

Full Text of the Service at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, February 21, 2021

PRELUDE MUSIC

Come Into This Place of Peace WBUUC Choir

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.

Covenant WBUUC Choir

To cross the river, to blur the line between your memory of sorrow
my fear of the unknown.

We have the courage to wade into the waters,
to swim against the current and tread a deeper course.

This is our covenant to dwell together peacefully.
To seek the truth in love and help each other grow.

WELCOME NICOLET LYON

Good morning, and welcome everyone, to White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church. I am Nicolet Lyon, 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 Rev. Jack Gaede and Rev. Sara Goodman, supported by Erin Scott and Anna Gehres. Music today is from Carol Caouette, Craig Hansen, Barbara McAfee, and the WBUUC Choir, directed by Thaxter Cunio.

Watch for the ENews this week on Monday and Thursday for news about upcoming classes and programs for children, youth and adults, including a new class starting soon on the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, led by Thomas Christie. Watch also for weekly videos about how to set up an account and use our new data directory, called Breeze. It's really easy, and will help us all stay even better connected.

Your Pledge Committee has a small gift to warm your spirit and light your way through these last winter weeks: a luminary candle to set on your path or in your window, and a packet of hot cocoa. You can pick these up anytime, right outside the church front doors. Strong is what we make each other!

If you're new or visiting today, we hope you'll join us right after the service for a quick welcome and orientation to our community, led by ministry staff. And at 11:15, all are welcome to join us for Cyber Social Hour. It's a fun way to meet others and share conversation in small facilitated groups. We'll put the Zoom link and easy instructions for both gatherings 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.

Mara Coyle and Joel Hedland will light the chalice.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE **Mara and Joel - NO TEXT AVAILABLE**

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

The hymn is All This Joy.

HYMN All This Joy (John Denver)

All this joy, all this sorrow

All this promise, all this pain

Such is life, such is being

Such is spirit, such is love

City of joy, city of sorrow

City of promise, city of pain

Such is life, such is being

Such is spirit, such is love

World of joy, world of sorrow

World of promise, world of pain

Such is life, such is being

Such is spirit, such is love

All this joy, all this sorrow

All this promise, all this pain

Such is life, such is being

Such is spirit, such is love

STORY

Adapted from Patrick Fishman's story "The Wisdom of the Dawn"

The old Master had assembled his students and other young people from the village to say goodbye to them and to leave them with a pearl of wisdom during an absence that could be long. He was travelling far, and in that land it was not without risk: therefore, this departure had the feel of a major farewell. And so their faces were solemn and their hearts were silent.

"Well then, don't pull such a long face. If you want to please me, host a dance later," the Master exclaimed. "In the meantime, I have one thing I wish to entrust you with. I wish for you to take extra care of it." The sound of whispering could be heard spreading throughout the gathering. Each person was ready to watch over this special treasure that the Master was about to give them. When he took out his handkerchief, they were expecting to see a small box or a book. They were waiting for a precious object to appear.

But the Master merely used the handkerchief to blow his nose (for it was winter, and he had some sniffles). Another murmur went through the crowd, but this one had less anticipation and more surprise.

Then he went on:

"It's not a material thing that I want to entrust you with. It's a question, a simple question for you to preserve, nurture, and cherish. Are you ready to hear it?"

The crowd was shocked but regained their composure quickly, with many students nodding amidst a chorus of yeses and sures.

"My children, when can you be really certain that the night is over and the Dawn is Breaking?"

There was a long pause, while the students thought about the question. No one wanted to answer too quickly, in case they had failed to find the hidden meaning in the words of the Master.

Finally, one brave student spoke up:

"You know dawn is breaking when the first ray of light appears."

"No," said the Master.

"Is it when the rooster crows?" asked another.

"Not that either."

One particularly bright student offered: "Is night over when you can distinguish a sheep from a dog?"

"No."

"How about that moment when you can tell the difference between an olive tree and a jujube tree?"

