

Full Text of the Service at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, September 13 2020

PRELUDE MUSIC

Come Into This Place of Peace - William Schulz/Thaxter Cunio (WBUUC Choir)
Circle Round for Freedom (WBUUC Choir directed by Thaxter Cunio)

GIVING VOICE TO THE SPIRIT

Look To the People - Ruth Pelham

We're gonna look to the people for courage
In the hard times comin' ahead
We're gonna sing and shout, we're gonna work it on out
In the hard times comin' ahead
With the People's Courage (3X)
We can make it.

We're gonna look to the people for power
In the hard times comin' ahead
We're gonna sing and shout, we're gonna work it on out
In the hard times comin' ahead
With the People's Power (3X)
We can make it.

We're gonna look to the people for justice
In the hard times comin' ahead
We're gonna sing and shout, we're gonna work it on out
In the hard times comin' ahead
With the People's Justice (3X)
We can make it.

We're gonna look to the CHILDREN for courage
In the hard times comin' ahead
We're gonna sing and shout, we're gonna work it on out
In the hard times comin' ahead
With the Children's Courage
With the Children's Wisdom
For the Children's Future
We can make it.

I am Willing - Holly Near

I am open and I am willing

for to be hopeless would seem so strange.
It dishonors those who go before us
so lift me up to the light of change.

There's a hurting in my family,
there is a sorrow in my town,
there's a panic in the nation,
there is wailing the whole world round.

May the children see more clearly,
may the elders be more wise,
may the winds of change caress us
even though it burns our eyes.

Give me a mighty oak to hold my confusion,
give me a desert to hold my fears.
give me a sunset to hold my wonder,
give me an ocean to hold my tears.

I am open and I am willing
for to be hopeless would seem so strange.
It dishonors those who go before us
so lift me up to the light of change.

WELCOME

Good morning, and welcome everyone, to White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church. I am Lisa Borg, serving on your Board of Directors.

We are a congregation in the free faith tradition, a community of youth, adults and children, dedicated to pluralism in the spiritual search and ethics grounded in action.

We're especially happy to welcome members and friends of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Charleston, West Virginia, joining us this morning. Welcome, friends! Service participants today include Victoria Safford, Amy Peterson Derrick, Sara Goodman, and Carol Caouette, supported by Anna Gehres and Erin Scott. Music today is from Carol Caouette and Craig Hansen, the WBUUC Choir directed by Thaxter Cunio, and Margo Berg.

Today, after the service at 11:15, we hope that you will join us for Cyber Social Hour. We'll put the Zoom link and easy instructions in the chat box.

Also today - we're holding our annual backpack blessing here at Maple Street this afternoon, in the parking lot. Stop by in your car for a drive-by greeting from church staff; we'll have ribbons for your backpack, hearts for your windows, and hymnals to take home. Come anytime between 2 and 4 pm. Info is on Facebook and the website.

Finally, a word about next Sunday, when we'll reimagine a familiar and beloved ritual: the Water Communion. We invite you to participate in any of these ways: send us a photo, by Tuesday, of water that quenches your spirit and replenishes your soul, whether from an outdoor space or from your kitchen sink. Bring water here, in a sealed container, and leave it on the table by the church front doors before Sunday, with a note about its source; and finally, and most importantly, plan to bring a little bowl of water to your worship space next week - just set it on the table near your chalice and computer (though not close enough to spill).

Welcome to our church. Together we grow our souls and serve the world.

Singing bowl

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Rebecca Edmiston Lange, adapted)

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.

Lisa Sem will light the chalice.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

OPENING WORDS (in unison)

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 Gather the Spirit by Jim Scott *Singing the Living Tradition #347*

Gather the spirit, harvest the power.

Our separate fires will kindle one flame.

Witness the mystery of this hour.

Our trials in this light appear all the same

Gather in peace, gather in thanks,

Gather in sympathy now and then.

Gather in hope, compassion, and strength
Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit of heart and mind.
Seeds for the sowing are laid in store.
Nurtured in love and conscience refined,
With body and spirit united once more.

Gather in peace, gather in thanks,
Gather in sympathy now and then.
Gather in hope compassion and strength
Gather to celebrate once again.

Gather the spirit, growing in all,
Drawn by the moon and fed by the sun.
Winter to Spring, and Summer to Fall,
The chorus of life resounding as one.

STORY

MEDITATION

Join me in the spirit of meditation or prayer.

Take a few deep breaths and find a comfortable place for your body. Listen for your connection to the earth and to each other.

Today, all that is and all that will be, spirit of life, connector of all beings, we invite your presence among us, between us, filling up the empty spaces.

