

Greeting

Chalice Lighting

Legacy Chalice Lighting - By Paul Sprecher

We light this chalice to honor the memory of those who have come before us,
kindling flames of wisdom in dark times,
willing to challenge orthodoxy even at great personal risk,
giving us a legacy of freedom and a love of truth,
A legacy that warms our hearts and lights our paths.

Candle of Peace and Social Justice

Offering *The Lone Wild Bird*

*The lone wild bird in lofty flight is still with Thee nor leaves Thy sight
And I am Thine, I rest in Thee. Great Spirit come and rest in me.
The ends of earth are in Thy sight. The sea's dark deep and far-off light.
And I am Thine, I rest in Thee. Great Spirit come and rest in me.*

<SONG>

<https://harboruu.org/pledgedonate/>

1296 Montgomery Ave., Muskegon, MI 4944

Story For All Ages

Owl Moon by Jane Yolen

Joys and Concerns

At this time, we invite you to bring forth anything that might be weighing on your heart. We recognize that a stone can be made lighter with many hands and a feather can be lifted higher when shared with your friends.

Finally, we recognize those joys and concerns that are too heavy or not ready to be vocalized.

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

Message - The Myths We Live

Good morning. It is good to be with you today.

“We live in a time full of sorrow.”

So begins February’s Global Chalice Lighting from the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, penned by the Reverend Aryanto Nugroho, President of the Unitarian Christian Church of Indonesia¹.

The Reverend Nugroho continues,

“Many lost their beloved one because of covid. Many lost their income because of economic crisis. Many become victim of natural disaster. Many suffer because conflict around the globe.

We live in a time of uncertainty. We don’t know when the pandemic will really end. We meet difficulties to define truth because hoax surrounds us. We question honesty of our government, empathy in our community, accuracy of our plans, and truth in our faith.

We are in a crossroad, going deeper in losing hope OR building stronger faith, for we face the valley of darkness. We are in an examination, living more egoistic lives to save our own self OR strengthening our community to survive together. We need the light, but do we have the discipline for spiritual works, because it seems all of our energy has run out, to think, to work, making income, and we don’t have enough time.

Then I see, that when a storm tears down a big banyan tree, the same storm can’t destroy a bamboo grove. I want to walk in that bamboo way, because I don’t want to stand alone in the middle of storm.

I choose to stay strong in faith, just as the bamboo has strong roots.

I choose to renew my hope, just as there is flexibility in the bamboo.

I choose to keep loving others, just as the bamboo grove survives together.

Right now, three things remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

Several months ago I had the privilege of preaching with you. At that time I preached a message about “The Other Side.” Though the direct reference was to how we relate to those on “the other side” of an issue, at the time it certainly also carried resonance about how we might all be imagining being on “the other side”

Of the covid pandemic
Of the 2020 election

¹ <https://icuu.net/2021/02/05/february-2021-global-chalice-lighting/>

And now here we are...at least on the other side of the election...and to some degree in a different place with COVID now that vaccines are becoming available.

But what is different

Here

Now

On this "other side"?

Or are things just the same?

We live, I would propose to you today, in the midst of myths that things will be different on "the other side" of something

And increasingly we are bombarded with messages of being present and mindful of what is...what is in the moment and place we are in.

As Reverend Nugroho's words remind us, we always have a choice.

And as Reverend Nugroho's framing illuminates, we often define those choices and the stories in which we live in terms of myth, metaphor and the stories of our people. In this case, the natural imagery which I imagine is familiar to Indonesia of the flexibility of bamboo compared to the relative rigidity of a banyan tree. Drawing on Christian scripture no doubt familiar to the Unitarian Christian church there, we, too, are reminded that as we walk through the valley of the shadow we have the option to choose faith, hope and love.

Though separated by thousands of miles and by culture as well as by the differences in how our shared liberal faith manifests, we Unitarian Universalists here in west Michigan have much in common with our Indonesian kindred.

We, like they, gather regularly and see ourselves as part of "a people."

As we gather we share our own personal stories and seek to see them in light of some larger story.

We gather to confront our own lives and the larger Life of which we are a part, and to find some way forward in living with greater meaning and purpose.

Though simple and concrete, this, I suggest to you, is an example of how we live in myth.

The author Joseph Campbell, in interviews with Bill Moyers transcribed in the text "The Power of Myth" once described "myth" as:

The experience of meaning, of life
clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life

We experience meaning in gathering together
We find our potential not in solitary strength but in community

Myths function, Campbell said in the same text, in four primary ways:

1. Mystically - myths are ways of articulating and focusing the realization of the wonder of the self, the universe, and the experience of awe - and i am reminded here of the story we heard earlier about Owl Moon
2. Cosmologically - myths describe for us a shape of the universe - how everything fits together
3. Sociologically - myths describe and prescribe a social order - how things should be in our communities
4. Pedagogically - myths tell us how to live a human lifetime

So basically, myths tell us:

- Who we are
- How we fit into the world
- How we should live

Or to put it another way

And as we will sing at the end of our service

Myths answer the questions:

Where do we come from

What are we

Where are we going

In this way, we can see that myths are not about fact and truth, but rather about larger patterns and purposes... of our lives...of gathering at all.

