

Full Text of the Service at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, February 7, 2021

PRELUDE MUSIC

Come Into This Place of Peace

Come into this place of peace, and let its silence heal your spirit
Come into this place of memory, and let its history warm your soul
Come into this place of power, and let its vision change your heart.

My Lord, What a Morning

My lord, what a morning, my lord, what a morning
Oh, my lord, what a morning when the stars begin to fall.
Done with all my worldly ways, join that heavenly band
My lord, what a morning, my lord, what a morning
Oh, my lord, what a morning when the stars begin to fall.

GIVING VOICE TO THE SPIRIT

Come, Come Whoever You Are
Gathered Here (with drum)

WELCOME

Good morning, and welcome everyone, to White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church. I am Kathy Sedro, 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.

Service participants today include Nico Van Ostrand, Victoria Safford, Rev. Sara Goodman, supported by Anna Gehres and Erin Scott. Music today is from Carol Caouette, _____ and the WBUUC Choir, directed by Thaxter Cunio.

If you are newer to the congregation or visiting today, please stop by our Newcomer Orientation right after the service. The link is in the chat box. Today, also after the service, but at 11:15, please join us for Cyber Social Hour. It's a fun way to meet others, see old friends, and share a little conversation in small facilitated groups. We'll put the Zoom link and easy instructions in the chat box.

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

CALL TO WORSHIP (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.

Today's chalice lighting is from Debra Debroux and Mena Hautau

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Debra Debroux and Mena Hautau

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 Find a Stillness #352

STORY - Nico Van Ostrand

Some of the stories we love and learn from are ancient, long texts whose lessons continue to be interpreted and re-interpreted as humanity shifts and calls for new understandings. But just as important are the stories from people's lives and experiences, even just one small habit that we can learn from, one spark of inspiration for a new spiritual practice.

One such short story, called "A Painter's Creative Process" from Spirit in Practice tells of a contemporary painter named Debora Jones-Buck, who has what many consider an unusual approach to her work. And though this story is short, there is a lot to learn from it.

When it is time to paint, Debora lines up her brushes, selects her paints, and settles down in front of a brand new, blank canvas. She picks up a brush and creates a picture that covers the whole canvas -- it's beautiful. She then cleans her brushes, and heads into the other room for a while while the paint dries. And when Debora returns to the room she confirms that her new, beautiful painting is completely dry.

Then, she lines up her brushes, selects her paints, and paints a new picture right on top of the one she just created. This picture is beautiful too, and covers the whole canvas. Debora cleans her brushes and lets the paint dry again.

And when it's dry, Debora comes back with clean brushes and her paints and adds another picture, and another on top of the first picture she made on that fresh, blank canvas. Eventually she puts the canvas aside, with its layers and layers of paint, five or six paintings all resting on one another.

Then she prepares a new canvas and starts all over again: Paint, let it dry, repeat again and again and again.

Debora does not keep a record of the pictures she paints before covering them up—she takes no photographs, keeps no sketches. She knows that lots of artwork is created specifically so that it will last, like the old paintings in a museum, hung in special frames behind protective glass and special lighting to preserve it, or the metal sculptures that sit outside in all kinds of weather to remind generations and generations of some special event long ago.

But for Debora, the point is not to make some thing that will last forever. She just has so many images in her head that she has to get them out, even if no one ever sees them. And between the time that the image is completed, and when it is dry enough to be painted over, the artwork is just as wonderful as it would be if it were preserved for hundreds of years to come.

From Debora's story, and from other stories like it all over the world, what spiritual practices can we bring into our lives -- finding brief moments each day that call us to be in the moment, enjoying it not because that moment will last forever, but because it is beautiful right now.

MEDITATION - Rev. Victoria Safford

Friends, draw deep the breath of life, the spirit of life, within us, among us, all around us. Let's join in meditation, a moment of prayer.

Spirit of life,
we are finding now it's hard, some days, to find our bearings,
our place in time and space,
as these pandemic days and weeks and months and soon a year,
seep one into the next.
So many days have passed.
And souls have passed - so many thousands gone.

