

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Return Again

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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First Reading: A Poem Made of Water *Ibtisam Barakat*

The biology teacher said that people,
all people,
are made mostly of water.

And I understood that all of us,
like water,
have been through so much:

Fell from the sky,
spent nights in the middle of a dark ocean,
cleaned dirt out of clothes and dishes of all kinds.

Like water,
we had to freeze in winters
and simmer under covers
and be put in cubes that are hit countless times on kitchen counters,

And I understood why when
someone's tears fall
I fell.

Second Reading *Marni Harmony, UU minister*

I say it touches us that our blood is seawater and our tears are salt,
that the seed of our bodies is scarcely different
from the same cells in a seaweed,
and that the stuff of our bones is like the coral.

I say that the tide rolls in on us, whether we like it or no,
and the sands of time keep running their intended course.

I say we have to go down into the wave's trough to find ourselves,
and ride her swell until we can see beyond ourselves
into our neighbor's eye.

I say that we shall never leave the harbor if we do not hoist the sail.

I say we have got to travel the waves as well as solid ground.
I say that anyone who goes without consciousness of this
will remain chained to a rusty anchor.

May the voyage find us worthy.
May the voyage make us glad.

Return Again

The biology teacher said that people, all people, are made mostly of water. And I understood that all people, like water, have been through so much: fell from the sky, spent dark nights in the dark ocean, freezing in winter and simmering under hot coverings, placed in cubes and smashed on kitchen counters... I understood why when someone's tears fall, I fell.

Ibstisam Barakat is a Palestinian poet. She's a Muslim, she writes in Arabic and English. Here she speaks the language of Universalism and we know it as our own.

I say it touches us, says Marni Harmony, Unitarian Universalist, touches us that our blood is made of seawater and our tears are salt, our bones are like the coral, and the tide rolls in on us, whether we like it or no; the sands of time run their course - and carry us along. She's speaking science here, the language of what's true, and we know that language as our native tongue. These are sacred texts, these kinds of poems.

There's a river somewhere, and it flows through the lives of everyone: it flows through the mountains and the valleys and the meadows of time... We'll sing those words of Roberta Flack in a few minutes, and that too is sacred text- that image of this life, our lives, as rivers flowing from and to the sea, which is one sea.

So often, motion and movement are the metaphors we choose for the spiritual life. In a church like this, where most of us - not all, but most - have come out of some other tradition, or no tradition, that sense of moving on, branching out, seeking, striving, wondering, wandering, is a lively metaphor. We ride the waves of questions and we won't be dammed by easy answers. We won't be damned (in either sense of the word) by easy answers. The old image of the solitary seeker is powerful for us, and it's noble, beautiful; it's necessary. I believe, because I've known it to be true, that the spiritual life is sometimes by definition a solo pilgrimage toward understanding, toward forgiveness, toward hope, toward light, or faith or grace. I do believe, I know, that the old song is right: *You've got to walk that lonesome valley, you've got to walk it by yourself. Ain't nobody here can walk for you; you've got to walk it by yourself.*

And because that's true, because the journey is a lonesome one, and hard, and lifelong, precisely because of this, we choose to go together. *That's what the church is for.* We travel side by side and hand in hand, spelling one another; bearing one another's burdens when we can; lifting up, literally raising, one another's children; learning over time to notice someone struggling. This is the work of social justice and the work of intimate love. We hold each other up and go on all together. That's our promise and our covenant, here, and in our families and marriages, our friendships, neighborhoods, towns, and on this tiny fragile planet. And that covenant becomes a kind of creed, even in this creedless Unitarian Universalist tradition. We join our solitudes in common cause, and cheerfully (awkwardly but willingly) agree to live within a paradox: holding sacred above all the worth and dignity of every individual, and holding sacred above all the interdependent web of all creation, of which each one of us is just a tiny fleeting fragment. We dwell within the challenge and the blessing of that paradox.

That metaphor of journey is beautiful and right, but it is not the only one. We're travelers, but we are also homebodies, finding home, coming home, breathless on the door step, making home and hearth by hand. That's what Sunday morning is for us. *Come in* we say. Religion for us is not *only* about swimming the river; sometimes it's about the shore.

In Islam, the people are called to pilgrimage. Each one must try once in their lifetimes to go to Mecca, no matter how far from Saudi Arabia they live, or how busy they are, or poor, they go, not to pay homage or prove anything, but to reenact the experience of exile: they remember Abraham, Ibrahim, banished to the desert, stumbling all his life toward God, and they re-enact also an even older exile: the expulsion Adam and Eve from paradise, their first and only home. The people feel perhaps a whisper (even now, in the 21st century) of the bewilderment of Adam and Eve, their sense of confusion and lowness and loneliness, clutching their clothes and their children in the cold, traversing the earth and trying always to get home again, to come round right again, which we're all trying all our lives to do, somehow, some way, to turn and to turn and at the end of the day, every day, to come round right. In Muslim tradition, Eve and Adam are at last reconciled with God in Arabia, at Arafat, from the Arabic word meaning "to know." They left the garden without much knowledge from the apples of that famous tree, but they returned in time with wisdom.

Return again, says the chant we sing here often: *return to who you are return to what you are, return to the home of your soul.* We're all on this journey, toward wisdom, toward forgiveness, humility, courage, love, travelling through the mystery and struggle and joy of our days, the beauty and the brokenness, the discord, the dysfunction, the miracles of our days, toward the home of our soul. .

