

**Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church
Order of Worship
May 12, 2019**

Thought for Contemplation:

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough.

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God.- Mother Theresa

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CHALICE LIGHTING Reader: Liam Scott; Lighters: George and Vivian Klein

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person.

Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

-Albert Schweitzer

CALL TO WORSHIP Rev. Vincent Silliman, adapted

This day is ours-

Its beauty, its promise-

Its weight of sorrow and disappointment,

The brightness of its opportunity

for doing and achieving,

for the deepening of love and understanding.

This day is ours, even as we make it ours

By the readiness and warmth of our appreciations;

...

Let our giving then be of ourselves, and from the heart.

May there be laughter in this day.

And if there be tears, then generous tears.

Another day?

Ah, yes, a day.

CHILDREN'S TIME *Rev. Anita*

Can you remember a time when you were taking care of someone or something?
A pet? A sister or brother? A doll or a stuffed animal?

What was that like?

Can you remember a time when you felt cared for, or taken care of?

What was that like?

Who was that, who was making you feel cared for or taking care of you? Could you thank them? Give them a hug? Let them know it meant something to you, that they did that?

Today is Mother's Day, and it is a day to notice the people who take care of us, in all different ways, and tell them thank you. It's a little thing you can do to care for them in return.

Song (seated) Go Now in Peace #413

(Children are invited to go now to their program)

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

READING: *The Lanyard* by Billy Collins reader: Miriam Congdon 11:00 am

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp

by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift- not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,

I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

OFFERING

READING *Sometimes* by Sheenagh Pugh

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss, sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

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ANTHEM *On Holy Ground*

SERMON

Sometimes Our Best Efforts...

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

I once had the very weird experience of finding, in a big box of old, old things, my diary from when I was a child- a preteen. And I opened it up and started reading. It was embarrassing.

One day I hated my mother, and thought my father was the only one with any sense in the household. I wished my mother would just shut up listen to him. When they were arguing it was so obvious that he was right. I said some very unkind things about my mother in that diary.

Fast forward a few months. A new entry. I hated my father. I thought he was a total idiot. Didn't understand anything. At best he was a pain in the neck- at worst, an obstacle to be outsmarted and overcome. When my parents argued, it was so clear that he was always wrong, and if he would only stop yelling and listen to my mother, he'd know she was right. I said some very unkind things about my father in that diary.

At some point, in those days, I entered that I was sure they were both ridiculously stupid, and clueless about life today, in the *real* world, which of course, was *my* world.

Now, I am sure that none of you ever had those feelings about your parents or guardians when you were growing up. Maybe you never had envy that your friends had better parents than you had

unfortunately been dealt, as a result of the fickle universe, and its luck of the draw. Or maybe you have had those feelings.

When I became a teenager, I didn't write such childish things in my diary. But I was clear about all the ways in which my parents were messing up, doing things wrong. They would discipline me for silly things, and totally miss the outrageous things I was doing, and getting away with them. I had criticisms about their priorities, their behavior, their clothes (except for my Dad's flannel shirts to which I helped myself on a regular basis without so much as a please or thank you.).

And, despite having such flawed, imperfect parents, (and I am not joking here- my parents, like any parents, were imperfect and flawed, and made some really bad choices) I grew up, got married, bought a house, and started a family- a perfect family... until my son was two, when the moment of truth arrived. It became dreadfully obvious that he, at two, was not going to be the perfect child and I was not going to be the perfect parent. I sat with that one.

And I knew that if I was ever going to allow myself to be forgiven for all the mistakes I was about to make, I had to call my mother, and apologize to her for what a difficult person I had been to raise. Which I did. And she laughed and said "Oh, Anita. You weren't that bad."

And then she paused. "Well, you weren't that bad to me, but you were really mean to your father." Happily, it turned out, my father didn't hold a grudge.

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,

sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.¹

I think of these things particularly now as my children are raising their preteens and teenagers. As they come back to me with memories that have surfaced, they offer both appreciations and confrontations about their growing up years and we once again are called to revisit our family stories.