We are as little boats, adrift in quaran-time,
so far from the familiar shore of "life before,"
and miles from the coast of what's next.
Here in these rough seas, the vessels of our lives, like little rafts,
feel so brittle and so small.

Hold us steady.
May we shine what little lights we have to guide each other safely through,
send up signal flares, cast lines,
each of us a constant star to all the other little boats.
And when our own lights falter, as they have, I think, and will again,
may others be a beacon then, beckoning us home,
each one, each face on Zoom, each phone call and each text,
an anchor in the storm.

We are learning now what we have always known:

that “together” and “alone” are not just about proximity,
bodies breathing, touching, held,
but conditions of the heart, compass points of heart.

When it’s hard to find our bearings,
when we feel lost at sea, adrift, and all the stars obscured,
may we each remember:

We will stand the storm together.
We will guide each other safely to the shore.
AMEN

This morning we’re holding close in our hearts those who are struggling with illness in themselves and those they love, living with Covid 19 and other afflictions. We hold all who live with mental illness, depression, and addictions; our prayer is for peace, and freedom, and abundant love. We hold those who are lonely, those struggling to stay afloat financially, and every teacher, every parent, every child and student showing up as best they can for homeschool, hybrid school, and school in-person. We see you shining there.

Out of the silence here, and into it, I invite you to speak aloud or silently the names of those you’re holding in your heart.

AMEN.

OFFERING - Kathy Sedro

To sustain our online programming, Sunday services, pastoral care, and our work in the wider world toward justice and equity, your church needs your financial support. Please be generous today! Send a text or send us a check - we’re all in this together!

OFFERTORY I am a River (Carol Caouette, piano)

READINGS

The first reading is from *The Perpetual Now: A Story of Amnesia, Memory, and Love* by Michael D. Lemonick

“Every normal brain has two hippocampi, one in each hemisphere. It is here that sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations, along with the thoughts those experiences trigger and the emotions they arouse, are linked together to form a coherent memory that might be retrieved sometime in the future. In some ways, the hippocampus is like the dutiful host at a party who introduces the guests to one another then steps back to let them form a direct relationship.

The guests—the collection of experiences you’re having at any given moment—are then linked, in other parts of the brain, to experiences from the past, forming a network of associated memories, Some of these are enormously rich because they have been repeated many times and have a lot of emotional content. Your mother’s face, coupled with her voice, with her

quirks and traits, with how you feel about her, and with the thousands of different situations and interactions you've shared with her, might be an example. ... The more eventful or emotional an experience is, or the more often it's repeated, the easier it is to recall, but completely trivial information can be dredged up from memory as well [with just a small reminder]. ...

[Y]ou probably can't recall what you had for lunch a week ago Wednesday unless something important happened at the lunch, or unless some cue related to that particular meal comes up to trigger it. But you can almost certainly remember your wedding or your high school graduation or where you were when JFK was shot or when 9/11 happened, years or even decades afterward. Without at least one functioning hippocampus to stitch those sights, smells, thoughts, and feelings together, however —without a host to introduce them—you almost certainly couldn't remember even those major life events.”

**The second reading is The Memory of Now a poem BY GEET CHATURVEDI,
TRANSLATED BY ANITA GOPALAN**

GEET CHATURVEDI is a noted Hindi poet and novelist. The poem was written for Peruvian poet Eduardo Chirinos as a tribute soon after his death. Geet and Chirinos knew each other only through the written word, through poetry and an exchange of emails.

(For Eduardo Chirinos)

Downstairs I left a candle burning
In its light I'll read a few lines when I return
By the time I returned the candle had burned out
Those few lines had faded like innocence
You walk with me
The way moon walks along with a child sitting in a train window
I stood in the balcony one day
Waved a handkerchief toward the sky
Those who have gone without saying their goodbyes
Will recognize it even from far
In my handkerchief they have left behind their tears
The way early humans left behind their etchings on cave walls
Lyotard said, every sentence is a now
No. Actually it's a memory of now
Every memory is a poem
In our books, the count of the unwritten poems is so much more

MUSIC Everything is Changing (Teresa de Avila; Thaxter Cunio) WBUUC Choir

Let nothing upset you, let nothing frighten you, everything is changing.
Only now is changeless; patience attains the goal
Who has now lacks nothing, now alone fills all needs
Let nothing upset you, let nothing frighten you, everything is changing.

