chose what the shape of time would be. Do you see it as a straight line from beginning to end, birth to death, one moment after another tumbling into the next until you just quit breathing while the line keeps running on like an arrow, or will you bend that line into a wheel, or make of it perhaps a spiral (so that years roll

round, but you keep moving)? Because our planet spins and travels in an orbit with its little moon around it, we tend to make of time a circle, and we step inside and live there. But time is not a circle really, and the way we understand it, mark it, pass it, live and die within it, is invented, it's crafted - even if you believe that Allah has designed the hours of a day around five holy moments of prayer; even if you believe that the liturgical year is separated into sacred time and ordinary time, with feasts and fasts and holy days of obligation pre-ordained by God to commemorate the life and death of Jesus and his resurrection; even if you believe that the Book of Life and the Gates of Repentance are opened precisely at this time of year, each year, and always have been, always will be, as in the Jewish calendar; even if you believe that the cycles of the moon are not just astrophysical realities but holy gifts, the moons of berries and rice— still in every place and time, humans decide whether and how to align themselves, align ourselves, synchronize ourselves and our work and our waking and our sleeping and our celebrations within time's infinity and our own mortality.

How do you name the cycles of the moon? What observances do you religiously keep? Christmas, Easter, Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan? The first day of school and the Fourth of July? Flag Day, Veterans Day, the feast of St. Francis, or St. Patrick, or Cecilia? Do you notice and mark the solstices and the equinoxes and the cross-quarter days in between? Or maybe for you it's hockey season, football season, the Final Four, and that beautiful day on the far side of winter when pitchers and catchers report for spring training, and the lake ice shatters, the ground greens up, song birds return, and with the crack of the bat everything's right with the world? How does your year go round?

There's a member here who celebrates the Holy Month of October. He invented it himself but that makes it no less sanctified, in fact sanctifies it more. For him it is hands-down the most beautiful month in Minnesota, so he schedules vacation in October when he can; he tries to be in the woods or in the wild as much as possible with a good camera and a good dog – all the elements of devotional practice – watching, listening, walking, breathing with deliberate gratitude and deliberate, punctual joy. And he'll say, *I'd be glad to serve on that committee, but call me later. For now, I'm in the Holy Month of October.* That is a reverent practice, because if you don't name it, mark it, lift it up, block it out, it might just slip by, and that might just be a sacrilege, a discourtesy, to fail to acknowledge the maple tree ablaze, the call of geese, the azure sky mirrored in the water, the first fall apple, round in your hand and tart in your mouth, or the feel of flannel on your skin or wool socks on your feet in the first days when it's clear that summer's gone and something else that's beautiful has come. If you see something, say something. Celebrate and bless it. That's what we're here to do.

We are here to witness the creation and abet it, says Annie Dillard. We are here to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but, especially, we notice the beautiful faces and complex natures of each other. We are here to bring to consciousness the beauty and power that are around us and to praise the people who are here with us. We witness our generation and our times. We watch the weather. Otherwise, creation would be playing to an empty house.

Celebrations large and loud, or very small; public rituals and private- all these markings and observances shape time (which has no shape) into a container fit to live in. You know all too

well that work will shape time, also. Work and school and obligations, the fiscal year, the bus schedule, the calendar, the clock - these hammer our days and our hours and our years into regulation, but celebrations crack that open, the naming of this month or this moment as special or particular, whether they occur again and again through the cycles and the seasons, or whether they happen just once in a lifetime: a wedding, a funeral, the blessing of a child, or a milestone big or small. It's a word I love because it was coined originally, I'm sure, to mark a place in space (one mile exactly from this place and from that one), but *milestone* now is used almost exclusively to mark a place in time, a specific location in your memory to which you look back from wherever you are now and say, "I did that. We did that. I saw that, felt that, survived that - and it mattered." If you see something beautiful, or something terrible if you go through something that breaks your heart; if you experience the mysterious, the wonderful; if you do something, achieve something, love something or someone, or miss someone - say something. Our celebrations stop time in its tracks for just a moment, and over time they tell the stories of our lives. Lucille Clifton, the great poet says,

*won't you celebrate with me
what I have shaped into
a kind of life? I had no model
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did I see to be except myself?
i made it up
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my other hand; come celebrate
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She's made a whole life out of whole cloth, and she has also made time to acknowledge it.

When I was in Divinity School, Ross and I lived in New Haven, Connecticut, which was then a tough, poor city and we lived in a tough, poor neighborhood, which was a beautiful neighborhood. It had once been mostly Italian, then African American, and Jamaican. When we lived there it was a mostly Puerto Rican neighborhood; all the kids went to Roberto Clemente Elementary School. Our street never slept. There was music all the time, spilling out of windows, cars and boom-boxes, there were holiday lights year-round and parties on the porches, on the sidewalks, in the street. It felt like one continuous celebration of Catholic holidays, Pentecostal holidays, national holidays, and also weddings, graduations, anniversaries, a party for this uncle who just came up from New York, a party for that daughter who just came out of jail. Not everything was happy, but everything was celebrated, meaning named, and gathered for: funerals, rent parties, a vigil day and night with sheet-pans of food and music and laughter and tears, held for someone who was sick with AIDS, or a grandma as she died. Rosette Street was noisy all the time, and it was vibrantly alive.

