



September 2020 Monthly Theme

# PRESENCE

*the practice of Knowing Your Place*

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*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](http://wbuuc.org/themes) or sign up for a circle at [wbuuc.org/classes](http://wbuuc.org/classes).*

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## QUESTIONS

What has been your experience of being fully present in a moment?

Is home a place or a feeling? How does your presence change that?

What is the mind or physical space you inhabit when you know you're in the place that is right for you?

## QUOTATIONS

As you walk and eat and travel, be where you are. Otherwise you will miss most of your life. —The Buddha

Drink your tea slowly and reverently, as if it is the axis on which the world earth revolves – slowly, evenly, without rushing toward the future. Live the actual moment. Only this moment is life. —Thich Nhat Hanh

If you must look back, do so forgivingly. If you must look forward, do so prayerfully . However, the wisest thing you can do is to be present in the present. Gratefully. — Maya Angelou

## POETRY

### Royal Guest

Stop acting like a beggar,

Know your place fool.

You're a royal guest, a royal guest—

That has been sent to this beautiful illusion.

—Rafy Rohaan

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only dance.  
I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say *where*.  
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time. (T. S. Eliot 1952)

### **Sheltered in Place**

You watch your boy struggle with giving  
up the turtle, returning it to the pond  
where he'd found it on a walk—  
first time you'd all been out in days.  
How thoughtful he thought he'd been,  
making it a home in the home  
where the family sheltered in place.  
How he cared for his armored friend.  
Having picked flowers, knowing they'd die,  
you understand the urge to pluck  
the exotic, the beautiful—any diversion  
from fear, which is in itself a disease.  
That morning, you helped your boy  
give up the idea of living forever. —Richard Levine

## **READINGS & EXCERPTS**

### **A Meditation**

As we go about our daily business, our energies often become scattered. While anticipating what the day holds, we may also think about the past or future - perhaps some recent triumph, an action that we regret, or a future conversation. These attachments to other times leach your energy and distract your attention from your experience in the moment. Visualize these attachments as anchors, which are weighing you down. Now imagine these anchors dissolving away, freeing you to be fully conscious of the present. —From 1001 Meditation

### **From The Blue Zones Kitchen by Dan Buettner**

Blue zones residents have a sense of purpose (the Okinawans call it *ikigai*, and then Nicoyans, *plan de vida*). Their lives are imbued with meaning from age 10 to age 100, and their brand of purpose is not just hobbies or golf. It also includes a sense of responsibility: for their community, family, or the next generation.

The word “retirement” doesn’t exist in the native Okinawan dialect. Instead *ikigai*, or “a reason for being,” imbues every adult life. Having a strong sense of purpose is associated with about eight extra years.

Other longevity advantages include the Okinawan propensity to support each other by forming *moais*, or committed social circles, and by practicing *yumaru*, the spirit of mutual aid. Traditionally, Okinawan peasants didn’t have access to bank loans, so they’d form groups of 5 to 8

people and agreed to meet regularly. At each meeting, moai members would chip in a sum of money to be given to the member with the greatest need. Through the middle of the 20th century, moais helped the community, providing aid to farmers needing to buy seed or cover in the medical costs of a sick child. While moais are still popular in Okinawa, they're now mostly a social affair and an excuse together around a meal. Nevertheless, the bond is authentic, and moai members tend to support each other, literally and figuratively. This ancient practice helps prevent loneliness, an increasingly prevalent element in the modern world that can be as bad for your health as a smoking habit.

### **From Michelle Obama's Podcast Higher Ground, in conversation with Barack Obama**

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA - It's interesting when I look back, all of us were from broken homes. All of us were working-class to middle-class, at least from an income perspective, but we were going to a school that had a lot a lot of rich kids. We had to share and improvise, right? So, Greg – he lived on one side of town. The school where we went was a lot closer to my grandparent's apartment. So, he'd sleep at either my place or Mike Ramos' place most of the week. And my grandparents fed him.

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA – Fed him.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA – And Mike Ramos' mom looked after him and made sure his clothes were clean. You know, his dad was working, Greg's dad was a hard-working guy. The point is... to some degree... We built our own community.

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA - You know that at the core of everything you have done politically, what I know about you as a person and one of the reasons why I fell in love with you is...

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA – It wasn't just my looks... but that's okay...

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA – You're cute you know... But no, one of the reasons I fell in love with you is because you are guided by the principle that we are each other's brother's and sister's keepers. And that's how I was raised!

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA – Mm hmm.

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA - I mean, my values, in terms of what I think my obligation – my personal obligation – Michelle Obama – is that it is not enough that I succeed on my own. I have to care about the kid in the desk next to me at school because he's just as smart but his mom works. And my father always kind of taught us to take in everybody's full story. Not to judge people, the drunk uncle or the cousin out of work...

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA – Cause you didn't know what was happening...

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA – You didn't know what happened to them. You know, we weren't special. And as a result, you know if something good happens to you, if you have an advantage, you don't hoard it. You share it. You reach out. You give back.

And I can say that my family, my neighborhood, my notion of community growing up shaped that view and shaped the choices that I made in life as I felt your experiences shaped yours.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA - I think I figured out once I got to school that if I am chasing after my own success, that somehow, I am going to end up alone and unhappy.

## **A Sacred Place by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon**

To the ancients, as well as to many contemporary seekers, the world is alive with spirit. The surrounding landscape is infused with creativity and meaning and each place and each place speaks to us of the divine:

*Every day is a god, each day is god  
and holiness holds forth in time... —Annie Dillard*

This notion of a richly sacralized world may seem strange to the mainstream western culture. We live in a secular landscape. We have been taught to identify the sacred primarily through cathedrals, churches, and temples. The rest of the Earth is considered real estate—a mere “it” to be used as a resource for our benefit. This effort to desacralize the world, dispel its sacred aura, is what made possible our commercial relationship to the land. It has allowed us to plunder the natural world, destroying places of more power and beauty than we will ever be able to recreate.

We must reacquaint ourselves with the immanence of the spirit in the natural world. They are filled with a deep love of the Earth and awe in the presence of its mystery. They remind us that every notion we have of the spirit has been shaped by our experience of this Earth. If we have a wonderful sense of the divine it is because we live amid such awesome magnificence. As the Passionist priest Thomas Berry observes, “If we lived on the moon, our mind and emotions, our speech, our imagination, our sense of the divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape.” Clearly the Earth is our primary revelatory environment. Our most sacred scripture is the “holy book” of Nature.

*It is written on then arched sky,  
It looks out from every star...  
It is spread out like a legible language upon the  
broad face of an unsleeping ocean.*

*It is the poetry of Nature,  
It is that which uplifts the spirit within us...—John Ruskin*

While the distinction between spirit and matter is valid, no one can separate the two, no one can draw a line between them. Spirit and matter are not two different realms of reality, two different layers of the universe. One and the same reality will be material or spiritual depending on how we approach it. No matter where we immerse ourselves in the stream of reality, we can touch the spiritual source of all that is natural.

From this perspective the Earth is a bountiful community of living beings of which we are only one part. And each living being has an inner presence and dignity apart from any value we humans may place upon it. While certain places always have been recognized for the powerful presence of their unique localities or landforms, these places are not isolated entities. All the physical things that make up our daily life share a common spiritual reality—as such they are all to be revered and respected.

## **PODCASTS**

***Nice White Parents***, a new podcast from Serial Productions and The New York Times, about the 60-year relationship between white parents and the public school down the block.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/podcasts/nice-white-parents-serial.html>