

Thought for Contemplation: “A story is like a painting, Soli. It doesn’t have to look like what you see out of the window.” -Barbara Kingsolver, from *The Lacuna*

Worship

Allen Ave. Unitarian Universalist Church

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

December 16, 2018

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CHALICE LIGHTING the Blue Team

A Chalice

Cradle of our dreams,

And Fire

Our power unleashed.

A Chalice

Holder of love,

And Fire

To kindle our courage.

Anita Farber-Robertson

CALL TO WORSHIP

Whoever you are, from wherever you have come,
Come in.

If you come with joy and hope, welcome.

Bring those here to this community of love and wonder.

If you come with sorrow or despair, welcome.

Bring those with you, and feel the arms of compassion around you.

If you have come uncertain, unsettled, with questions, welcome.

Bring them all into this day of sharing and story.

A day for us, living beings, to remember the birth of hope and wonder in each of our souls once again.

Welcome to this day.

Anita Farber-Robertson

HYMN *Jesus, Our Brother* #243

CHILDREN'S TIME Rev. Anita

The First Creche

A long time ago, a very long time ago, twelve hundred years ago, there was a man we now call St. Francis of Assisi. He loved animals and people and the Christmas story. He wasn't a saint then, he was just a man, a priest who was really good at thinking things up. We'd call him creative.

He started the Franciscan Order of priests, which became famous for their love of learning and love of teaching.

Because he loved people, and teaching, it bothered him that in those days the only thing that happened at Christmas was that people went to church and the priest told the Christmas story- but he told it in Latin, a language the people didn't understand.

Francis thought the story of Christmas was a great story, that people would love it if they only knew it and understood it. So, he thought up a way to tell it, not by just talking, even just talking in a language that people could understand, but by showing, by acting it out.

He started out by asking his friend to loan him some animals, because there are animals in the story. And he collected costumes and asked people to play the different people in the story. And he had them setup the scene in a cave just outside the town.

The people in the town all came and watched what was the first Christmas pageant, the acting out of the story of Mary and Joseph and their trip to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born.

On Christmas Eve we will do what people in churches here have been doing ever since, act out the story, and many of you sitting here, will be in that pageant, just like in the old, old days of Francis, 800 0years ago.

9amSong (seated) Go Now in Peace #413

(Children are invited to go now for a brief introduction to their program.)

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

READING: from *The Strangeness of this Business* by Clarke Dewey Wells

Clark Dewey Wells, a UU minister who has now since passed away, told this story years ago:

“Several years ago, and shortly after twilight our 3 ½ year old tried to gain his parents attention to a shining star. The parents were busy with time and schedules, the irritabilities of the day and other worthy preoccupations. ‘Yes, yes, we see the star- Now I’m busy! Don’t bother me.’

“On hearing this the young one launched through the porch door, fixed us with a fiery gaze and said, ““ You be glad at that star!””

“I will not forget the incident or his perfect words. It was one of those rare moments when you get everything you need for the good of your soul-reprimand, disclosure and blessing. It was especially good for me, that surprising moment, because I am one who responds automatically

and negatively to the usual exhortations to pause-and-be-more-appreciative-of-life-unquote. Fortunate. I was caught grandly off guard.

“There is a notion, with some truth in it, that we cannot command joy, happiness, appreciation, fulfillment. We do not engineer the seasons of the soul or enjoin the quality of mood on another, and yet I do believe that there is right and wisdom in that imperative declaration- you be glad at that star!”

OFFERING

READING: from *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke

Perhaps all the dragons

In our lives

Are (princes or) princesses

Who are only waiting

To see us act

Just once

With beauty and with courage.

Perhaps everything

That delights us is,

In its deepest essence,

Something that feels helpless

And needs our love.”

MUSICAL INTERLUDE (9am)

ANTHEM (11am)

SERMON

Humbled in Love

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

In the hectic, sometimes frenzied life in this, the holiday season, the practices that we usually find comforting or helpful, may go out the window. Too busy for meditation, walking, painting, writing. Too busy for sitting at the water's edge. Playing with our children or grandchildren. Working out. Dancing. Making music for the sheer pleasure of it. Daydreaming. We have so much on our "to do" lists getting ready for the holidays that often, we have no time to do those things that have no goal, other than to please, comfort or center us. Those are the things that often get triaged out of our lives. Am I right? We know better. And we do it anyway. At least I do...sometimes.

And there are always things that happen to interrupt me; interrupt me when I am most focused on my "important" tasks; Interrupt my self-made busyness. Because the interruptions are authentically important, they insist on recalibrating my priorities...they bring sense and health to my life.

Sometimes it is an illness or an injury that stops me or slows me down, my own, or that of someone whose well-being matters to me. I

received such a call last week from someone who needed the kind of help I actually could give. It intruded on my tight schedule. I had to put aside intended plans. And, happily, it caused me to remember the gifts of love and health and friendship which are more important than purchased gifts or beautifully decorated homes or fancy cookies or tasteful platters. Life can do that. Intrude when you are so busy planning something else.

It's not always a bad thing, or a trouble, that intrudes. Sometimes it is just a dazzle in the universe that grabs hold and shakes you out of your holiday stupor.

