

"Being...Change"

February 4, 2018

for the Unitarian Society of Hartford
Rev. Heather Rion Starr, Co-Minister
Worship Associate: Sue Smolski

"We are all called.

Called by the wind, the rushing water, the fireflies, the summer sun.

Called by the sidewalk, the playground, the laughing children, the streetlights.

Called by our appetites and gifts – our needs and challenges.

Called by the bottle, the needle, the powder, the pill, the game, the bet, the need,
the want, the pain, the cure, the love, the hope, the dream.

Called by the Spirit of Love and Hope, and visions of God's purpose for our lives.

We are all called.

What will we choose? How will we answer?"

--"What Will We Choose?"

by Rev. Natalie Fenimore

from *Voices from the Margins*

Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church—and would whether I was a preacher or not—because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them. I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent, and my church—my church of the free spirit—brings me back to what I want to be. I could easily despair; doubt and dismay could overwhelm me. My church renews my courage and my hope. It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened—sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe to others. I must not only hear about it but feel it. In church, I do. I am brought toward my best, in every way toward my best.

--Rev. A. Powell Davies, Unitarian Minister (1902-1957)

"You showed me that our dreams and visions matter. They are the way we make oppression temporary. The worlds you wrote increased my trust that white people could imagine something beyond their own supremacy, and that capitalism could be out-imagined, like monarchy."

--"Dear Ursula," podcast, by Adrienne Maree Brown

upon hearing of the death of Ursula Le Guin (Oct 21, 1929 - Jan 22, 2018)

PRELUDE

Come Sunday
Duke Ellington

Sam Moffett, piano

*GATHERING SONG #361

"Enter, Rejoice, and Come In"

OPENING WORDS

Rev. Heather Rion Starr

Good morning. It is good to be with you this morning. We come into the routine, ritual, and practice of Sunday morning worship, I feel, in order to give our attention to matters that are larger and deeper than our minute-by-minute routine concerns. We come to be nourished, to get regrounded and centered, to be comforted and inspired. We come to collectively give our attention to one another, to this ever-evolving community, and to those parts of our ourselves that we barely find the time to notice, the rest of the week. We come for both healing and stretching. We come for comfort and for challenge. We come to wrestle together with the universal effort that it takes to be humane human beings. Come, let us do all this--let us worship, together.

CHALICE LIGHTING

*"We light this chalice for the warmth of love,
for the light of truth, for the energy of action, and for the harmony of peace;
peace in our hearts, peace in our community, and peace in our world."*

WELCOME & RECOGNITION OF VISITORS

*GREAT COVENANT

*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.*

*SONG #1009

Meditation on Breathing

TIME FOR ALL AGES

OFFERING

USH Choir

Lean On Me

TURNING INWARD

...As we move towards our time of shared silence today, join me in the spirit of meditation, prayer, or whatever your practice is of cultivating calm, clarity, and curiosity, within yourself. I'm pleased to share with you this poem, titled simply...

"Poem," by Nancy Shaffer.

Poem

Because we spill not only milk
Knocking it over with an elbow

When we reach to wipe a small face
But also spill seed on soil we thought was fertile but isn't,
And also spill whole lives, and only later see in fading light
How much is gone and we hadn't intended it
Because we tear not only cloth
Thinking to find a true edge and instead making only a hole
But also tear friendships when we grow
And whole mountainsides because we are so many
And we want to live right where black oaks lived,
Once very quietly and still
Because we forget not only what we are doing in the kitchen
And have to go back to the room we were in before,
Remember why it was we left
But also forget entire lexicons of joy
And how we lost ourselves for hours
Yet all that time were clearly found and held
And also forget the hungry not at our table
Because we weep not only at jade plants caught in freeze
And precious papers left in rain
But also at legs that no longer walk
Or never did, although from the outside they look like most others
And also weep at words said once as though
They might be rearranged but which
Once loose, refuse to return and we are helpless
Because we are imperfect and love so
Deeply we will never have enough days,
We need the gift of starting over, beginning
Again: just this constant good, this
Saving hope.