How do you mark your life's passage through the passing of time? Who's invited to your parties? Special events are one kind of way, and then I think of how in the Catholic church, the service on Sunday or Saturday night is called the *celebration* of the mass: a different celebration. It's a return every week, in some churches every day, to a different kind of naming, a different way of noticing the cycle of your own life within the cycles of the seasons and the great wheel of the year; your own life within the eternal rolling mystery of life itself, and death. The people come once a week and sometimes more, just as we do here, to celebrate, lift up, name those things which might otherwise slip by (and that could just be a sacrilege): gratitude, wonder, awe, repentance, forgiveness, grief and solace, hope and fear and faith. Worship literally means worth-ship, making space in time for what is worthy. One writer, Richard Rodriguez, recalls the church of his childhood, and its lifelong effect on his parents and on him; they were immigrants from Mexico.

Of all the institutions in their lives, only the Catholic Church seemed aware that my mother and father were thinkers—persons aware of the experience of their lives. Other institutions—political parties, the industries of mass entertainment and communications, the companies that employed them—all treated my parents with condescension. But the liturgical church [not the preaching or the teaching, which treated them like children, but the ritual] excited my parents. In ceremonies of public worship, they were moved, assured that their lives – all aspects of their lives, from waking to eating, from birth until death, all moments – possess great significance. The liturgy encouraged them to dwell on the meaning of their lives. To think.

The *celebration* of the mass.

A rabbi, Sue Levi Elwell, writes in the same way about why people come to synagogue during the high holy days, but she's also naming why and how a lot of us come here:

Sometimes, she says, we're not ready. Yet we show up, in spite of ourselves, in spite of all the voices saying, "There's nothing here for me."

Each of us is here, now, in spite of our ambivalence, our cynicism, our reticence, in spite of, or because of our depleted spirits, our aching souls, our broken hearts, in spite of and because of our physical or psychic pain. We're here, creating community, under this ceiling, under this morning's sky. We're here, gathered with others, in spite of everything.

We've arrived to welcome ourselves and one another into a day. We've come here to imagine together, to sing together, and to dream together. We've come here to celebrate the resilience of the human spirit. We've come to claim the possibility of renewal. We defiantly name today as a day of hope and a day of sacred memory.

This is about knowing what time it is, being oriented, every week, in time and space. Last year, you may remember, we changed our Order of Service on the Sunday after the election, in several small but meaningful ways. That event in our country, in our world, in our being, was a watershed moment and it felt that we should mark it, even though we did not yet understand, and of course we still don't understand, what happened, what's happening and what will happen going forward. We knew that most of us were grieving, angry and afraid, and so no that first

Sunday we added more singing, we added a blessing (more prayer), we acknowledged all year long through those changes that something beyond us and among us had changed mightily and that we would be called as a people, as a church, and one by one, to more courage, more wisdom, more compassion than we had ever imagined. Those changes in our liturgy were a kind of celebration –not joyful, but a deliberate and defiant marking, the way sometimes a memorial service, even the most sorrowful occasion, is infused with these rays of defiance. We will celebrate life in the presence of death, love in the presence of fear; stronger together, in honor of the children the ancestors, and we mean to sing and laugh and dance and work hard and keep on even through our tears. Our tears sanctify the day. That is celebration. If you see something, feel something, know something, even if you have no words yet, say something, do something. Sanctify the day.

A woman writes about attending an event last fall when her heart was heavy and her spirit was not strong. Gabrielle Civil lives in Minneapolis, and she describes a moment at this gathering when the speaking and the speeches stopped, and some dancers appeared:

They came in shimmying, conjuring, undulating, Black women elders in different shapes, different sizes, different hues, different hair. They came in with claps, with a drummer behind them, shaking and rattling, snapping and soothing, They stepped onto the stage, stood behind the music stands, and started to intone. Not church, but something like it. And boy did I need it. As a black feminist poet, a liberal arts professor with a PhD, as a queer-friendly child of an immigrant, the election was rough. The nasty, divisive, acrimonious campaign was rough. Right now is rough, rough meaning scary, poisonous, destructive, a real bummer for real. Let me be clear, the world wasn't perfect before, things were not peachy keen. Still, I woke up on 11/9 not knowing where I was nor whom I could trust. My sense of the national body, the political body, my own black feminist body, was beyond alarmed.

And then they came in shimmying, conjuring, rock steady, un-phased, righteous, ready and maybe a little amused. The movement of these black women elders moves me. This is the time for art, and action, art in action. This is the time not just to stand for justice, resistance and solidarity, but to shimmy for it. This is our moment to become who we are most meant to be. It becomes an experiment in joy.

[This is an excerpt from a longer essay.]

How do you mark the cycles of the moon, the seasons of your sorrow and your joy, whether once in a lifetime or once every day? How do you catch in your hands the arrow that is time, and breathe, and weep, give thanks, take notice? If October's not your Holy Month, what is? If this is not your sacred space, what is? And where's the party? Where have you placed the stones that mark the miles you've travelled, the stones that shine like stars through miles of memory, celebrating the life that you've shaped on this bridge between star-shine and clay? We are here to witness the creation, and abet it.

This is the blessing for rain after drought: says Marge Piercy.

*This is the blessing for sun after rain:
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This is the blessing for the first garden tomato:
This is the blessing for a political victory:
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The discipline of blessings is to taste
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hurt. The art is in compressing attention
to each little and big blossom of the tree
of life.*

*Bless whatever you can.
Attention is love.*

With gratitude to Lisa Sem for the quote adapted from Rabbi Susan Levi Elwell.