

Service Text
Sunday 19 July 2020

PRELUDE

Come Into This Place of Peace - Rev William Schulz; Thaxter Cunio
WBUUC Choir

Share Your Truth – David Heath
WBUUC Choir

Be Here Now – Thaxter Cunio
WBUUC Choir

GIVING VOICE TO THE SPIRIT

Meditation on Breathing
Olam Chesed Yibaneh

WELCOME

Good morning, and welcome everyone, to White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church. We're grateful to share this space with you. Service participants today include Carol Caouette, Rev. Jack Gaede, and Amy Peterson Derrick, supported by Anna Gehres and Erin Scott. Today, after the service at 11:15, we hope that you will join us for Social Hour. Anna will put the Zoom link and easy instructions in the chat box. Welcome to our church. Together we grow our souls and serve the world.

CALL TO WORSHIP from Rebecca Edmiston Lange

Come in.

Come into this space which we make holy by our presence.

Come in with all your vulnerabilities and strengths, fears
and anxieties, loves and hopes, for here you need not hide,
nor pretend, nor be anything other than who you are and
who you are called to be.

Come into this space where we can heal and be healed, forgive and be forgiven.

Come into this space where the ordinary is sanctified,
the human is celebrated, the compassionate is expected.

Come into this space –

Together we make it a holy space.

Our chalice will be lit by Gloria Ferguson.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE Gloria Ferguson

Part of my work in adolescent health was sex education and teacher training.

During one teacher training session, after the group had tried out our activities for teaching about on sexual orientation, a woman in the front row raised her hand and softly said, “I used to be gay but I prayed about it and now I’m not.”

I paused. Everything I knew told me this couldn’t be true. In fact, the belief that you could pray away the gay was a toxic, sometimes deadly myth. But not for her.

It was **her** lived experience. Her truth.

“ I believe you.” I said, “Thank you for telling us. If there is one thing I’ve learned about human sexuality, it’s that we far more complex than we ever imagined. I would ask this: that you believe the many other people whose experiences are so very different from your own.”

She nodded.

Friends, this is hard stuff. But if ever there was a time to listen to one another with open hearts, it’s now. I light the chalice today for the truth inherent in all lived experiences.

OPENING WORDS from James Vila Blake

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another

HYMN Voice Still and Small

STORY The Angry Lady Bug and the Very Polite Spider by Sarah Skochko adapted by Amy Peterson Derrick

As Unitarian Universalists, we seek wisdom from many different sources-- and, for many of us, stories can be a rich source of wisdom. Some of the wisdom tales that we share with one another are old, and some are new--some are retellings of things that have really happened, and some of them are set in imaginary worlds. And, as is the case with this morning’s story, sometimes the stories we share are created to call attention to truths and to call us to hold a tough question together. And so, in that spirit, I’d like to share with you a story called “the Angry Ladybug and the Very Polite Spider.” by Sarah Skochko.

Bugsburg was for everybody. There were caterpillars, and ants, and beetles; there were moths and flies and ladybugs; and everyone lived in harmony together, that is until one day Ant said, “have you all noticed that a lot of bugs have gone missing?”

The Angry Ladybug replied, “oh yeah, didn’t you know? It’s that suspiciously polite spider that just moved in.”

“I beg your pardon” said the spider, who was at that moment chewing on an ant leg, “how dare you,” said the spider, “how dare you accuse me with no proof. I have been nothing but kind to the residents of Bugsburg. Have I ever raised my voice at any of you?”

“well no,” said Caterpillar, “you haven't raised your voice...”

“Yeah, but you HAVE been eating people!” said the angry ladybug.

The spider looked shocked and with his back legs he pushed all the bug leftovers from his lunch behind his web where no one could see.

“I can't believe I'm being treated this way,” said the suspiciously polite spider. “In Bugsborg, of all places. I would have expected better from all of you. Is this who you really want to be?” “I know I don't want to be eaten!” said the angry ladybug.

“You are unbelievably rude.” said the spider

The ladybug stamped three of her feet on one side and said, “Me? Rude? I'm being honest!”

“This is just low,” said the spider, and he crawled back into his web sadly.

The next day, in the town square in Bugsborg there was a poster: “Debate at noon! ladybug versus spider!”

When the ladybug saw this she was shocked. She ran straight to the spider's web and said, “debate?!” I didn't agree to any debate!”

“Wow,” said the polite spider, “so you accuse me in public of eating bugs-- something heinous something no spider would do--”

“I'm pretty sure that's what spiders do...” said the ladybug.

“I digress,” said the spider, “you accuse me in public and then refuse to meet for a reasonable, logical debate in front of everyone in the marketplace of ideas.” “I don't want to get eaten,” said the ladybug.