"Not even then."

Well, at this point, the students were all genuinely puzzled and sat in silent wondering.

Finally, the master spoke up:

"You can be certain that the night is really over and the Dawn is Breaking when you see a stranger coming and when you know, without a doubt, that he is your brother. At that moment we are enlightened."

So, I ask, who is wise? Is it the educated one? No, the person who learns from others, that is the wise one.

MEDITATION Rev. Sara Goodman

Now, let's close our eyes and take a couple of breaths together as we transition into an attitude of Meditation and prayer.

Breathe for the joy of being alive, even in these disastrous times.

Breathe for the grief of being alive, even as hope is returning.

Remember the lives that brought us to this point, our own, our parents', our ancestors' – generations of joy and struggle, so many strands, twisted and entwined into a thread, a guideline, a through line, connecting past and future.

Spirit of life, great through line, energy that connects all that is and has been, we are calling on you today. We are calling on you to witness our fears and tears. We are calling on you to hold our loved ones as they begin on new journeys, as they continue on well-trodden paths, and as they make life altering decisions about their futures.

Oh, Spirit of Life, All-That-Is, we also invoke you as we witness another devastating natural disaster, evidence of dramatic and dangerous climate change. We invoke you to witness the many dead, the many struggling to survive, the many, many more whose homes have been destroyed, in Texas. We call on you to witness the grave errors of neglect and greed that led to so many people going without power, heat, and water in a dangerous winter storm.

Spirit of Life, connector of all that is beloved, life force, breath of our ancestors, I petition you – I ask that you help us to direct restorative energy to those who are suffering – suffering with sickness, with mental health, with anxiety and depression, with addiction – suffering with losses and grief, and those struggling with memories.

I also ask you to help us share our joy with those with life celebrations: Those who are delighted by the births, marriages, milestones of many types that have blessed their lives – our lives. Help us to spread joy through the community, as we find ways to move forward to into new memories. Hear the names of those we lift up in this brief silence:

Spirit of life, mapper of many destinies and free-er of all unwelcome bonds – we call on you, once more to help us to remember the good times and hold the hard times lightly, to help us remember the struggles and the complexities of the past as we navigate an uncertain future.

There is so much to love about the world – remind us to love it into the best version of the world it can be.

AMEN, make it so.

OFFERING INTRODUCTION - Dan Wachtler

Good Morning. I'm Dan Wachtler, a member of the Social Action Committee.

We are taking a Special Collection today for the Mahtomedi and White Bear Area Food Shelves. This collection has special importance in light of significant food insecurity made worse by COVID-19.

The Mahtomedi Food Shelf services people in the Mahtomedi School District. It has been serving about 75 families per week and supplying school sacks for 50 students.

The White Bear Area Food Shelf's vision is to end food insecurity for people in the White Bear area. 2020 saw a 50% increase in visits from 1200 to 1800 each month. The food shelf also distributes hundreds of kid packs to local elementary schools and operates a mobile market program which provides food for seniors, Century College and Solid Ground.

Your donations to these food shelves will help support and continue services critically important in these difficult times. In addition, any dollars donated to food shelves this month will be matched by Minnesota FoodShare. Please be generous.

OFFERTORY - Spirit of Life

Spirit of Life, come unto me.
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;
move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

READINGS - Rev. Sara Goodman

The first reading is Joy Harjo's poem "Once the World Was Perfect"

Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.
Then we took it for granted. Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind.
Then Doubt ruptured the web,
All manner of demon thoughts
Jumped through--
We destroyed the world we had been given
For inspiration, for life--
Each stone of jealousy, each stone
Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.
No one was without a stone in [their] hand.
There we were,
Right back where we had started.
We were bumping into each other
In the dark.
And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know
How to live with each other.
Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another
And shared a blanket.
A spark of kindness made a light.
The light made an opening in the darkness.
Everyone worked together to make a ladder.
A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world,
And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,
And their children, all the way through time--
To now, into this morning light to you.