In our gathering

In our ritual

In the words and music and stories and silences we share

We are reinforcing the myths we live

For good and for ill

Here on this snowy February day we are in the midst of winter in our northern hemisphere, though some among us have recently observed the approaching of spring with the pagan celebration of Imbolc, perhaps with acknowledgement of the Celtic goddess Brig - who later became appropriated by the Christian and now Catholic tradition as St. Brigid.

Observances of neo-pagan traditions reinforce and remind us of natural seasons and cycles - sometimes linked to agricultural practices.

I would argue that our national secular calendar with its holidays and observances reveals the cycles and myths of this nation:

Elections - and the myths surrounding democracy and equality - some of which were laid bare by the events in our nation's capitol on January 6

Flu season - and the myths around science, the health care system

Public Education calendars -

Even Super Bowl Sunday (today) - and the myths around competition, taking sides, acceptable uses of violence

Unitarian Universalism as we embody it uniquely in the United States has mythology revealed by our ritual and song:

The chalice lighting and words

Evidence a commitment to the presence of the ultimate within and between us
And today's words in honor of Unitarian resisters in Nazi Germany

The songs

Spirit of Life

and

The Lone Wild Bird

Where Do We Come From

Which you will hear later

Evidence a conviction

That there is something larger

Of which we are a part

Which flows through us

Which grounds and liberates us

And invigorates us to participate

In the grounding and liberation of others

The story

Owl Moon

Evidence of valuing of children among us

And the story itself

An honoring of our place in the natural world

As communities of generations who pass along practices
The acts of offering, joys and sorrows
Evidencing the acts of sharing
Our resources
Our life journeys

And these all
Nested within larger myths of Unitarian Universalism
Salvation by character
Good deeds
Education
And the inherent oneness of people and persons

My personal spiritual practice is to follow a Jewish liturgical cycle and its attendant scriptural readings. A central myth or story in Jewish tradition is the story of the Exodus or escape of the Jewish people from enslavement in Egypt to freedom.

Growing up loosely within Protestant Christianity the story of the Exodus was largely backstory for me, overshadowed by the stories of the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. But once I began to decenter Jesus the Christ and began to explore the meaning of Jesus the Jew, I began to become more and more interested not only in Jesus' Jewishness, but my own as well.

You see, my mother's mother's family immigrated from eastern Europe in the early twentieth century. Though I have never been able to clarify exactly how observant they were, it is clear to me that they were Jewish and that they and their children (my grandmother and her brother) were intent on the project of passing as respectable, trustworthy (read non-Jewish) Americans. My father's heritage was decidedly Puritan and frontiersman focused...English. So the Jewishness of my ethnic heritage was very much downplayed, only becoming apparent to me as I began to explore my maternal lineage more closely in my early twenties.

This coincided with my entrance into Unitarian Universalism
And with my introduction to racial justice work and the notion of white privilege
As well as with my coming out as gay

So many different myths - sets of stories about a good life - being deconstructed, challenged, set aside, interrogated and investigated

So many more new possible myths being set before me - new possibilities of what a good life might actually mean, who my people are and were, where we and I fit into the universe

Even the sense of gender and what it meant to be a man began to be questioned

as I began to identify as gay
 which some would argue as hypermasculine and others would argue as the antithesis of
 masculinity
And as I was introduced to the concept of “trans” - as in transgender
 Long before the practice of naming pronouns was even introduced within our practices
 and tradition

As many of us do, I jettisoned much of what I had grown up with - labeled it as “bad” and “wrong” and
embraced these new notions as “better,” more whole and full and right

And with that came embracing my family’s Jewish heritage - over and above its Christian heritage

Imagine my surprise, then, years later when a friend of mine with Jewish heritage explained to me
how traumatic it was for her to grow up being reminded at every turn and holiday how “her people”
had been oppressed and persecuted for their beliefs...for their very being

The exodus narrative - which had become so central and essential for me - was one that bordered on
abusive to my friend

Incidentally, this same friend once came to see me preach at a Unitarian Universalist Church.
Politely, after the service, she said, “I know you say you’re not Christian, but c’mon:

 You gather on Sundays
 You call yourself a church
 Your liturgy of song, sermon, silence, offering

“You’re not Christian?
You could have fooled me.”

I say all of this to point out
How oblivious we can be to the myths we live
 About what and who we are
 And what and who are not

And when those are pointed out to us
We can get reactive
Defensive
Or we can respond by rushing to demean the myths we previously lived
 Only to replace them with another
 As i may have done with the Exodus story

And my Jewish heritage

And i wonder about the opposing factions in our nation

And how they are in conflict

Over which myth is more true

About what America is

About who is American

And about who suffers more because of inequities and injustices of our current system

One side battles another

Another myth?

