

Order of Worship
Allen Ave. Unitarian Universalist Church
December 15, 2019

Thought for Contemplation:

Difficult roads often lead to beautiful destinations. -author unknown

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION Lay Leader 11:00am

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this chalice
As we gather once again
Celebrating the warmth of this place
The love of our faith
And the assurance of welcome.

-Anita Farber-Robertson

CALL TO WORSHIP Blessing attributed to Jewish prayer books

May the door of this house be wide enough
To receive all who hunger for love,

May the door of this house be wide enough
To receive all who are lonely for friendship.

May this house welcome all who have-
cares to unburden,
hopes to nurture,
prayers to whisper or sing.

May the door of this house be narrow enough to shut out
pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.

May its threshold be too high to admit selfishness and harshness
or complacency.

May its threshold be so low that it be no stumbling block
To young feet, or old feet,
or broken or tired feet.

As it has welcomed us, each one,
may this house be a home for all
who would enter-
with doors open wide
and windows shining welcome.

HYMN *either Within the Shining of a Star # 238 or We Are #1051*

CHILDREN'S TIME Bob Moseley DRE

Song (seated) Go Now in Peace #413 9:00am

(Children are invited to go now to their program)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION *Lay Leader* 9:00am

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

SHARING OUR JOURNEYS Erica Bartlett 9:00am, Noel Genova 11:00am

OFFERING

READING: *Advent* by Wallace Robbins fr. *For Everything there is a Season*, UUCF, **1978**

In all the happy sounds of Christmas preparation there is still a solemn bell of judgment. The peace of the world cannot come without forcing out a private peace of mind. God is an intrusion in a world of neighborhood fences and national boundaries, in a world of private success and social failure, in a world that is self-seeking, pleasure-loving, and insecure. A burglar will threaten

your possessions, but a holy (person) is worse. That one will threaten your most treasured illusions of contentment.

Let us admit it: we approach the crib with a little too much avuncular jollity, a little too much sibling happiness. The truth is this child will disturb our moral sleep; this child will become more favored of the parent than are we.

ANTHEM *Lullaby for a Winter Child*

SERMON

A Little Discomfort

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

We have our ways of doing things. Some we call traditions. Some we call “the right way.” Some are just how we do things, familiar, comfortable.

I remember hearing once, years ago, about a study someone did (must have been a doctoral student desperate for a research project) about whether people put their roll of toilet paper in such a way that the sheets unrolled from the top, or are pulled down from the bottom. They discovered that people, irrationally, had very strong feelings about this, that when it was done differently from how they were accustomed to doing it, it proved a source of great discomfort- to the extent that some people admitted that when they were guests in other people’s homes, if they discovered, upon using the bathroom that their host hung the toilet paper roll the other way, they would change it. I kid you not.

We have our ways of doing things. Some we call traditions. Some we call “the right way.” Some are just how we do things, familiar, comfortable.

Each of them is difficult to change, even when we know the change may be for the better, and often, we are most aware of it at holiday time.

It may be when you add family members through marriages, and the people you consider “new” to the family, have their own traditions which they cherish and bring, and then there they are, with expectations different from yours. Do you have fish or turkey or ham? Do you go to church Christmas Eve? Whose church? Are there gifts from Santa? Do gifts get torn open all at once, or does the ritual unfold slowly, everyone watching each person, carefully attending to the opening of each gift? Do only children get gifts? Does each person get assigned one other person for whom to select a gift? Traditions.

Or maybe the upset comes when the matriarch or patriarch can no longer host or fill the role they held for years and years. Or they no longer live in the old family homestead. Or they have passed away. Gone. Inevitable, unwelcome changes. Just a few of the possible challenges to your holiday celebration.

Growing up at my house we celebrated our intimate family Christmas on Christmas Eve. We had special foods, sang Christmas Carols while my father played the accordion, and exchanged gifts. The next weekend, we’d go to my grandparents’ and eat my Grandma’s traditional Christmas foods and exchange gifts.

Then my grandpa got very sick. We couldn’t go to their house anymore. My grandma announced that instead, she would come to our house with her gifts Christmas Eve and join us.

We kids were not happy. I was not happy. And I knew that I shouldn’t feel that way. But I did, and I felt it strongly. It was going to ruin our Christmas. Grandma belonged in Grandma’s house doing

Grandma's Christmas. She wouldn't fit in with ours, wouldn't understand our traditions, would want to change them, insert her own. I was stuck between knowing that my feelings were selfish and unkind, disapproving of them, and having them anyway. Ick!

