

This Threshold Time

Rev. Ken Read-Brown

First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

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(text from live-streamed worship)

Opening Song – Where Have All the Flowers Gone, by Pete Seeger

Call to Worship

Though at a distance, we have once again gathered in spirit.
May our time together bring comfort to those who need comfort.
Bring inspiration to those who need inspiration.
Bring all-embracing love – God’s other name – to... everyone!

Lighting of the Flaming Chalice

On this Memorial Day Sunday, words for the lighting of our flaming chalice from my colleague, Rev. Kathleen McTigue:

In the struggles we choose for ourselves, in the ways we move forward in our lives and bring our world forward with us, it is right to remember the names of those who gave us strength in this choice of living...
We have a history with those lives. We belong to the same motion.
They too were strengthened by what had gone before.
They too were drawn on by the vision of what might come to be...
They are with us still. The lives they lived hold us steady.
Their words remind us and call us back to ourselves.
Their courage and love evoke our own.
We, the living, carry them with us:
we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.
We take them with us, and with them choose the deeper path of living.

I light the flaming chalice of our Unitarian Universalist faith, uniting us with one another, with all who have gone before, and with all who will come after.

Story – An old story, as re-told by Rabbi Alexander Davis
(Beth El Synagogue, St. Louise Park, Minnesota)

A poor farmer was busy plowing his field when a disguised Elijah the Prophet approached and said, “My good man, you have six years of wealth coming to you. Do you want the treasure now or at the end of your life?”

The farmer didn’t believe what he was hearing and sent the man away. But Elijah returned again and again. So eventually, the farmer went and sought the opinion of his wife. She told him to take the money now. When the farmer gave Elijah their decision, Elijah said to him, “even before you get to the door of your home, you will find that you’ve been blessed.” And indeed, it was so.

When he arrived home, the farmer found his children in his front yard playing in the dirt. All of a sudden, they found a treasure – enough money to support the family for six years. They immediately thanked God for this good fortune.

After the shock of this good fortune wore off, the couple began imagining what they might do with all the money – build a house, take a trip, buy the finest wine. But being simple, pious and generous people, in the end, they decided to give it away as tzedakah – charity.

At the end of six years, Elijah returned and said, “The time has come for me to take back what I gave you.” They told him that they had given it away to people who needed it more than they did and that if he wanted it back, he’d have to go collect it from all the people they had helped.

The story concludes, God saw all the good they had done for others and blessed them with additional wealth.

Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, become more fully awake to this moment we share in spirit...

And from this deeper presence in the moment, our hearts’ yearnings arise, prayers to the God of our hearts, God of all blessings...

This Memorial Day Sunday we pray especially for all those who grieve, whether for a recent loss or for a loss a long time ago. Most especially at the time of Memorial Day we remember those who lost their lives in war, and hold in our hearts all who grieve those losses.

...and as every week during these days... we pray for all in need of help and healing for whatever reason, for the ill, for the hungry, for those facing financial hardship...

All this, along with continued prayers of gratitude for the helpers and healers, and for those who lead us with knowledge and wisdom and compassion...

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

Reading

As Ramadan has come to an end, a reading from an Islamic source, the poetry of Jelaluddin Rumi - "The Guest House"

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from the beyond.

Message – "This Threshold Time"

We are living in a liminal period of time. Not a word we often hear, but I've been finding it a helpful one. It comes from a root meaning threshold, suggesting that one is neither here nor there... rather, one is in between... and it may well not even be clear where one is going next. Which I think pretty accurately describes these days we are currently sharing on the planet.

You know that experience of going from one room to another and then forgetting what you'd come for? Yes, you do. It is a universal experience, actually documented by scientific studies. Somehow, for some reason, crossing a threshold cleans out the brain of at least some short-term memory – I suppose making room for whatever comes next, whatever the next room has to offer or may require of us.

Well what would it be like if we paused at the threshold, paused in liminal, in between space, in between time?

I'm talking again about this threshold time in which we are all living now. What if we were to pause and allow ourselves to experience the threshold, what it might be clearing out and what it might be preparing us for – something new, maybe even better, to emerge?

It seems to me that another – related – way of describing what we are all living through, each very much in our own way, in the midst of our own circumstances, is something like another universal experience, the experience of grief.

Many are right now in the midst of deep mourning for a loved one who has died. At the same time, most if not all of us may be grieving the lives we were living only several weeks ago, pre-pandemic.

Well, one thing that characterizes the initial experience of grieving the loss of a dear one is the disorienting feeling of our world having utterly changed as the rest of the world seems to be going along as if everything was just as it was the day before, just fine. When for us the world is not just fine; worse still, though we may yearn to go back, to have our dear one again by our side, we know this is impossible; and, further, it is quite likely we can't, not yet anyway, imagine how we can possibly go forward into some new and different life we didn't choose and didn't want – that next room of our lives

But in fact, and of course... we must.

And the best way to go forward is... to allow all the feelings... including this disorienting threshold feeling of being set apart from the rest of the world... *and* to allow the experience of not knowing how to take the next step... yet at the same time somehow to manage faith enough that, in the Quaker phrase, “way will open” if we have the patience to wait... just to wait awhile, sometimes a long while, at this threshold we did not ask for yet cannot escape.

And way almost always does open; sooner or later, in fits and starts it does. When it comes to grief, we never stop missing our dear one and the life we had, but we find our way forward into some sort of next room beyond the threshold, beyond the liminal, in-between time.

So it might be for all of us as we live through this shared strange, liminal, threshold time of pandemic – maybe, as I've suggested, grieving the life we were living before the pandemic changed, it seems, everything... missing “the old days” and wishing, yearning, to go back to how life was long, long... no, it was only weeks... ago.

But knowing we cannot.

Rather, then, can we be patient enough even as life resumes some vague semblance of “normal” activity to allow and be part of helping to make a better world than the one we've left behind? After all, as I've been preaching one way or another for these past two months: How the world was before, was careening towards climate disaster. How the world was, was (and is) filled with social inequities. How the world was, was filled with too much rushing and too little savoring. How the world was, was too much division and hate, and not enough respect, understanding, and love.

An invitation, then, it seems to me, has been offered to us through this unbidden pandemic, an invitation to each of us personally and to all of us together, an invitation to have the patience and even courage to allow this threshold, liminal time. To remain in it long enough for the new to emerge – personally and collectively.

With faith that however unbidden this time in our lives is, and it is quite unbidden, paraphrasing Rumi's words from the reading, it may indeed be clearing us out for something new, perhaps even better.

Meanwhile taking comfort, as I know I do, in much that remains and always will remain even as so much changes... comfort in the words of truth tellers, even when the truths they tell are difficult to hear... better than the alternative; taking comfort in the goodness of so many that we see or read about every day; taking comfort in the beauty all around us in this refulgent spring. Truth, goodness, beauty – among the many names of the God beyond all names who embraces us all, guiding us into the next room.

So may it ever be.

Closing Words and Benediction

From the Sufi (Muslim) poet Hafiz:

Your fidelity to love, that is all you need.
No day will then match your strength.

What was once a fear or problem will see
you coming and step aside... or run.

Be well. Be safe.

May we take care of one another... take care, as best we can, of everyone!

May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.