A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.²
Some men become what they were born for.

I do think families do well to reprocess and revisit the stories and their meanings, as we each go through our life stages, developing understandings and perspectives we had not had before.

My mother once gave my grandmother, her mother-in-law a necklace for Christmas. My grandmother thanked her but never wore it. My mother asked her about it, and she told my mother that she only wore necklaces she could put over her head. My mother was miffed. She mumbled and ruminated about it, talking about how rude and ungrateful and demanding my grandmother was. She would bring it up under her breath, whenever she was experiencing my grandmother as controlling.

Many years later, when my mother was in her eighties, and my grandmother long gone, my mother said to me, "I owe your grandmother an apology. All those years that I was so angry with her for refusing jewelry that was not exactly what she wanted, that was not

¹ Sheenagh Pugh, *Sometimes*

² Ibid

the kind you could put on over your head, I didn't understand. But now, in my eighties, when I can no longer work the clasps on my favorite necklaces, I do understand. It wasn't that she chose not to wear my gifts. It was that she was not able to put them on."

It can be valuable to revisit the stories at each new juncture, bringing to them the lessons we have learned in the meantime.

A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.³

The poet Sheenagh Pugh, who penned these words, explained,
*I think most people read it wrong. When read carefully, it says
sometimes things go right, but not that often, and usually only
when people make some kind of effort in that direction.*⁴

*sometimes things go right, ...and usually only when people make
some kind of effort in that direction.*

I remember the book *Love Story* which was very popular when I was a young adult. Many in my generation were enamored of it. I remember its opening line. It was often repeated in those days as though it were profound wisdom. Some of you may remember:

*"Love means never having to say you are sorry."*⁵ Silly line. That's what I'd say now.

³ Ibid

⁴ Sheenagh Pugh, Quoted on the website for the English department of St. Columbia's College, Whitechurch, Dublin

⁵ Erich Segal, *Love Story*, 1970

“Love means never having to say you are sorry.” I’d even go so far as to say, “That is dangerously wrong!” Love, to me, means saying you are sorry if what you did hurt someone, even if you didn’t mean it, even if hurting them was the farthest thing from your intention. Once you know that was the impact, hurt, a compassionate heart is sorry.

Now that I understand my mother and my father better, I understand that they made the best decisions for me, that they knew how, with their limited insight and understanding. The ways in which I sometimes felt lost, or vulnerable out in the world, were not because they didn’t care to teach me or show me, but were because they simply did not know how. They probably felt lost and vulnerable themselves some of the time, even as I still do myself, sometimes. And I can feel gratitude for how hard they tried and forgiveness for how often they failed.

In the Gospel of Thomas, one of the gnostic gospels, Jesus is quoted as saying, *“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”*⁶

Is that not as true for our families, as it is for our individual stories? As we, and our children and their children continuously bring forth what is within them, their truths and their experiences, together with our truths and our experiences, we can, with each iteration, with each careful listening, each swelling of gratitude and each deep listening that conveys *I’m sorry*, rediscover that place of resolution, bringing new understandings to the stories, through the unfolding seasons of our lives.

I think about the question Billy Collins asks, about how we repay the people who raised us. Is it possible? Is it reasonable? Does it serve

⁶ Elaine Pagels, *Why Religion? A Personal Story*, ecco:2018

us to weigh the scales of the right and wrongs they did to us, and see how that computes?

Or could we do something different? Might we offer whatever it is we have within ourselves to those who came before us, as well as those who come after; offer our own expression of acceptance, be it a lanyard, a word or a gesture, and allow it to be sufficient? Our gratitude, our regrets, and our forgiveness, released and releasing us, that we might fully inhabit the present, for real, now. Maybe Billy Collins, as a boy was right. Exactly right. We offer what we can, whatever we have within us, and for this moment of profound presence, it makes us even.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss, sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.⁷

May it happen to you.

Amen and Blessed be.

CLOSING HYMN *Be That Guide* #124

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)

⁷ Sheenagh Pugh, *Sometimes*