Of course, she came. Of course, she brought some of her traditions into our house. It turned out some we liked and some we resisted a little, and some we resisted a lot. In time a new tradition emerged that included Grandma. It felt different, including someone who was in some way "other," not part of our most intimate circle.

I didn't think much more about it, until the year that something happened, and it turned out my best friend, Chuck, didn't have any place to be Christmas Eve. Without thinking, I invited him to join us. Had that happened three or four years before, my family would have been in an uproar- or I never would have even thought of it- inviting an outsider into our insiders' Christmas. But no one thought twice about it. Everyone was happy to roll with it. Of course, if Chuck didn't have people with whom to spend Christmas Eve, he should come and spend it with us. And that is how Chuck came to be part of our inner circle of intimate family.

Because we were pushed to open our closed circle to include Grandma, we learned how to do that- how to live through the discomfort of disruption of the familiar and the cherished, in the service of higher values- the values of compassion and hospitality. Hard as it was, Christmas became more meaningful, and in my secular home it shifted - in addition to feeling sacred, it now also felt holy.

Wallace Robbins cautions us:

God is an intrusion in a world of neighborhood fences and national boundaries, in a world of private success and social

failure, in a world that is self-seeking, pleasure-loving, and insecure. A burglar will threaten your possessions, but a holy (person) is worse.

Are we not living in such a world right now? In our polarized country it is easy to point the finger at “the other side” as the source of fences, boundaries and the privatization of success with social failure. And certainly, there are egregious behaviors on the part of our government to which we could point. I am heartbroken and ashamed of my country for its separation of families at the border.

But I am also aware of the silos and boundaries we create intentionally or unintentionally, out of our desire to be with people who think like us, who see the world the way we see it and benefit from the way we like to do things. It is one of the serious challenges to our Unitarian Universalist congregations. I cannot count how many times I have heard people say that they love their UU church because it is a place they can be with like-minded people

I understand that. My first Unitarian Universalist congregation of membership was in a very conservative area. I had spent time working in the community for causes that felt like an exhausting uphill battle—adequate funding for the public library, protecting our lakes and access to them, to name a few. It felt like banging my head against the wall. And then I found my UU congregation, and there were people who got it, who understood why we should fund libraries, protect lakes, and create public access to these natural treasures. That was wonderful. This was a community of people who shared my values. But it was a slippery slope to expecting that we all shared our politics, or our strategies on how to do those things. I learned early on, at the tender age of 25, as president of that congregation, to never say “we all” know, think anything. I spent many of my years as a mentor and

supervisor of UU ministers in formation, striking from their sermons language that attributes to a congregation what we all know or think.

A burglar will threaten your possessions, but a holy (person) is worse.

That one will threaten your most treasured illusions of contentment.

I used to think that I was a fairly secure person because I had grown up relatively poor, in rent-controlled housing, free school lunches, summer camp on scholarships, parents always arguing about money and trying to make ends meet. So, I thought that if I ever suffered a change of fortune, and lost my middle-class income, I'd struggle, but my identity would be intact. And because I was stricken with Multiple Sclerosis when I was in my early thirties, I thought I had already found my peace with knowing that my self-worth was not dependent upon physical capacities.

But now I realize that for my whole life in this country, I have lived as a white person. And if I didn't have that extra little hedge of protection built in around me, I don't know how I would fare. While of course, my values say I want everyone to have a fair shot at success, to play on a level playing field, and enjoy equal opportunity, and I do, that holy one who speaks those values in my ear and in my heart, threatens my illusions of contentment. Do I love my values deeply enough to be ready to relinquish my self-image as one of the brightest, most able and gifted who gained my position as a result of merit and hard work? That it was more than merit that put me at the front of line?

The Christmas story for which we are preparing tells us that God chose to be known in the world as one of least of these, as one of the marginalized, the discounted. It is a story that was meant to disturb.

Our Universalist faith was forged in that story, in the uncomfortable truth – that the holy lives in the mentally ill, in the addict, in the prisoner, in the homeless, in the failure, in the incompetent, in the dirty and the ugly, the coarse and the crude, and in you, and me, no more or less.

A burglar will threaten your possessions, but a holy (person) is worse. That one will threaten your most treasured illusions of contentment.

Can we prepare to welcome that child? The one who, like my grandmother, inconveniently shows up, uninvited...the one who insists there is room, when we think there is none, who loves those we thought were unlovable, the one whose peace passes understanding, and who companions us on that most uncomfortable journey, to get us there...to the peace we crave, that is deep enough to hold and heal each and every one of us – no exceptions. Amen and Blessed be.

CLOSING HYMN *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* # 225

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)