Today when so many people, and so much of our earth are hurting, we welcome your healing presence.

When we've looked back and remembered the dead of 19 years ago, and remembered the unfathomable truth of losing exponentially more lives from Covid-19 in six months, when we have lost or will soon be saying goodbye to loved ones, we invite your grieving presence to share in our sorrow.

When we look to the earth and find hurricanes, flooding, tornados, extreme heat and wildfires, unrelenting, massive, destructive effects of climate change, we invite your transforming presence into our hearts, recognizing the desperate need to do whatever we can to stop things getting worse.

When we look into the eyes of our beloveds, our animal companions, our best friends over zoom, our family members, our partners, ourselves, we invite your adoring presence, amplifying and expanding the love we feel.

Now in all our separate places, in all our interconnectedness, in all of our joys and sorrows, we invite your presence, and we all name our beloveds aloud or in our hearts, knowing that they, like us, are held in your web of connection and love. Amen.

OFFERING

In these times, your financial support for our congregation matters more than ever. Please be generous!

OFFERTORY Blessing of Love (performed by Margo Berg)

May the blessing of love be upon you, and may peace abide with you.

May God's presence illuminate your heart, now and forever more.

READINGS

Homesteading

Joyce Sutphen

Long ago, I settled on this piece of mind,
clearing a spot for memory, making a
road so that the future could come and go,
building a house of possibility.

I came across the prairie with only
my wagonload of words, fragile stories
packed in sawdust. I had to learn how
to press a thought like seed into the ground;

I had to learn to speak with a hammer,
how to hit the nail straight on. When
I took up the reins behind the plow,
I felt the land, threading through me,
stitching me into place.

from John O'Donohue

Awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

Have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.

Receive encouragement when new frontiers beckon.

Respond to the call of your gift and the courage to follow its path.

Let the flame of anger free you of all falsity.

May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame.
May anxiety never linger about you.
May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul.
Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention.
Be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.
May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.

MUSIC I Knew This Place by Dave Mallett

I knew this place, I knew it well
Every sound and every smell
And every time I walked I felt
For the first two years or so
There across the grassy yard
I, a young boy runnin' hard
Brown and bruised and battle
Scarred and lost in sweet illusion

From my window I can see
The fingers of an ancient tree
Reaching out it calls to me
To climb its surly branches
But all my climbing days are gone
And these tired legs I'm standin' on
Would scarcely dare to leave the spot upon
Which they are standin'

And I remember every word
From every voice I ever heard
Every frog and every bird
Yes, this is where it starts
A brother's laugh, the sighing wind
This is where my life begins
This is where I learned to use my
Hands and hear my heart

This house is old, it carries on
Like lyrics to an old time song
Always changed but never gone
This house can stand the seasons
Our lives pass on from door to door
Dust upon the wooden floor
Feather rain and thunder roar
We need not know the reason

And all these thoughts come back to
Me like ships across a friendly sea
Like breezes blowing endlessly
Like rivers running deep
The day is done. The lights are low
The wheels of life are turning slow
And as these visions turn and go
I lay me down to sleep

SERMON Blessing the House

When I come into this building now, this house, and especially into this room, I can't help but think of an old children's rhyme:

*Here is the church
(It has no steeple)
Open the doors
And see all the people...*

...except, of course there's no one here. If I close my eyes, I see you clearly, but otherwise, I don't. What I see is this.... a room filled with light and emptiness. One thing I've learned in these six months is that churches are meant to hold congregations. It's made holy by your presence, consecrated by the physical, incarnate presence of noisy, messy, weeping, laughing people, bodies and beliefs bumping into one another, shoulders, stories side by side in random and deliberate encounters, all that sparky magic. It's made holy by the trust it takes to cross the threshold, to come inside, come home here even if you've never been before, come in, come out as who you truly are. It's made holy by the presence of your love and hope and faith and doubt and self-doubt, your singing and your grief and gladness, tangible, touchable presence - not by the presence of a few spiders and ladybugs and maybe a mouse (I think). Holy beings all, but they can't bless the house. They're here helping us hold space for you, until you can come home.

In April one of the architects who built this space sent a note to ask how we're all doing. A photo of this building sits over his desk. I wrote back all those months ago:

Moving through these quiet spaces now, I find my relationship with the building deepening. It holds silence softly, and invitingly. The light is a presence, even more than before, and even (especially?) on overcast days, or at twilight, or on Sundays before the sun is over the horizon. Birds and deer, small animals, neighborhood dogs so proud of slipping their collars or jumping their fence, raccoons and bunnies at night, are all coming closer in, even if I'm in the glass alcove, in full view.