In Jewish tradition, the people place on the door frames of their houses a small container, a little box, a case made of wood or metal, or plastic now, within which is a tiny scroll of paper, called a *mezuzah*. The custom is biblically prescribed: *Thou shalt place on the lintels of your doorways these words*, this sacred scrap of truth. Blessed by rabbis in strict ceremonies, the scrolls unroll to reveal the verse, "*Shema, Israel: Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God is one God...*" It's the single-most important tenet of Hebrew scripture. It's how they know they have come home. The mezuzah should be affixed to your doorframe, or the door of your apartment, or your dorm room or nursing home room, as soon as you move in, before you sleep a single night, but in good Jewish tradition, which accounts for every contingency or excuse or circumstance in the life of every Jew, the law also grants a stay of 30 days to get the mezuzah purchased, blessed and installed, because for so many centuries, Jews have had to move in haste, and coming home for good has not always been an easy thing. In places like New York, there are hundreds, thousands, of old tenements and brownstones, now gentrified into condos and co-ops, with old mezuzahs still on the doorframes, blessing gentile tenants unawares.

If your house kept that custom, what would you write on the scroll? What matters to you most? What reminds you who you are, what text, what verse, what principle, what song, tells you *you are home*, and offers the world a glimpse of your heart?

If this house kept that custom, what words would we inscribe on the frame of the front door to announce what kind of welcome? If not, "the Lord our God is one God," then what?

*Love is the spirit of this church...
Come into this place made holy by your presence...
This is our great covenant...
May peace dwell within our hearts...*

What words could signal “home,” not only to all of us, but to every visitor, every wedding guest and mourner, and each member of our staff, and the UPS delivery person, Brian the furnace guy, and every solitary seeker who sits down in a pew, every queer or trans or gay person young or old who bravely, quietly slips in and wonders all through the hour if the spoken welcome will be lived in practice when the service stops and coffee time begins?

What pronouns signal “I see you, I see you as you are, and in this house, you’re home?”

What prayer, what proclamation, what silent, spoken blessing speaks “sleep well,” to the children and their parents who are staying in our classrooms now, the ones who come through Project Home, because they have no other place?

What would signal “be at home and have no fear,” to the family who are here in sanctuary, who came through the jungle, through the desert, over the border into Texas asking for asylum (a family who would not have done that - you just don’t do that - unless the children are in mortal danger)? What words, in what languages, say *welcome, bienvenidos*, plain and simple in these complicated times? In this moment, we have to be explicit.

How can we inscribe on the lintels of our doorways, and carve into our hearts and tweet out to our followers and spray across our jackets a fierce, defiant, and insistent love: *i really do care, don’t u?* and reclaim and convey through that spiritual sentiment some kind of national conviction and humility and pride for country and homeland – our home?

*I say it touches us that our blood is seawater
and our tears are salt,
that the seed of our bodies is scarcely different
from the same cells in a seaweed, our bones the same as coral.*

*The biology teacher said that people, all people, are made mostly of water,
all the same, and I understood then why I cry when someone’s tears are falling,
and why their laughter makes me laugh.*

Our message here is welcome, welcome home, whether this is your 50th year coming back from summer, or your very first time. Come in, and help us make this house a home.

Summer closed this year for all of us with the marking of mighty passages, right and fitting tributes to leaders and movers and shakers. I’m thinking this morning as we celebrate our dear

Carol, thinking this morning of Aretha Franklin, and the way that music, soul music, brings us safely home. It's rare that people sing out loud together any more, but we do it here, taught by our amazing choir, with Thaxter at the helm. We sing songs of freedom here and songs of struggle, songs of welcome, songs of peace, sorrow songs and love songs for this lovely life. There's a pastor in Michigan, Emily Swan, who in August composed this prayer, comprised just about entirely of lyrics that Aretha Franklin sang, words Aretha prayed as she took us all to church. I invite you to join in a spirit of prayer. Take a breath. Draw deep the breath of life, spirit of life, and be at home in this house, in this circle, at peace in your body and in this moment, now and here.

Breath in peace.

Breath out love.

*When darkness comes
And pain is all around
May you find friends who will lay down for you,
Like a bridge over troubled water*

*When it's been an uphill journey
When it's sure been a long way comin'
When it's been real hard every step of the way
May you believe that your change is come*

*May you discover the joys of receiving R-E-S-P-E-C-T
May you go ridin' on the freeway of love, wind against your back
May you always feel natural—be it a natural woman, a natural man, or naturally gender fluid or non-binary [naural child of god, of holiness, of water, wind and sky]*

*May you never be treated badly by a chain of fools
May you not falter when the river is deep.
May you still believe when the mountain is high.
May you prove unstoppable when the the valley is low.
May you always know the love of God is there waiting for you.*

*Stop trying to be
Someone you're not
Let your mind go, let yourself be free
Because where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is
Freedom (freedom), freedom (freedom)
Freedom, oh freedom*

*We are connected, you and I
And oh, how you are loved
Together, forever, that's how it must be*

*[Say to one another, even to someone you don't know, or you don't like]
say, To live without you
Would only mean heartbreak for me*

*Your time has come to shine
All of your dreams are on their way
See how they shine?
And if you ever need a friend
Look around, we're sailing right behind
Saying a little prayer for you.*

AMEN