“Have I ever eaten you?” said the spider

“I'm sorry-- are you picking your teeth with a beetle shell?” the ladybug said “You have no proof that this is a beetle shell...” said the polite spider.

“okay fine!” said the ladybug “what is it we're debating? The fact that you keep eating bugs?”

“I'm not sure that that's up for debate,” said the spider, “have we really established that at all? No, what we're debating today is the trend of ladybugs accusing spiders of things. We're going to get to the bottom of this,” said the spider.

“I'm not sure I want to be in this debate,” said the ladybug.

“Ah,” said the spider to everyone who had assembled, “so you see, the ladybug wants to level accusations at people and then not defend herself. Typical.”

“He does have a point,” said one of the ants, who was, at that moment being eaten by the spider.

“This is ridiculous! You are mean!” shouted the ladybug.

“You're yelling,” said the spider, “You've called me names-- we can see who's in the right here.” The ladybug stomped off.

And so, the bugs in Bugsborg kept right on disappearing, until one day, no one was left to question the suspiciously polite spider. And so, the spider packed up his web and went to another town.

“Do you have any references from Bugsburg?” they said. “Before we let you move in we'd like to know everything went well.”

“Well,” said the spider, “have you heard anything bad about me from the residents of Bugsburg?”

“Well, no...” said the chief ant in AntsVille. And - they let him move in.

I wonder--who was in the right? The angry ladybug? or the very polite spider?

MEDITATION

Will you join me in a spirit of prayer?

Draw deep the breath of life, be at home in your body,
Eyes open or eyes closed,
Be at home in your space, your homemade sanctuary,
And be at home in our community
Physically distant and yet we are together.

Breathe in
Breathe out.

Spirit of life and love,
God of many names and beyond all naming,
Steady us and center us in this disoriented time.
Recall, to us what we cherish, what we love,
What matters, what we trust.

This morning we hold those who are lonely in their isolation
Who long for human touch and laughter, easy conversation,
We hold those who are sick in body or spirit or mind And
those caring for loved ones who need help.
We hold those who live every day with mental illness, anxiety , depression, And
those who live with chemical addictions in themselves and those they love.
May there be healing, may this be a peaceful day.

We hold children who are lonesome this summer, or bored, or afraid And
we hold parents and teachers who are worried about school in the fall, In
this time when no choice feels like a good choice.

For those most vulnerable as this pandemic rages on, prayers of hope.

May you stay safe.

For those who are scared about money now, prayers of courage.

May all of us learn to ask for help and offer it,

For both are signs of our tender humanity,

And we need tenderness now.

For a few moments, breathing in and out,

Trusting we are bound in love to one another and the holy We'll

hold silence together.

Amen.

OFFERING

This morning we're beginning a practice of monthly special collections for justice partners our congregation has supported all along. Today's offering will support Project Home, neighbor families living with homelessness. You can learn more in our ENews tomorrow and on our website. And here's an update from our Project Home team. They need us more than ever.

OFFERTORY VIDEO: Margie Schmidt for Project Home

Hi, I'm Margie Schmidt. Sue Will and I were the coordinators of Project Home last year for WBUUC. We had over 100 volunteers that helped us to give overnight shelter to families who were experiencing homelessness.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Project Home lost all of its church partners because of safety reasons. What didn't change is the number of families who are experiencing homelessness.

Last week, Project Home moved their 39 families from a gymnasium in a church basement to a hotel in St. Paul to make it a safer environment for family members. They also increased the number of family members they will support from 40 to 80. Because of this, Project Home needs our support now more than ever. Please be generous with your donations today. Thank You.
Offertory Music Carol Caouette and Craig Hansen

READINGS

The first reading is from Reinhold Niebuhr, a Christian theologian and thinker writing in the context of fascism during the 1930s:

“Liberal religion has a dogma and it views the contemporary world through the eyes of this dogma... The dogma is that the world is gradually growing better and that the inevitability of gradualness guarantees our salvation... It has given a note of romantic and unreal optimism to the preaching of the liberal church and has prevented it from making any realistic estimate of the moral problems of our day....It is the business of true religion to preach judgment without reducing [folks] to despair and to preach hope without tempting [them] to complacency.”

The second reading is a 1973 poem by Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist warrior-poet:

“Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap”

It is a waste of time hating a mirror
or its reflection instead of
stopping the hand that makes
glass with distortions slight
enough to pass unnoticed until
one day you peer into your face
under a merciless white light
and the fault in a mirror slaps back
becoming what you think
is the shape of your error
and if I am beside that self
you destroy me or if you
can see the mirror is lying
you shatter the glass
choosing another blindness
and slashed helpless
hands.

Because at the same time
down the street a glassmaker is
grinning turning out new
mirrors that lie
selling us
new clowns
at cut rate.