And as ever, it is a haunted house. The presence of the dead has always been a quiet companioning here; I think that's true in every church and temple. But now the living are here, too – their longing and love and their laughter, their hopes and fears and busy agendas, all held safe between the walls, awaiting the day when the people come back.

Buildings aren't built to be vacant, right? This one is patient, settling onto the land, shining rust red against the budding trees and sky.

That was almost 6 months ago now.

Amy's story is a favorite one, about the lanterns, all the many lights the people bring, all the many lights you've brought, and you will bring again. On days when yours is dim you know and you can trust that you'll be warmed and guided by the lights that others shine. That's really what the church is for. But what can that mean now? If we had a steeple bell to call you back, it would not be ringing now, not ye. How do we bless the house, how do we bless each other, how do we even be a congregation, if we can't be together?

Years ago, when Ross and Hope and I first came to Minnesota, we spent a week here first, in the spring before we moved, me in interviews with committees all day, and them driving around trying to find a house for us. We left with the job in hand but no house, and as the time drew close for us to move out here for real that summer, we started to get worried, especially once we sold our house back east and announced that we were leaving. One night someone called us, a member of this congregation, and said there maybe might be something, not quite yet on the market, and they sent some photos, and then a video (this was all by snail mail, right? Excruciating..) and I don't remember exactly how this all went down, but we called back and said, "Ok, we'll take it," sight unseen - and we realized then, and even more a few weeks later, when we pulled into the driveway and opened the door and stepped inside that house for the first time, we knew that home had travelled with us, inside us, among us, our little tiny family. We knew we wouldn't find it there, in this lovely but unfamiliar building. We would place it there, lay it down with the boxes and the furniture, the dishes and the stories, and we would open the windows and open the doors to let new stories come and new people be our guests.

I'm remembering, too, something that was said here on the Sunday morning in 2007 when the congregation moved, literally stood up and walked across the hall, out of the old meeting room (now the Social Hall) into this new space, the Sanctuary. Ann Bushnell who joined the church with her husband Bill in 1966, stood before the people and told them what she'd actually already said, years and years before, when the congregation moved up the street, from the little church on Mahtomedi Avenue into this ginormous building, in 1990. She said, so firmly and so reassuringly, "We don't have to worry. Change is hard. This will feel different, and it will be. But it will also be the same, because we're taking ourselves with us." I wasn't here in 1990, but I remember that morning in 2007 when the congregation rose, the choir singing, and someone picked up the chalice, still alight, and carried it across the Atrium. They – you – were not seeking a new home, but a place to set home down.

There are people coming now, to online classes and to “church,” who’ve never been inside this building. Some have never seen it. Some have joined the congregation. They have found a home here; not “here,” but h-e-r-e, with you. All together, we are learning what this means, deciding and defining what this means, in this new time. You decide what welcome means, you who’ve been here for a while – how will you embrace them? You decide together what belonging means, and how you’re going to find each other and share your stories and lay down the new foundation of your common home, your post-pandemic home. Whether you’ve been here since 1966, or since August, you’re building it together, the house you will return to. Every time you join an online gathering it gets a little stronger.

Joyce Sutphen’s poem is called Homesteading. It reminds me of how people come into churches, and new communities of all kinds, stamping our feet on the threshold, hoping somebody will let us in:

*Long ago, I settled on this piece of mind,
clearing a spot for memory, making a
road so that the future could come and go,
building a house of possibility.*

*I came across the prairie with only
my wagonload of words, fragile stories
packed in sawdust. I had to learn how
to press a thought like seed into the ground;*

Think back to when you first came to this church, in person or online, how you came with your stories and your hope.

*I had to learn to speak with a hammer,
how to hit the nail straight on. When
I took up the reins behind the plow,
I felt the land, threading through me,
stitching me into place.*

More than anything these days, I think about that sense of belonging that so many of you have said over the years is what matters, that sense of knowing your place, and I wonder how you’re holding it now, nurturing it, cherishing it, remembering. I wonder what you’ll need this year to keep that sense alive, and I hope you’ll tell me, call me up, write to me, come by the window, and tell me, tell us, what would help you stay connected to your church for the long haul, the long, long haul we’re in? It is so hard, sometimes it feels impossible, to be a people apart. But we can do it.

Every week I hear people say how hard it is on Zoom – exhausting, cold, two-dimensional, confounding – more often than not, I’m the one complaining. And every week, I hear someone, usually one of you, telling us how grateful they are, to connect with their out-of-state older parents on the screen, or their children, or their children’s school. People tell us every week how, strangely, on Zoom, they’re having deeper conversations - at Cyber Social Hour , say – than ever in the Social Hall on Sunday, with its unintentionally closed cliques and clusters of old friends. These virtual spaces even us out – it doesn’t matter if you’ve ever been inside the church. Maybe we’re learning, in this time apart, how to better together. Maybe we can learn.

