

How Things Really Are

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

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(text from live-streamed worship)

Opening Song

Come, Come, Whoever You Are

(words adapted from Rumi; music Lynn Ungar)

Come, come, whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving,
Ours is no caravan of despair,
Come, yet again come.

Call to Worship and chalice

We have gathered for worship in this so-called virtual space...
But we truly are gathered, truly are together, for distance avails not...
Nothing virtual about this!
We are together in the spirit of love,
holding one another,
caring for all those in need,
embraced by the one spirit of life,
God of many names and beyond all names.

May the flame of our chalice - flame of truth, of freedom, of community, of love –
symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith, remind us of all that we share, wherever we may be
on this one blue-green earth.

In this spirit, words from the Sufi Muslim poet Jelalludin Rumi during these opening
days of Ramadan:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

Story

There is an old story that came first from India, and traveled through the Middle East and around the world. Here is how Rumi tells the tale.

Some Hindus have an elephant to show.
No one here has ever seen an elephant.
They bring it at night to a dark room.
One by one, we go in the dark and come out
saying how we experience the animal.
One of us happens to touch the trunk.
"A water-pipe kind of creature."
Another, the ear. "A very strong, always moving
back and forth, fan-animal."
Another, the leg. "I find it still,
like a column on a temple."
Another touches the curved back.
"A leathery throne."
Another, the cleverest, feels the tusk.
"A rounded sword made of porcelain."
He's proud of his description.
Each of us touches one place
and understands the whole in that way.
The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark are
how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.
If each of us held a candle there,
and if we went in together,
we could see it.

Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, breathe into full presence, body, mind, spirit... feeling our shared presence in spirit... feel held by the love we have for one another... and by the love that embraces all... Feel deeply that we are connected to all our sisters and brothers... no matter our various religions, colors, opinions, political persuasions... one human family... part of one family of life on Earth.

And from this profound experience of interdependence, our hearts' yearnings arise, our prayers to the God of our hearts, God of all blessings... for all in need of help and healing for whatever reason, for the ill, for the hungry, for those facing financial hardship... and our prayers of gratitude for all the helpers and leaders guiding us through these times...

May we pause in silent communion... wherever we are... whoever we are... whatever our circumstances...

Readings

Ramadan, to put it colloquially, is meant to be a month of reflection on what is truly important in our lives: including such virtues as patience, compassion, generosity, charity – virtues which, for Muslims, are expressions of love for Allah, for God. I've chose a few verses from the poetry of Jelalludin Rumi, which it seems to me suggest this direction – asking such questions as what do we really want, what do we most deeply love....

O moon-faced lover,
The fasting month of Ramadan has come.
Tie up some tight knots in your tablecloths,
the upward path towards reaching God
has just become wide open.
It doesn't matter if you're a clueless wanderer,
or a spiritually detached individual,
this is the perfect month for you to come back to God.
translated by Shaykh Hamza Yusuf

Give up wanting what other people have.
That way you're safe.

What can I say to someone so curled up with wanting,
so constricted in his love.

When you eventually see
through the veils to how things really are,
you will keep saying again
and again,
“This is certainly not like
we thought it was.”

Let yourself be silently drawn
by the stronger pull of what you really love.

translated by Coleman Barks

Message – “How Things Really Are”

I’m of course not a Muslim, but I’ve long been inspired as I reflect on some of the essential tenets and practices of Islam.

One of those practices is of course the fasting enjoined for the month of Ramadan. As most of you know, during Ramadan one is not meant to eat or drink from dawn to dusk. And this physical discipline is meant to be accompanied by spiritual disciplines of prayer and charity, which for those who are able can take the form of donating a meal each day to those who are hungry not just during Ramadan but all the time.

In short, one is meant to practice, if you will, being a better human being, reorienting from the usual ways of the world – the getting and spending that lay waste our powers as the poet Yeats put is, the “wanting what other people have” as Rumi wrote, which, as he also said, constricts us in our love.

To put it yet another way, reorienting to more fundamental realities, to “how things really are” as Rumi put it.

Well, it seems to me that our required social isolation and distance during the pandemic offers a Ramadan-like experience for us, an opportunity if we choose to take it. Not to fast from eating and drinking from dawn to dusk, but to use this enforced time apart from others, apart from our usual routines, fasting if you will from those usual routines – and instead reflecting on “how things really are,” on what really matters and what matters less than we might habitually think, to reflect on the injustices and inequities in our social order, injustices we do not have to accept as if they were a fact of nature, but could indeed help to change.

Such reflection could be seen as an expression of privilege, possible for those of us who are not suddenly without a job, or who are wondering day to day how they will put food on the table for themselves and their families. And to an extent this is certainly true – but it is also all the more reason for those of us who have this and other forms of privilege to seek to serve others and to work to transform the social order – on the premise (the reality) that we are all in this thing called life together. That this is “how things really are.”

One of the most beautiful and iconic images in the world of Islam is the image of thousands of pilgrims in Mecca circling the holy Kaaba. The pilgrims are all dressed in white robes, making distinctions of wealth and poverty, of social position, country of origin, and so on invisible – instead circling the Kaaba, simply and profoundly, as representatives of one family of humanity. Circling the Kaaba as we all circle the sun, one family of life regardless of outward differences.

This *is* how things really are – in the spirit of this often-quoted verse from the Quran:

O humankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.

So it’s actually all pretty simple, isn’t it?

Though as with many “simple” things, easier in the saying than in the doing.

Look, part of me misses the way things were not too many weeks ago – the usual routines of my days and my weeks, the usual ways of doing things when it comes to my ministry: worship, classes, meetings, and so on. Can’t we just go back to that?!

No, comes the answer, we can’t – maybe someday, some weeks or months or years hence... or maybe routines and usual ways of doing things will be forever changed in ways we cannot yet predict.

In any case, it does no good to simply wish our way back to how things were.

Better... I have to tell myself... (maybe you do too)... better to breathe into how day to day things are now, this “fasting” so to speak from the usual ways we do things; instead to use these strange and different days to seek to see more deeply into “how things really are” – to get in closer touch with what (and with who) we most deeply and truly love, with how we most deeply would like to live more completely – to be of use in this family not only of humanity but of life, doing our small parts to move us all to a shared life more closely aligned with compassion, with justice, with the ways of the Earth, our home, with love.

Returning to the ancient story of the elephant in the dark room. Among the many meanings we can take from the story is this: We each have only a partial view of the world, a slice of a view of the nature of life. So though yes the image of pilgrims in Mecca almost indistinguishable from one another is beautiful and holds the great truth of our common humanity, it is also true that we each bring different gifts, different views of what this thing called life is all about and how to make meaning out of it.

So we need the perspectives and gifts of every individual, every nation, every religion, in order to get a little closer to the whole picture and together to share the great work of creating a true and beautiful community of life.

In the spirit of life as it truly and most deeply is.

Song – Spirit of Life *(by Carolyn McDade)*

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.

Closing Words and Benediction

Rumi: What is praised is one, so the praise is one too, many jugs being poured
into a huge basin. All religions, all this singing, one song.
The differences are just illusion and vanity. Sunlight looks slightly different
on this wall and a lot different on this other one,
but it is still one light.

May the one light of love lead us all through these days we share.
Be well. Be safe. Take care of one another.
And together, may we take care of our earth home.

May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.