And if it is a battle of one over another

A war in which one side must be vanquished

And the other victorious

Like the story of the Jews escaping bondage in Egypt

And their pursuers - the Egyptians

Being drowned when the sea closes back in on them

If that is the story we live

Over and over again

How can we but help making the way

For the next warring factions

The next acts of violence

The next sets of opposing forces

Victors and their villainous opponents

And so the cycle continues

But what if there was another choice

Another option

Another myth to live

Instead of the rigid banyan standing against the storm and snapping

What if we chose to live the myth of the bamboo

Flexible

collected

Over and over again in my life

I come back to the notion of integration

Who am I now?

What does this mean now?

How am I to live now, in light of this?

In light of the realities of COVID

In light of the realities of the past administration and those whose interests were supported by it

How do we live

Knowing we are living myths

And how do we live

When the myths are revealed

Or exchanged

In his recent book, "Humankind: A Hopeful History," Dutch writer Rutger Bregman interrogates many "myths" of western social science. It's a great read which I highly recommend...even reading aloud with a friend.

At one point in his text (pp. 235-6) he has this to say:

In..."prehistory those myths were less stable. Chieftains could be summarily toppled and monuments speedily torn down. In the words of two anthropologists, 'Rather than idling in some primordial innocence, until the genie of inequality was somehow uncorked, our prehistoric ancestors seem to have successfully opened and shut the bottle on a regular basis, confining inequality to ritual costume dramas, constructing gods and kingdoms as they did their monuments, then cheerfully disassembling them once again.'² For millennia we could afford to be sceptical about the stories we were told. If some loudmouth stood up announcing he'd been singled out by the hand of God, you could shrug it off. If that person became a nuisance, sooner or later they would get an arrow in the backside...It wasn't until the emergence of armies and their commanders that all this changed. Just try standing up to a strongman who has all opposition skinned, burned alive, or drawn and quartered. Your criticisms suddenly won't seem so urgent...Not backing a myth could now prove fatal...the threat of violence is still very much present, and it's pervasive...it's the reason families with children can be kicked out of their homes for defaulting on mortgage payments. It's the reason why immigrants can't simply stroll across the border in the fictions we call 'Europe' and 'the United States.' and it's also the reason we continue to believe in money."

There's a lot to unpack in that, I know

And I'm not going to even begin to do so today

I simply offer it to you as

1. A reading recommendation, and
2. A reminder - that humans have lived with myths for a long, long time

² Graber and Wengrow, 'How to Change the Course of Human History (at Least the Part That's Already Happened)'.

And as mythic creatures, if you will, we have both learned how to change the myths and have also grown into a system wherein there are very real risks to uncovering the myths...very real consequences to refusing to support them.

Which brings us back to our opening

Here, then, is why we need faith, hope and love
So that we can be flexible, courageous and compassionate

 With ourselves

 And with others

Because as the myths are revealed - and challenged

The world needs us

All of us

To be humble

And hopeful

To be supple

To listen

 As our child and parent did in today's story

 For the haunting sound of the owl

To be reminded

 That our very existence is within a much larger story

That we may sometimes catch glimpses of

 If we are silent

That we may sometimes participate in

 If we are brave

And that our knowledge of

 Will always, always

 Be partial

Nonetheless

We pursue it

And are pursued by it

All of our lives

And we are faced always with the reminder that amidst the myths of our times we have the choices of how we will live, who we will live for

To revisit the words of the Indonesian Unitarian Christian reverend with which we opened:

Then I see, that when a storm tears down a big banyan tree, the same storm can't destroy a bamboo grove. I want to walk in that bamboo way, because I don't want to stand alone in the middle of storm.

I choose to stay strong in faith, just as the bamboo has strong roots.

I choose to renew my hope, just as there is flexibility in the bamboo.

I choose to keep loving others, just as the bamboo grove survives together.

In the midst of the storms around us and within us, friends

Continue to choose

Faith

Hope

Love

Music - Where Do We Come From

Chalice extinguishing

This blessing was written in honor of two Unitarians, Martha and Waitstill Sharp, who during WWII dared to risk their own comfort in order to help save the lives of those in desperate need.

As we gather together,
May we remember
When you share with me what is most important to you,
That is where listening begins.
When I show you that I hear you,
When I say your life matters,
That is where compassion begins.
When I open the door to greet you,
That is where hospitality begins.
When I venture out to bring you to shelter,
That is where love begins.
When I risk my comfort to ease your suffering,
When I act against hatred, violence, and injustice,
That is where courage begins.
When we experience the full presence of each other,
Because of our shared humanity,
Because of our differences,
That is where holy gratitude begins.

May this space be a table
that is not complete
until all are welcome.
May this table be a space of beauty
where together
we create a series of miracles, and
where all that we share is sacred.

May it be so.

Announcements

Social Time