~ Nancy Shaffer

CANDLES OF MEMORY AND HOPE

SERMON

"Being...Change"

"Be the change you wish to see in the world," goes the well-known quote from Mahatma Gandhi. Trouble is, there is *so much* change I want to see in the world these days I sometimes can't fathom where to begin in my own life. I feel like the only way to be all the change I want to see is to...somehow eject myself from this life and transport myself to Pema Chodron's Buddhist monastery in Nova Scotia--but since I don't want you all to do that before I do, and since it wouldn't actually work for me and everyone I know to transport ourselves to a monastery in

Nova Scotia in order to effect real change in this world, well, it doesn't make much sense.

I also wrestle with what the First Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon, Music Director DeReau Farrar observed which is that sometimes this quote--"be the change you want to see"--seems used to suggest: "I've got my stuff all figured out. Be like *me*." And sometimes pulpits can contribute to that pretentious--preachy--impression. So I want to be clear that *that* is not what I'm trying to find the words to say, this morning. I adjusted the title of this service from "Be the Change" to "Being...Change," because actually working at having the flexibility and adaptability to evolve ourselves within our limited days is full of constant effort.

Also: I am really good at setting *intentions*. So many intentions. Pretty soon those good intentions can start to feel like burdens--I agreed to do too many things. I committed myself to too much. Darn it, I signed myself up for more than what I can follow-through on in the way that I would like. I know some of you know what I'm talking about.

So I'm moved and inspired to think of intention in a new way--more as *practice*. As in these words from former *Esquire* magazine Editor-in-Chief turned Buddhist dharma teacher, Phillip Moffitt: "Setting intention, at least according to Buddhist teachings, is quite different than goal making. It is not oriented toward a future outcome. Instead, it is a path or practice that is focused on how you are 'being' in the present moment. Your attention is on the ever-present 'now' in the constantly changing flow of life. You set your intentions based on understanding what matters most to you and make a commitment to align your worldly actions with your inner values."

According to this teaching, we can set our intentions constantly for how we want to be--to ourselves, with others, in our larger community, and in this world. We can fiercely commit and recommit to work on our own actions and reactions. When Dr. Angela Davis was asked on Friday, next door at the University of Hartford, "Who inspires you? Who are the individuals that inspire you to keep going?" She beautifully and authentically answered the question in her own way. "It's not any individual who inspires me," she said, after a pause. "It's the whole--it's community." "A sense of being a part of something that is more than the sum of each individual. We are inculcated into a dominant ideology that points to the individual. Yet we would not be who we are apart from our relationships with others. We need to acknowledge the importance of community in making us who we are. I learned the value of community very early. What has kept me moving forward and continuing to do this work is the communal effort. I have a lot of people...that remind me, every day, of which way I should be going."

...I'm conscious that since Sunday, January 14, I've led services almost of a shared theme--crafting your own story, your own narrative; making space for what

you want to be doing with your life; and now, making commitments and intentions that you truly follow-through on in a soulful way.

I want to try to talk today about follow-through and practice, and I want to share a story with you that is really not in the vein of stories that I usually share. So I'm stretching myself a bit to try to sum up this story, but some of you will be familiar with it and you can help me by silently filling in the details with your own recollections.

Enron. "**Enron Corporation** was an American energy, commodities, and services company based in Houston, Texas. It was founded in 1985 as a merger of...relatively small regional companies. Before its bankruptcy in December, 2001, Enron employed approximately 20,000 [people] and was one of the world's major electricity, natural gas, communications and...paper companies, with claimed revenues of nearly \$101 billion during 2000.^[1] *Fortune* [magazine] named Enron "America's Most Innovative Company" for six consecutive years.¹" Most innovative company.

It turned out to be complete and total innovation in deception and fraud, the largest corporation to declare bankruptcy at that time. There were a few women who were particularly responsible for calling out and naming Enron's deceptive practices. One of them was Bethany McLean, a reporter for *Fortune* magazine, who was at the time of her work on this just in her early 20s. Looking back, McLean says now: "I think the Enron story is so fascinating, because people perceive it as a story that's about numbers, that it's somehow about all these complicated transactions. In reality it's a story about people, and it's really a human tragedy."