SERMON Persistence of Memory

(Rev. Sara Goodman)

Memory is a fickle thing. Just when we think we understand it, we learn something new about memory and our brains. I am, and have always been, fascinated at the way the brain works. Our brains are incredibly mysterious and important and fragile – the main thing that they do for us is process information and help us make sense of the world.

Amy Reichelt, Lecturer at a University in Melbourne Australia tells us that “One of the critical functions of the brain is to encode and store information, which becomes our memories. Our memories provide us with insight into events and knowledge of the world around us and influence our actions and behaviours – forming important aspects of our personality.”

The main thing that lets us function is memory – both the implicit memories, like voluntary movement and learned skills like tying shoes and riding a bike, and explicit or declarative memories like the memory of a loved one’s face, or where you keep your socks, or the answers to complex questions.

These memories are formed by complex processes within the brain’s neural networks that take the information coming in through the senses and use it to recall situations and relate them to prior experiences giving them emotional value, which then influences behavior and instinctive physical reactions. We make split-second assessments that aren’t usually based on conscious thought, but emotional reactions that are related to memories.

Memories that are related to emotion are easy to recall and act as a short hand instruction for the brain that lets us react before thought is necessary – what many people might call instinctive reaction, which likely served to further survival of our species. There isn’t time to think of what to do when being chased by a creature that wants to make you lunch.

Different kinds of memories are stored in different parts of the brain, and the process to make a lasting memory (within the brain) takes the coordination of several different parts of the brain but seem to be partly dependent on the hippocampus. As we heard in the reading, the hippocampus is the host at the party introducing all the guests and letting them get on with the conversation.

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As we are living through this pandemic, I have often wondered what specifics I will remember about this time, what our children will remember, what my children will remember (My son, at 4 might remember that his pre-k experience was a full year of virtual school in front of an iPad, but my daughter, having just turned one, will likely only remember what we tell her about this time.) And yet parts of the rest of their lives will be defined by being children in a global pandemic.

Will my children remember being stuck at home without playing with kids their own age? Or will they remember that we got to play a lot of games together as a family, got to go outside a lot, and take lots of family drives? Will our children remember the nearly mind-numbing hours staring at a tiny screen “learning” or the emotional landscape that filled their lives through this time? We will remember the sense of an endless repetition of days, like the movie Groundhogs Day – or the specific days and dates that will stay with us?

I wonder, do we get to decide to make memories that will last, or are our memories a random collection of events and sensations built without our conscious input?

We know memories are fleeting, even more as our short term memory has shrunk and more of our brains are focused on surviving – making our executive functioning slow – forgetting appointments, losing track of the passage of time, losing words. We are very aware of how our memories are fleeting, and we are so afraid of forgetting that we use tools to help us remember – we use calendars and clocks, we use

technology to save things that our brains are prone to forget – telephone numbers, photographs of moments, people, and places we want to remember.

But does the technology and the desire to remember something in the short-term get in the way of making a long-term memory? If it's saved on a device, do we give our minds permission to store the memory away in a different way or throw it away altogether?

Memories are a sensory snapshot of a moment or series of events. They are feelings – physical and emotional feelings. And memories with strong feelings attached are usually the ones that stay with us the longest.

Memories help us function, and because memories are feelings, that means that feelings help us function. But as we know, memories can also hinder our functioning – either our lack of memory, or memories that overwhelm our feeling systems – bring us back into a moment of trauma and won't let us leave that emotional and physical response. At its extreme this becomes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which can make it very hard to function.

Memory is fickle, and primary and it's heartbreaking and harrowing – memory is vital to our wellbeing but can cause us great pain and suffering.

I have a theory of depression, that isn't based in research or facts, but on experience, observations and listening to the stories of folks with depression, it's a personal theory of memory and feelings and how sometimes we need to shut it down. Sometimes when the memories are too painful the brain just stops making connections to those memories – as a way to protect us. The hippocampus host at the memory party stops introducing new sensations to old memories.

