



December 2017 Monthly Theme

HOSPITALITY

the practice of belonging

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

Where do we find the spiritual resources to enable ourselves to make space for the unexpected?

Where do we find the courage to open ourselves in welcome of the “other”?

When, where, with whom have you felt like you truly belonged? What was it about that place or situation that welcomed you in so fully?

QUOTATIONS

After all, what can a first impression tell us about someone we've just met for a minute in the lobby of a hotel? For that matter, what can a first impression tell us about anyone? Why, no more than a chord can tell us about Beethoven, or a brushstroke about Botticelli. By their very nature, human beings are so capricious, so complex, so delightfully contradictory, that they deserve not only our consideration, but our *reconsideration*—and our unwavering determination to withhold our opinion until we have engaged with them in every possible setting at every possible hour.

~ Amor Towles, from *A Gentleman in Moscow*

Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.

~ Henri Nouwen

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been - a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

~ Starhawk from *Dreaming the Dark*

POETRY

The Guest House

by Jellaludin Rumi
translated by Coleman Barks

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite
them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Do Not Leave Your Cares at the Door

by Norman V. Naylor
adapted by Elizabeth Alexander

Do not leave your cares at the door.
Do not leave them there when you come into
this place.

Be open to forgiveness and transformation —
Come on in; you are welcome here;
And do not leave your cares at the door.

Bring your pain and sorrow and joy,
There's a place for them upon the altar of life.
Be open to forgiveness and transformation —
Come on in; you are welcome here;
And do not leave your cares at the door.

This is a place of grace,
Of losing and finding the way upon the
winding road,
Meeting and parting,
Stumbling and starting over.
Every journey is sacred here, even yours.

Do not leave your cares at the door.
Do not leave them there when you come into
this place.
Be open to forgiveness and transformation —
Come on in; you are welcome here;
And do not leave your cares at the door.

READINGS & EXCERPTS

~ Excerpt from “How I Met the Tumtum: Toward a Jewish Liberation Theology for All Genders” by Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

Although Jewish Sages often tried to sort the world into binaries, they also acknowledged that not all parts of God’s creation can be contained in orderly boxes. Distinctions between Jews and non-Jews; Shabbat and the days of the week; purity and impurity, are crucial to Jewish tradition. However, it was the parts of the universe that defied binaries that interested the rabbis of the Mishna and the Talmud the most. Pages and pages of sacred texts are occupied with the minute details of the moment between fruit and bud, wildness and domestication, innocence and maturity, the twilight hour between day and night. We read in the Babylonian Talmud: “Our sages taught: As to twilight, it is doubtful whether it is part day and part night or whether all of it is day or all of it is night.

We might have thought that the ambiguity of twilight would have made it dangerous or forbidden within Jewish tradition, since twilight marks the end of one day and start of the next. But, in fact, our Sages determined that dawn and dusk, the in-between moments, are the best times for prayer. Jewish tradition acknowledges that some parts of God’s creation defy categories and that these liminal people, places and things are often the sites of the most intense holiness. After all, the word for holiness in Hebrew, “kedusha”, literally means set aside or out of the ordinary.

Reuben Zellman, a transgender activist and rabbinical student writes: “Twilight cannot be defined; it can only be sanctified and appreciated. People can’t always be defined; they can only be seen and respected and their lives made holy. This Jewish approach allows for genders beyond male and female. It opens space in society. And it protects those who live in the places in between.” (From a sermon at Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, San Francisco, CA, Rosh Hashana 2006.)

The term “Bri’a b’ifnei atzmah” is a classical Jewish legal term for exceptionality. This term is an acknowledgement that not all of creation can be understood within binary systems. It is recognition of the possibility that uniqueness can burst through the walls that demarcate our society. It is also a theological statement — it is a proclamation that God creates diversity that is far too complex for human beings to understand. There are parts of each of us that are uncontainable. Every one of us must be appreciated as a “created being of our own.”

In order to create a just society for people of all genders we need to create new and infinitely diverse “homes” in the fullest sense of the word. Home as an ideal represents the place in the world where we are the safest. Home is a synecdoche for belonging.

The injunction to see one another as “created beings of our own” is the basis of a liberation theology for men, women, transgender people and everyone else: God wants and needs difference and holiness comes from diversity as well as commonality. This theology can liberate all of us from the boundaries that circumscribe our lives. It asks us to throw away the expectations that our bodies or our souls are containable within two categories. It allows us to see each and every other person as a uniquely created being. And it commands us to move through the world embodying and celebrating infinitely diverse manifestations of God’s own image.

~ from the New Story Group of the Waterloo Region, Canada

Perhaps the notion of treating “the other” as an equal, an honored guest, is at the heart of hospitality. At a recent information session for those interested in sponsoring refugees, I was reminded that hospitality is not charity. A true welcome acknowledges that the guest has gifts and skills, rights and choices. Acts of service, no matter how well meaning, that flow from our own sense of superiority have no place in radical welcome. Only through offering respect, care, and deep listening can we open our hearts and homes to strangers among us. Only then can strangers become neighbors and neighbors become friends.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books for adults:

I Wonder As I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey by Langston Hughes

Reaching Out by Henri J.M. Nouwen

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin

Films for adults:

Witness (1985 film)

Chocolat (2001 film)

As Good As it Gets (1997 film)

Resources for Youth:

Counting By 7s by Holly Goldberg Sloan

Old Turtle and the Broken Truth by Douglas Wood

Grandpa’s Soup by Eiko Kadono

Immi’s Gift by Karin Littlewood

Babe (1995 animated film)

Animals United (2012 animated film)

How shall we live?

Be welcoming to all.

~ Mechtild of Magdeburg