The second reading is The Way It Is by William Stafford

There's a thread you follow.
It goes among things that change.
But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it's hard for others to see.

While you hold it, you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
Or die. And you suffer and get old.

Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

The third reading is a brief epilogue from another Joy Harjo poem

*For any spark to make a song it must be transformed
by pressure. There must be unspeakable need, muscle of
belief, and will, unknowable elements. I am singing a
song that can only be born after losing a country.*

MUSIC *There Are Songs - Barbara McAfee*

There are songs in the soil, in the rivers and the trees
And the ears of your heart can hear them
And some come alive in the meeting of the eyes
When you take the time to see them

I will listen to the deeper story
I will see how Life's gonna move... in me (2x)

There are songs in my bones won't leave me alone
Calling for creation
And tunes that ride on the whispering wind
Seeking incarnation - Chorus

There are songs in the clouds that shout out loud
In the dark voice of the thunder
And some that flash in the cool blue fire
That splits the sky asunder - Chorus

There are songs that ride on the dancing tides
That swirl through all the oceans
And some that sleep in the bitter seed
That grief will set in motion - Chorus

SERMON *Tracing a Deeper Story*

In her epilogue, Joy Harjo tells us that she is "singing a song that can only be born after losing a country," which makes me think "How many ways are there to lose a country?" There are times when we realize that we are not the country we thought we were; and there were times when we realized that we never had been the country we aspired to be. There are times when the expectations and norms of civil discourse are gone; and there were times when the country was split in half by a civil war. There are times when a pandemic has killed almost 500,000 US citizens--the equivalent of a small nation; and there were times when an earlier pandemic killed even more--almost 700,000. There were times when the US government broke its treaties and stole land from people; and there were also times where people were stolen from their land. What must that be like...to lose a country? I might already know in small ways, because we have all of us lost the country of our earliest childhood education, where the nation was depicted as a paragon of freedom and equality--a nation founded by unsullied heroes removed from all their flaws and complexity. Maybe the country we lost is the one filled with innocence and ideals, naivete and never-ending promise. But for so many people, that's not the country they lost, because it was never the country that they knew.

I grew up in northern Minnesota, surrounded by the vestiges of the Indigenous peoples who had inhabited the land before my ancestors came from Germany and Denmark. Traces of the native languages made their way into most of the place names that I knew best when I was growing up: Bemidji, Mississippi, Lake Winnibigoshish, Biwabik, Lake Wendigo, Wabana, Pokegama, even Minnesota itself. Just up the road from us was the Leech Lake Indian Reservation--the most populous in the state, and yet I had only a cursory exposure to our indigenous peoples. My understanding of their history was shallow at best and at worst, it was misleading, stereotypical, and misinformed. To top it all off, our high school mascot until the mid-90s was the Indians.

I want to believe that someone back then tried to educate me about this important part of our state's history, and I'm sure they did. In fact, I seem to remember getting remarkably poor grades in my 6th grade history class during the quarter that we covered Minnesota history. But looking back on that part of my education, I begin to wonder how this history was taught. I know that I was asked to memorize "The Song of Hiawatha" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, but I don't think I was taught much about the US-Dakota War. And if I was, it was definitely a tale told by the victors--without much nuance or compassion. There is a strong case for revising these histories--for deconstructing the myths of innocence and ignorance, and for re-remembering them in a more thorough and honest way. The person who shapes the narrative holds a lot of power, so memory is a powerful tool and a necessary antidote against disinformation.