My theory is that when we experience something traumatic our brains shut down the memories, shut down the feelings, which in turn shuts down our ability to function. We cannot function without memories, which are feelings, we established that – and what does depression do? It makes it hard to feel. What does depression feel like? It feels like isolation and exhaustion and impossibility. It feels like nothing makes a difference, it feels like sadness that leads to numb acceptance of futility. It makes functioning extremely difficult and even sometimes impossible.

One of the many possible treatments for depression, taking medication that helps to balance neurochemicals, helps the brain to reestablish those neural pathways that make memory and emotion work together.

Another treatment is Cognitive Behavior Therapy, giving people the tools to start to counter the thoughts that connect memories with negative feelings and instead focus on more positive memories and associations. One tool is remembering positive sensory memories. “Tell me about a time when you felt something really soft” or “try to remember the smell that is associated with your favorite safe place.”

Memory is fickle and fragile and important – what can we do? I we need to make new memories, how do we make them positive? How do we make memories of the now we are living in?

We remain present, we remain open, we play good music and wear comforting and pungent scents, we disconnect our monkey minds, and experience the moment – it really is all that actually exists, because memories are fickle and can leave us in an instant.

Consider this poem:

Downstairs I left a candle burning
In its light I'll read a few lines when I return
By the time I returned the candle had burned out
Those few lines had faded like innocence

You walk with me
The way moon walks along with a child sitting in a train window
I stood in the balcony one day
Waved a handkerchief toward the sky
Those who have gone without saying their goodbyes
Will recognize it even from far
In my handkerchief they have left behind their tears
The way early humans left behind their etchings on cave walls
Lyotard said, every sentence is a now
No. Actually it's a memory of now
Every memory is a poem
In our books, the count of the unwritten

And now consider the senses you might experience in the poem. Let's take some time to do a sensory memory scan.

Remember, the visual of a candle flame, burning down and burning out, the words on a page fading from vision, darkness surrounding you.

Remember the sound of a train in motion moving past, the rhythm of the sound, the train whistle blowing at a distance,

Remember the feel of a damp cloth in your hand, like a handkerchief as you wave it to signal goodbye
Remember the taste of tears, salty and surprising.

Remember the smell of a cave, damp dirt, and growing things

Remember in winter the chill of an autumn day, the cool of a spring evening, and the warmth of a summer morning.

And now, in this quiet moment, take time to scan your senses, what do you smell, what do you taste, what do you see, what do you hear, and what do you feel?

May this moment be a memory.

Music Present Moment, Wonderful Moment (Thaxter Cunio) WBUUC Choir

Breathing, calming, present moment, wonderful moment

Breathing, healing, present moment, wonderful moment.

CLOSING WORDS - Kathy Sedro

May peace dwell within our hearts, and understanding in our minds

May courage steel our will, and love of truth forever guide us.

HYMN Gaudeamus Hodie/Rejoice Today! (Latin Chant) SLT #390

Go-day-ah-moos, go-day-ah-moos, go-day-ah-moos ho-dee-ay.

Go-day-ah-moos, go-day-ah-moos, ho-dee-ay.

FAREWELL

Victoria

Thank you, everyone, for joining us today. Please join us at 11:15 for Social Hour. And if you're new today –welcome. There's a newcomer orientation starting in just a few minutes. There are links in the chat box to get you there.

We are sending love to all of you from 328 Maple Street and from all of our locations. If you're not receiving our ENews twice a week, let us know and we'll get you on the list. Call to ask for help, or to offer help. We're all stronger together. Stay well, everyone. Amen

POSTLUDE The Path You Walk Upon (Cathy Dalton) WBUUC Choir

May the path that you will walk upon
be free of roots and stones.
May your days be filled with laughter
and the rain wash away your tears.
May your path lead you through forest dark
and the river still your mind.
May the mountains be your highest hope
as your dreams ever urge you on.
May the earth hold you in beauty
and the sun's warmth fill your soul.
May the starshine be your guiding light
as your heart finds its way back home.