McLean highlights so many red flags in her articles, book, and 2003 film on the subject, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*. Something new termed "mark-to-market accounting" allowed potential future profits to be used as if they were already acquired. Money--and particularly keeping stock prices up--became the thing that was valued above all. Marketing was used to shape and mask the truth, such as when Enron CEO Jeff Skilling said to thousands of assembled employees: "You can tell from the response in the stock market that they like [our] strategy; [thus] it makes sense." The perception became the reality.

Author Peter Elkind observed: "Enron was losing money, year-after-year, and yet... it was reporting profits." Major banks were persuaded to invest in Enron and continue buying up Enron stock--Merrill Lynch, Citigroup, Deutsche Bank all essentially loaned Enron Corporation money in order to keep doing what it was doing, and passing on large returns in exchange.

When the younger-than-the-rest female reporter, Bethany McClean, called up Enron's CEO and asked "How exactly does Enron make its money?," she was told "if you had done enough homework, you would know how off base your questions are." Another women, brought on to executive staff just to keep things

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enron>

going as they were, also asked some questions. "The math just didn't add up," recalls Sherron Watkins. "Accounting doesn't get that creative." Then there was the illusory magic of "deregulation."

In a desperate attempt to keep making money, Enron traders discovered they could move power around California, causing rolling blackouts which then caused the demand (and stock price) for energy to rise, and then the traders would make energy available again at that higher price. "Traders...discovered that by shutting down power plants they could create artificial shortages that would push prices even higher." Psychology Professor Angela Duckworth observes: "You can't blame the Enron debacle on a lack of grit or IQ points. It was a culture that was driven by short-term performance but discouraged long-term learning and growth. Their [personnel] practices as a company rewarded deception and discouraged integrity." 20,000 Enron employees--and 29,000 employees of Enron's legal firm, Arthur Anderson, lost their jobs, their health insurance, and \$2 billion in pensions and carefully saved retirement funds disappeared.

The tall, blue, reflective-glass Enron skyscrapers still stand in Houston, Texas. Right nearby, there's a church--Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church. "I am still doing counseling three years later with some of the [former employee] families," said Rector James Nutter in the early 2000s. "With some of those who are most reflective, it's gone to a deeper layer, and they are looking at the corporate culture itself in this country...you know you can gain the whole world, and all the trinkets, trophies, and perks of the world. And you really can lose your soul in the midst of this."

Reviewing the Enron debacle compels me to look around and ask myself: What am I most valuing? Day-in and day-out, what are we valuing? What are we practicing putting our faith in? That is why the Enron story is the right story to reflect upon because there is so much "smoke and mirrors" in our contemporary social media-driven virtual reality world. What is truly real? What is tactile?

Just as an example, I only recently finished sending out close to 500 holiday cards -- I sometimes remember to call them "winter" cards because that buys me a little more time to get them all out. There are 43 days still left of winter, after all. And maybe if you looked at our Unitarian Society of Hartford mission statement or our strategic plan, you'd wonder how one of your Co-Ministers individually writing notes on cards really fits in. I can understand that. I paused and asked myself, more than a few times: why am I doing this? Well, first and foremost I think, I do it because it nourishes me, it grounds me in one-to-one relationship with each of you and each of the people who are not here today but have passed through these doors at some point in the past six months or so--probably for a reason--and might come back again. It connects me with our community partners and vendors, the people who do things for us on a weekly basis but who we rarely-if-ever take the time to know and thank. It causes me to pause and remember that

we are each human beings, each with our own unique story, journey, town, address, mailbox.

This and every dynamic congregation is fluid and ever-changing, and as I write a note on each card I practice deep appreciation for that reality. I also do this annual practice because it is tactile. It gives me a stack of blank, unfolded cards that I fold, write a note on, seal with my own saliva if you want to know the truth, gather and deposit into a blue U.S. mailbox my very own self. It makes what can feel like our abstract, dispersed, fluid community very concrete. Dear John. Dear Becky. Dear Margalie, I write.