Which made me wonder: what other stories need to be told or re-told? What other stories need to be listened to and deeply heard? Last summer after George Floyd was killed, I was on an afternoon run, tending to my body and my spirit while my mind was trying to process the happenings of the past few weeks. I was listening to a podcast where I heard about this list of fifty stories that had been told by black storytellers. These stories had been told through a specific medium, and then they were canonized by other black artists, writers, filmmakers, and thinkers. They called this list of 50 films the Black Film Canon and held them up with special esteem as stories that were rich in content and important. Over a span of 100 years, these films had stood the test of time and all of them had individually contributed some important thread to the tapestry of black film. I checked the list, and I had only watched three of the 50 films. My understanding of the current moment that black Americans were facing was at risk of being shallow. Instead of a deep etching of black history, my understanding was merely a dim tracing, and it ran the risk of being smudged or even erased. In the interest of tracing the deeper story, I set out to watch eight films from the list over the period of eight weeks, and I invited you to join me. Twenty of you did, and we have run the class in every subsequent season of the year so far. We've even begun a second section, where we are watching eight more films.

In these classes, we have been challenging ourselves and each other to go beyond the single story, to deepen our understanding of what it means to be black in America. We have centered on the stories of marginalized people told in their own voices, and we have scrutinized the lens through which we view life and approach art. In the process, we have been learning how to hold a complexity of truths together at the same time. Love and joy co-exist with pain and suffering, tragedy co-exists with comedy, ecstasy with agony, injustice with solidarity, and the ordinary with the extraordinary.

For any white viewers of these films, we are intentionally seeking to lose our sense of racial innocence and ignorance. We are learning how to shed our feelings of white fragility when we are confronted with the overwhelming power and irrevocable damage of white supremacy--not just the active flames but also the ashes and the coals, the remnants of an old fire, re-ignited again. We are bearing witness to the pervasive nature of systemic racism, seeing its legacy and its many echoes. We are building up a resilience to know how to move from devastation to action, as we gain perspective and wisdom. To share one example, as I watched a story about a black queer teen, my own understanding of queerness--which is admittedly white-centered--became more layered. New stories traced on top of old stories--bringing more color and dimension to some old tropes.

Similarly, I have been reading both fictional and non-fiction accounts of pandemics lately, in the hopes of gleaning some lessons for the moment. Whether I'm reading about smallpox, the 1918 pandemic, or the Zombie World War, echoes of the stories are rippling through time and reverberating all the way to 2020, giving

me a fresh perspective as we live through this current COVID moment. Can you imagine living through an airborne pandemic as deadly as this one without the medical and scientific wherewithal that we currently have? Can you imagine encountering a pandemic in a time before it was possible to work from home, to video-call your family, or to worship in a virtual space? It gives me such great hope to think about our ancestors who survived past pandemics. This knowledge, this history is in our bones...it's in our memory. Both the trauma and the resilience are in our bodies.

Many people of color in the Twin Cities have been speaking out about "the tale of two cities" that they see here. Not the differences between Minneapolis and St. Paul, but the differences between the city as experienced by white people as opposed to the city experienced by people of color. Minneapolis and Minnesota rank near the absolute bottom when it comes to having some of the biggest racial disparities between black and white average incomes and between black and white homeownership. The song that Joy Harjo is singing requires "unspeakable need, muscle of belief, and will, unknowable elements." I don't know exactly what those unknowable elements are, but it must be some kind of magic that pressurizes a spark into a song, especially after losing a country. I wonder if one of those unknowable elements resembles the thread that William Stafford references:

"There's a thread you follow.
It goes among things that change.
But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it's hard for others to see.

While you hold it, you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
Or die. And you suffer and get old.

Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread."

Tragedies come and pandemics; we suffer and people die. "You never let go of the thread." What is that thread for you? What is the thing that you refuse to let go of--no matter what storms may come? During this pandemic, some people have been talking as if they are just planning not to experience any deep happiness or joy until the pandemic is done and life goes back to "normal." Some are talking as if they can pause life until we reach herd immunity. But that's not possible. "Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding." I know this sentiment might be hard to believe since our sense of time has felt so warped lately--simultaneously dreadfully slow and offensively fast. But time keeps moving--with or without us. So many of our usual systems and routines have been interrupted. Our usual sources of joy and intimacy are inaccessible or unsafe. "We follow the thread that goes among things that change. But it doesn't change." So how can we adapt? How else can we get our needs met? I hope you have already asked yourself this question, and if you haven't, please do so now. The twelfth month of a pandemic is just as good a time as ever.