When this room was being built, actually when it was being built in our imagination, and we were still raising money for it, I remember the president of the congregation, Katy Lowery, telling the people, telling some of you, “We will bless it -bless the building, bless the house – bless it by the use we put it to.” And if you close your eyes for a moment and think of the spaces you’ve known here (either in person or maybe pictures on the website), think of this space, the sanctuary, and the Social Hall, and the classrooms and kitchens, think of conversations in the bathrooms, and Thaxter in the balcony, people cooking on a Wednesday night, a chalice in a classroom, and a circle of children who’ve been here all their lives, meetings of the men’s group on a Tuesday afternoon, ordinations, installations, memorials for our beloved dead, so many now, and weddings, and parties and vigils and all those nights with Project Home, and our sanctuary family, Cati, Mirian and Julio: you have blessed the house by all these uses you have put it to, and it has blessed you in return. What I see in my mind is all these uses of a building- a center for learning, growing, risking, working, justice-making, truth telling, music, art, the cracking open of hearts and minds and conscience, rituals of healing and forgiveness, lamentation, learning to pray, learning to live with more integrity and joy – all of these are little lights that you’ve all taken out now, lanterns carried way beyond the building, into your own homes, into your workspaces, your neighborhoods, all the real and virtual communities you’re part of far from here. It’s as if the Corten-steel and concrete walls were lowered down like drawbridges, and the roof opened like a skylight, the whole thing opened like a box, and all the light the house was holding in has gone out with you, in a good way, shining all over the places you go – your own house, mostly, your family, your heart. Whatever you came seeking here has travelled home with you, for safekeeping for a while and your job is to spread it all around and some day bring it back, burning even brighter.

Some years ago, a Quaker mystic edited a lovely book called *Some Fruits of Solitude*, a kind of meditation manual, a gathering of short readings to center the spirits of people pulled in a thousand directions by all kinds of modern distractions. That Quaker mystic was William Penn, writing in the middle of the 1600’s. It seems like we could use a book like that right now, *Some Fruits of Solitude*. In another place, Penn wrote, *God’s spirit is not tied to places, but may be found anywhere, in field or house... We say a measure of divine light is in everyone, already. If you confine the dwelling of the holy to a local heaven, you are ignorant of that which is the greatest joy that can be: the holy dwells in the heart.* You don’t need the Meeting House, nor even the meeting, for your soul to be at home.

It reminds me of John O'Donohue, from the piece that Sara read to us just now:

Awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

Have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.

Respond to the call of your gift and the courage to follow its path.

May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame.

May anxiety never linger about you.

May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul.

Be consoled in the secret symmetry of this.

William Penn wrote, in an essay for his children, some guidance for spiritual practice on their own, in solitude. I'm not sure how old they were, and my guess is that they had to do a little simultaneous translation to get the gist their father's mystic mind, just as you might have to do if his theological language is a roadblock. But I think you'll get his meaning here:

I begin with the beginning of time, the morning. So soon as you wake, retire your mind into a pure silence from all thoughts and ideas of worldly things, and in that frame wait upon GOD, to feel God's good presence, to lift up your hearts, and commit your whole self into blessed care and protection. Then rise, if well, immediately; ...

and then, he says, "get dressed and read a bit of scripture but the parts that inspire you, and do your work and be good children," and then he goes on:

And as you have intervals from your work in the day, delight to step home (within yourselves, I mean), commune with your own hearts for a time and be still; this will bear you up against all temptations [to discouragement, among other things], and carry you sweetly and evenly through your day's business, supporting you under disappointments...keep the inward watch, keep a clear soul and a light heart. Mind an inward sense...

I love this: "delight to step home" - to the wisdom and divine light inside you. That's good advice for children, heading into yet another day of distance learning, good advice for their teachers, whether on-line or on site, good advice for their frazzled parents, trying so hard to make wholeness from a fractured time, for all of us: delight to step home to the center of your spirit, because that's the core that we've been cultivating here together, refining like a precious stone, that inner light that we let shine in one another's company. It still burns inside you, and we need you, we all need each other, to keep that light strong.