MUSIC The Path You Walk Upon by Member Cathy Dalton

The WBUUC Choir, directed by Thaxter Cunio

SERMON The Joy and Challenge of Learning

Rev. Jack Gaede

Today's sermon is about the joy and challenge of learning. I want to give you the quick summary ahead of time so that you won't be surprised where this path will take us. In online lingo, this is called the TL:DR (Too Long, Didn't Read). We're going to redefine sin, separate shame from guilt, get rid of shame, and then brainstorm ways not to get stuck in guilt but rather use it to propel us toward education and action. We'll talk briefly about what it means to be a lifelong learner and how important it is not to pretend that we have it all figured out. We will take the word judgment (which sounds too harsh and shame-based) and reframe it as discernment. We'll celebrate it as a strength, and then re-read that Reinhold Niebuhr quote. We will talk through a few versions of self-inflicted nonsense that might be hurting us, and we'll get rid of them. And then we'll talk about America and the ways that its institutions and systems are failing and harming people. We will be hearing from multiple sources, because America has problems and too many of our fellow citizens are hurting, and it's gone on far too long. But remember my job is to preach about how to judge (or discern) some collective moral failings without reducing you to despair AND to preach hope without tempting you to complacency. That's my goal. Okay, here goes.

When I hear the word sin, my mind instantly races back to catechism classes, where I learned about the doctrine of original sin. I learned that before I had ever even committed any sins, I was already marked by sin. In other words, I learned not just that I had committed sins, but that I was sin--I contained sin. In my family's religious tradition, they baptized infants to remove that stain of original sin. When I got older, I started to question and challenge this doctrine. I didn't use these words then, but this moment was the beginning of my path toward theological universalism.

In my later years, I did the important work of distinguishing between shame and guilt. Shame is feeling bad about who you are, whereas guilt is feeling bad about what you have done. Shame is about your identity and your character; guilt is about your actions. Since I no longer believed in the doctrine of original sin, I had to begin the process of untangling from the feelings of shame that had been wrapped up with it. One very helpful antidote is that the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

And now having said that, we look again at the word sin. Its basic definition is of missing the mark, of making a mistake. It doesn't have to hold the weight of the world now that it's divorced from potential feelings of shame or worthlessness that might come with original sin. It feels easier to handle if the word "sin" is simply the way we talk about the mistakes we have made or the harm that we've caused (whether intentionally or unintentionally). We might feel guilty about the mistakes we have made, and we must figure out how to avoid getting stuck in the fragility of our guilt. And why would it be so tempting to get stuck in our guilt? Because it is HARD to admit when we have been wrong or when we missed the mark.

I recently asked a small group of people the following question: When was a recent time when learning was joyful? Some people had a hard time answering. I think for many people the process of learning requires humility and an openness to admit that we missed a few things the

first time around. This learning process also occasionally involves unlearning a few false narratives. And for many people, this is the point where shame and embarrassment sneak in. How can we send shame packing while we move forward instead into a space where we can bring our new framework, find some new stories, and some new truths?

The big question here is around judgment--but not the wrathful, shame-wrapped, capital J judgment that many people think of first. Judgment in the sense of discernment. Judgment without a sense of shamefulness. Not a judgment that undercuts our inherent worth and dignity, but judgment that recognizes that we are human and limited and imperfect. We make mistakes and we can choose to learn from them. But that learning requires humility, and we need to admit that we have a problem with what Pastor Danny Givens calls S.I.N. ("self-inflicted nonsense").

But how do we do all this humility-requiring work without losing sight of our inherent worth and dignity? In her 2018 comedy special *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby argues persuasively against a comedy centered on self-deprecating and self-effacing jokes. She explains that self-deprecation disguises itself as humility when it is actually much closer to humiliation. She discussed her own history of telling fat jokes or making jokes about her body, and she got to a point where she had learned to love her body despite what the impossible beauty standards of the world were telling her. Those jokes just stopped working, and she couldn't tell them without confirming that the world's perception of her was accurate and her body was worth laughing at. But she refused to be the joke--she was basically starting the work of dismantling skinny supremacy.

This journey for Gadsby took a while, and she has quite a few documented years of comedy where she was utilizing and displaying a form of comedy and jokes that she no longer believes in. She almost gave up comedy for a while, because she had been telling herself a specific story of what comedy was and could be and maybe even should be. But in the end, she found it unhelpful and politely showed it to the door.

When she was ready to give up that false mythology and tell a new story, she gave up that kind of comedy and found a new form. With a recent diagnosis of autism, she started her second show with an explanation (and celebration) of how her brain works, while weaving together jokes, cultural critique, and art history. Her move from self-deprecation to self-acceptance and celebration was powerful.

If you haven't seen *Nanette* or her second special *Douglas*, please consider them highly recommended.