If we wait to prioritize contentment until some future time where we are free of pain and suffering, we will be waiting for quite a while. In our age of connectedness and global knowledge, we no longer have access to some kind of simple and pure joy--it is always tinted with sorrow, interweaving lines of promise and pain. In Joy Harjo's poem "Once the World Was Perfect," she speaks of some historic perfect time--an Eden with happiness only. I'm not saying it didn't happen, but I don't think there's any record of this time, and I certainly know that I didn't experience it. In our day and age, so many things get in the way.

Harjo names a list of obstacles: discontent, doubt, jealousy, fear, greed, envy, and hatred. But take notice: she doesn't list loss or grief. Loss and grief are natural parts of life, and they exist in tension with

happiness and joy, seeking to find balance. Our current grief is epic in scope, and it has tipped the scale off the edge. In fact, the number of lives lost is so high, it is literally unfathomable. When we consider the loss and the grief, we run the risk of going numb, insensate to the pain surrounding us. Or maybe the despair within us grows, busily scribbling sonnets of doubt and sketching out doodles of fear. But we must allow our pens to trace out deeper stories. Stories from our ancestors, stories of resilience and survival. Stories of wisdom where we know that dawn is breaking, because we see a stranger approaching and know that they are our brother. That is partly what we are doing here in this community--seeing in each other the kinship of faith and the bonds of hope.

Just yesterday, as I was preparing for this sermon, I walked around the space of our sanctuary, thinking about all of you. I wanted to trace the paths that many of you have walked, holding in my heart your joys and your sorrows, and holding in my memory the memorials and weddings of your beloveds. Acknowledging your griefs and your vulnerabilities, recognizing your hopes and your anxieties. Just like our bodies, that building holds memories. It holds both the traumas we've explored and the resilience we've built.

For just a moment, let's meditate on that resilience in the stillness and the silence.

Before, we had been bumping in the dark and stumbling. In many ways, we had forgotten how to live with each other--how to live together.

"Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another
And shared a blanket.
A spark of kindness made a light.
The light made an opening in the darkness.
Everyone worked together to make a ladder.
A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world,
And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,
And their children, all the way through time--
To now, into this morning light to you."

Dawn is breaking, and maybe it has already broken. We are in this together. Strangers no more. I traced a path yesterday through our sanctuary, thinking about all of you--all your flights of joy and depths of sorrow. Whether you've never been in this building before or whether you know it like the back of your hand and miss it deeply, you are held by this community of memory, this community of love. As we work together to make a ladder, let us also plant the seeds of our dreams. Let us build a new way for our children and their children. May it be so, and make it so. Amen.

The closing hymn is "We Are Building a New Way." #1017 in the teal hymnal.

CLOSING HYMN #1017 STJ Building a New Way

We are building a new way
We are building a new way, feeling stronger every day
We are building a new way.

We are working to be free.
We are working to be free.
We are working to be free of hate and greed and jealousy
We are working to be free.

We can feed our every need

We can feed our every need
We can feed our every need; start with love, that is the seed.
We can feed our every need.

Peace and freedom is our cry.
Peace and freedom is our cry.
Peace and freedom is our cry; without these our world will die.
Peace and freedom is our cry.

CLOSING WORDS Nicolet Lyon

Please join me in the 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 - Jack

Friends, thank you for coming today!

If you are fairly new to our church community, please join us for a brief, 15-minute Newcomer Orientation. It starts immediately after the postlude, and the Zoom link will be in the chat box.

At 11:15, please join us for Cyber Social Hour. It's actually just half an hour of easy conversation in facilitated small groups - we hope you'll come.

We're sending love to you today from all of our locations.
Farewell, and stay well, friends, from all of us. So be it. See to it. Amen.

POSTLUDE *Hard Times*