I read another piece this week, an essay by a man in prison, in San Quentin. He tells what it was like his first night there, when the iron door slammed shut and he knew that for a time, for many years ahead, in fact, his entire home would be no larger than his wingspan; he could touch the walls with both his hands at once. There came despair, of course. Then after some time, some days, some weeks (he doesn't say), he took a breath, and opened up the little kit of things the prison gave him: toothpaste, towels and soap, detergent for washing, and 2 outdated

magazines. He scrubbed the cell for hours, several days, floor to ceiling, and the bars, scraped the filth and stains and odor from the concrete, plugged with wads of toilet paper all the cracks where roaches came at night. He tore pages from the magazines, National Geographic's, and with spitballs made from more toilet paper and saliva, he plastered the walls with pictures of the ocean in Malaysia, and the rainforest, and the desert at sunset, pictures of animals and people. "These small tokens of life on the walls helped to imagine a life beyond the walls of a prison," he said. His essay is called "Sanctuary." Over the years (13 years when he wrote this), friends from outside have sent many more pictures, thousands, and he's put them all up on the wall. *The one that has made my home in prison most like a sanctuary is a very small photograph of the "Bohishatt" Buddha. And I always begin my prison day through the practice of meditation, sitting on the cold floor each morning, cushioned by my neatly folded blanket. There, I always welcome the light of morning, and realize, as though I were seeing through clouds, that home is genuinely wherever the heart can be found.* His name is Jarvis Masters, and the book I found this in is old, so I don't know if he's still there.

So a prayer this morning. Join me in a spirit of prayer:

For the spaces that hold us now, our houses and apartments, imperfect as they are, and sometimes so lonesome and sometimes so noisy and chaotic – a blessing for the house. Our homes didn't know we were coming, back in March; they had no time to prepare for us barging in with our laptops and our school days and our work days, our pajama pants on Zoom, our anxiety and fear; say a prayer, and gratitude, for the houses that have made room for us, that hold us through the night.

A prayer and more than a prayer for those without a safe house, for those with no home at all, so many of our siblings, and many more each day, as the virus rips through every false promise of our cruel economy.

A prayer now, and more than a prayer, for people in prison, in jail or detention, in exile, or in hiding – a blessing, a prayer; we know that you're there inside the concrete and the bars. And prayers for those who have lost their homes now, to hurricane and wildfire, the devastations of climate change.

Say a prayer and more than a prayer, for those for whom home is not a safe place, for whom home is real danger. For those who live lives with abusers and can't find a way out; for those whose true self, whose beautiful body and soul, are at risk, at high risk at home, our trans and gay siblings and especially young people, those who can't leave – a prayer for a window, a door that will open.

For those with those with mental illness, whose depression or anxiety is large in the room, for those for whom it's not safe to stay alone, a prayer for peace within, and people who can help, with encouragement and food and love, a text that says, "I see you there. I need you to survive. I love you and believe in you, just exactly as you are."

A prayer for those caring for loved ones who can't care for themselves, partner, parent, relative, child, and for whom there is no respite now, no help at all as programs close; for those with chemical addictions who find the walls are closing in -

may there be peace. May there be safety. May there be respite, hope and companions, all the slender lifelines that weave a net of love. May you find a window. May there be an open door.

A prayer for the spaces where we have found home- physical spaces, spiritual places, buildings, churches, the glowing rectangles that bring us into one another's holy presence, the sacrament of faces and voices, real and imperfect, with all our laundry and our dishes and our dogs in the background. For every shelter from the storm that's welcomed us and said, "come in." For this house, lonesome now, but strong, patiently waiting for its people to come back.

May we be shelter to each other, may we be hearth and home and hospitality incarnate, shining our bright and friendly light. AMEN

HYMN Prayer for Your House Singing the Living Tradition #1 (adapted lyrics)
May nothing evil cross your door, and may ill fortune never pry
About your windows; may the roar and rain go by.

By faith made strong, the rafters will withstand the batt'ring of the storm
Your house, though all the world grow chill, will keep you warm.

Peace shall walk softly through each room,
touching your lips with holy wine,
Till ev'ry casual corner blooms into a shrine.

With laughter, drown the raucous shout,
and though the sheltering walls are thin,
May they be strong to keep fear out, and hold love in.

CLOSING WORDS

May peace dwell within our hearts, and understanding in our minds
May courage steel our will, and love of truth forever guide us.

FAREWELL

Friends, thank you for joining us. If you're not receiving our EMAIL NEWS, go to our website and sign up! We'll send updates twice a week about groups and gatherings, updates from the Board of Directors, and more. Call or write with questions, or to ask for help, or to offer help. Please join us at 11:15 for Cyber Social Hour. This is a wonderful opportunity to connect with others in the congregation, to make new connections or renew old ones. We hope to see you

there. We are sending love to you from all of our locations. Stay well and stay connected, everyone. So be it. See to it. Amen.

POSTLUDE Ashokan Farewell (performed by Craig Hansen)