I hope you all here today feel that same way--that practice of intention--when you contribute to our Sunday offering or place a candle of Joy or Sorrow in the sand, when you bring in food for the food banks, when you take a deep breath to share your thoughts or listen to another's in a Small Group Ministry, when you spend time teaching and learning alongside our children and youth, or walk into these doors to soak in another marvelous Meeting House Presents event. May this be a place and way that we make the spiritual physical, make it concrete.

You know there are times, like many well-meaning, perhaps often-female, sometimes-younger-than-those-around-them, reasonable people, when I have felt like maybe I'm just not smart enough to follow what's going on. I must just not know enough, I think to myself. I don't have enough experience or knowledge to have an opinion about that, I say to myself. But sometimes I suddenly realize that everyone else I've put on a pedestal of "smarter" or "more accomplished" than me for this or that reason is also a human being, and it feels like a momentary flash of enlightenment. No one is any better or worse than anyone else. (That's Universalism in a nutshell by the way.)

I see that veil pulled back with all the incredibly heartbreaking stories coming out of successful actresses manipulated, abused, and worse by Harvey Weinstein, or the more than 265-and-counting gymnasts molested by Lawrence Nassar. And now we see Donald Trump attacking the FBI, seemingly, according to the *New York Times*, "tearing at the credibility of...the most important institutions in American life [in order] to save himself." Hmmmm...let us not think it is too complicated for us to have an opinion. Let us not think we need to do more study before we can speak up and cry out. Let us all do the soulful daily work that helps us to sift through all the input and the ever-changing often-confusing vocabulary and be able to trust our gut, our heart, our instinct, all our senses.

We know more than we think we know. You know more than you think you know. To me, how we practice our beliefs and values in our day-to-day, how we put them into intentional practice, this is the stuff of faith. As in this wonderful quote from Anne Lamott:

Oh my God, what if you wake up some day and you never got your memoir or novel written; or you didn't go swimming in warm pools and oceans all those years because your thighs were jiggy and you had a nice big comfortable tummy;

or you were just so strung out on perfectionism and people-pleasing that you forgot to have a big juicy creative life of imagination and radical silliness and staring off into space like when you were a kid? It's going to break your heart. ...Don't let this happen. Repent," Lamott continues, "repent just means to change direction — and NOT to be said by someone who is wagging their forefinger at you. Repentance is a blessing. Pick a new direction and aim for that. Shoot the moon." Repent just means to change direction. To set a new intention. To create space for that which you've been longing for and no one else can move that way except you.

Writer and podcaster Adrienne Maree Brown wrote and shared a beautiful letter to her mentor, author Ursula LeGuin, upon hearing of her death last month. She wrote: "You showed me that our dreams and visions matter. They are the way we make oppression temporary. The worlds you wrote increased my trust that white people could imagine something beyond their own supremacy, and that capitalism could be out-imagined, like monarchy."

We have to work together to support one another's dreams
to buoy up each other's spirits
to help each other sift through all the muck
and see the truth shining out at us
to practice being human, together.
Our only way forward is with and in community.

In Nancy Shaffer's poetic words:
"Because we tear not only cloth...
But also tear friendships when we grow
And whole mountainsides because we are so many
And we want to live right where black oaks lived...
Because we are imperfect and love so
Deeply we will never have enough days,
We need the gift of starting over, beginning
Again."

May we begin again, and again, each day, each hour if need be, to be a people of integrity. Integrity is not a one-and-done accomplishment. It is a practice. A constant effort. An intention and a ritual. May we commit and recommit ourselves to this effort, together.

May it be so.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Goodbye Pork Pie Hat
Charles Mingus

Sam Moffett, piano

*CHALICE EXTINGUISHING

*“We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.”*

*CLOSING HYMN #34 "Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire"

*BENEDICTION

Please, reach out and find the shoulder of those near you. Following the Benediction, greet and connect with those around you. Our world is rich...with sources of wisdom. There are signs everywhere pointing us to "go this way" or "don't do it that way." Take these in as learnings. Turn and learn from your neighbor. With determination, feed and grow your own soul. Try something new and let go of something you've learned is serving neither you nor anyone else. And when you go from this place, commit to help someone else to find their way.