It happened to me just a few nights ago when I looked up at the beautiful fingernail slip of a moon, bright and delicate and I had to stop and just look at it, allow its beauty to perform a reset on me. My walking slowed. I stopped. The lists in my head fell away. Suddenly the only thing that mattered was that life was, and it was good, and I was so glad and lucky to be a part of it. A reset.

I thought of Clark Welles, and his experience with his 3 ½ year old son. "You be glad at that star!"

And I heard the imagined voice of the prophetic little boy speaking to me. "You be glad at that moon." And I was.

Has that happened to you? Something that made you just stop, look, listen, notice, and hit the reset button, to start again, grounded, clear and facing, this time, in the right direction?

I call it grace. It's not something I plan. And I am never sure what exactly it is that I am calling grace- the thing that happened. Or the good fortune that this time, I noticed it and paid attention.

That thing that can tap you on the shoulder and hit your reset button might be an experience, as it was with Clarke Wells and his three-year-old, or with me and the incredibly beautiful sliver of a moon. But it could just as well be a story, like this one, that was recently in the *New York Times*.

After an intruder killed 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Eric S.C. Manning, pastor of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina flew to Pittsburgh to show his support directly to Jeffrey Meyers, the rabbi at Tree of Life. Emanuel AME was where nine people were killed by a racist intruder in 2015. Myers invited Manning to speak at one of the funerals of the slain. Manning had the bells at Emanuel toll for the Pittsburgh victims just as they had (toll) for Emanuel's lost members three years before.¹

*Perhaps all the dragons
In our lives
Are (princes or) princesses
Who are only waiting
To see us act
Just once*

¹ *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 2018, as reported in the *Christian Century*, December 5, 2018

*With beauty and with courage.*²

Two men, strangers, embedded in different cultures, different communities, different faith traditions, separated by hundreds of miles, reached out and claimed each other as their own. And the part of me that feels raw, and angry, and frightened by those things that happen that I cannot control, is soothed and empowered by knowing of these men who acted with beauty and with courage.

*Perhaps all the dragons
In our lives
Are (princes or) princesses
Who are only waiting
To see us act
Just once
With beauty and with courage.*³

If they can, perhaps, perhaps I can too.

To find the deep well of beauty and courage that has always lived silently within me, and let down the bucket to draw it up, knowing that I could drink from it and be sustained, that is powerful. To know that each of us has that well of beauty and courage, is to know how to defang the dragon that terrifies...whatever your dragon may be.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Letters to a Young Poet*

³ Op cit

Rachel Remen is a physician, and also an incredibly wise soul. From the stories she shares, she seems to naturally intuit what needs to be done. She does it with her patients, but the day came when it was her father who was the one in need.

Her father was a strong and healthy man who had never really been ill, until the time came when he needed major heart surgery. After the surgery he wouldn't speak. It seemed as if he had, for the time, stepped out of his body and was hovering, not sure if he wanted to return.

So, one day, in the hospital room, Rachel took her father's feet and began massaging them, first in silence. After a while she began to speak to him quietly about the many experiences they had shared. She just stayed there at the foot of his bed, massaging his feet and remembering softly all that they had done and meant together.

After some time had elapsed, she looked up at her father. There were tears in his eyes. And he spoke, reassuring her, that it would take more than surgery to keep a guy like him down.⁴

⁴ Rachel Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings*.

I think Rachel tells that story because it is the story of a love that was meaningful, and made a difference, her love of her father, when he was unable to do for himself.

***Perhaps everything
That delights us is,
In its deepest essence,
Something that feels helpless
And needs our love.⁵***

That, I think, is the deepest power of the Christmas story. Is not our deepest longing for our love to matter; for it to be received and for it to make a difference? So much is said of the desire we have to be loved. And surely it is so. We do. We do want to be loved. And much of our religious tradition has its roots in the struggle to understand our place in the story of the universe, are we accepted? Are we acceptable? Are we beloved? And we Unitarian Universalists always answer those questions, "Yes!"

Not as much explicit attention is paid to our loving, our need to love and our need to love in ways that renew and restore.

***Perhaps everything
That delights us is,***

⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, Ibid

***In its deepest essence,
Something that feels helpless
And needs our love.⁶***

Surely there is something important about this Christmas story, that we here, Unitarian Universalists with beliefs as varied as there are planets in the universe, spend the month preparing for it, and turn out in record numbers to light candles and sing softly at the foot of the cradle of a new born baby. Is there anything that can make us feel better than the chance, once again, to love, to love deeply and love meaningfully, that which feels helpless and needs our love? So often we have missed it, raced right by the need and the opportunity.

God is so good, or we are so wise, that the opportunity to get it right comes around again, and again each year. This year. Here. The opportunity to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, befriend the friendless, love the helpless. To hit our rest button.

We are blessed when we can be glad at the stars and humbled in our love for this most extraordinary and most beautiful world.

May we be so blessed, and so wise, to be glad, and to love that which is helpless and needs our love.

Amen, and blessed be.

CLOSING HYMN *Once in Royal David's City* #228

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)

⁶ Op cit