This process of reclaiming the way one is perceived and smashing any false narratives or distortions is a primary theme in the work of Audre Lorde. She was negatively impacted by the intersecting marginalizations of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism. I'm not sure who exactly inspired the origins of the *Angry Ladybug*, but I do know that the work of Audre Lorde has helped a lot of folks of all genders know and name, own and claim their anger and their outrage in healthy and productive ways. In describing her time at an academic conference where she was speaking out of direct and particular anger, a white woman told her, "Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you." But Audre Lorde knew that it wasn't

actually her manner of speech that kept the other woman from hearing but the threat of a message that may compel her to change her life.

In her poem “Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap,” she reframes the conversation from the personal to the political, from the individual to the systemic. When a person looks at a mirror and doesn’t like what she sees, Audre Lorde challenges her to interrogate the value and strength of the mirror. Before instantly hating the reflection or the mirror itself, she invites the reader to think about the glassmaker who might be purposefully adding barely perceptible distortions to the mirror, which is essentially gaslighting.

if you can see
the mirror is lying you
shatter the glass choosing
another blindness and
slashed helpless hands.

Because at the same time
down the street
a glassmaker is grinning
turning out new mirrors that lie
selling us
new clowns
at cut rate.

The only question that remains for me is how do you train your eye to see the barely distinguishable distortions. And how do we trust the prophets of our age when they tell us about the distortions? Hannah Gadsby warned against self-deprecation and Audre Lorde warned against deprecation by society.

There is another danger hidden underneath all this shame-free space, and that is the danger of toxic positivity. Toxic positivity is the uninterrogated, desperately held desire to have a positive spin on everything--even the worst of things. When confronted with grief or a loss (your own or someone else’s), the first move of toxic positivity is toward finding a silver lining or fixing it or (even worse) denying it. This impulse was discussed 90 years ago by Reinhold Niebuhr: “Liberal religion has a dogma and it views the contemporary world through the eyes of this dogma... The dogma is that the world is gradually growing better and that the inevitability of gradualness guarantees our salvation... It has given a note of romantic and unreal optimism to

the preaching of the liberal church and has prevented it from making any realistic estimate of the moral problems of our day..”

This impulse is especially problematic when it prevents people from seeing with plain sight the moral problems of our day or listening to our contemporary prophets. Some people are failing to adequately see and understand the ways that our systems and our institutions are harming our fellow citizens--and it's gone on far too long. It's hard to name and own this collective misstep or even to know how to hold our collective guilt and how to channel those feelings into action--acts of repair, repentance, and reform. But that is the work we're called to do right now. Let's not just get stuck in a place of guilt or fragility. Let's push beyond into the beautiful uncertainty of what new systems can look like--systems that are less flawed, where oppression and distortion aren't so baked into the glass of the mirrors.

South African pastor and bishop Peter Storey said, "American preachers have a task more difficult, perhaps, than those faced by us under South Africa's apartheid, or [even] Christians under Communism. We had obvious evils to engage; you have to unwrap your culture from years of red, white and blue myth. You have to expose, and confront, the great disconnection between the kindness, compassion and caring of most American people, and the ruthless way American power is experienced, directly and indirectly, by the poor of the earth. You have to help good people see how they have let their institutions do their sinning for them. This is not easy among people who really believe that their country does nothing but good, but it is necessary, not only for their future, but for us all."

Okay, let's just take a breath for a second and remember that we've separated shame from guilt and we've redefined sin. So let's hear that quote again in that context: "You have to help good people see how they have let their institutions do their sinning for them." This is a hard truth, but we must hear it. Have you noticed your institutions do your sinning for you? Maybe you've never lifted a finger against a person or spoken a violent word, but what if you don't speak out against unnecessary or disproportionate state-sanctioned violence against a specific group of people? It is a hard truth, but we still have children living in cages in this country. Complicity or silence in the face of taxpayer-funded violence is a problem--I'll even go so far as to call it a sin; it's absolute self-inflicted nonsense. Complicity interweaves with complacency, and we need a fiery holy outrageous hope to fight against that complacency.

It takes a radical hope to believe in a future where it would be possible that all people could be treated equally. But first we have to admit that people aren't being treated equally. This week, I stumbled across a very helpful but dense, 16-word definition of racism from Professor Ruth Wilson Gilmore. She defines racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." Let's break that down, starting from the end. Vulnerability to premature death is the main measure that she uses to figure out if a system is racist. When one group is differentiated from another group as to their vulnerability to premature death, she sees a problem. And the bigger problem she sees is the production and the exploitation of that group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. But then the final component needed for us to wrap our minds around the enormity of the problem of systemic and institutional racism is when that production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death is state-sanctioned and/or extralegal. Whether it is within or

