

Beneath the Deep-Piled Snow
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
Deb Weiner, Interim Religious Education Consultant
January 30, 2022

Readings

“Litany of Spring” by Addae Ama Kraba (*adapted by Deborah Weiner*)

As we gather to celebrate
this time of beginnings – this season of birth and rebirth,
We sense the heartbeat of Mother Earth.

Even with early spring time comes the blossoming of bulbs,
A time of setting down roots under the snow,
And renewal of the emerging patterns of life
as we hear the heartbeat of Mother Earth

Let us draw close to each other and our creator
In this time of rebirth and growth.
In the continuing circle of life,
We know the heartbeat of Mother Earth

Let us remember past and present
And the start of each week that we begin anew
Let us share laughter, love and joy as ...
We feel the heartbeat of Mother Earth.

From “Connections” by Marge Piercy

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot always tell by looking at what is happening
More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.
Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.
Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.
Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden
Gnaw in the dark, and use the sun to make sugar.
Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.
Live a life you can endure: make life that is loving.
Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble
wilderness to the outside but to us it is interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.

Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.

This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always.
For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long season of
tending and growth, the harvest comes.

Sermon

(shared by Deb Weiner, Interim Religious Education Consultant, and Rev. Ken Read-Brown)

Deb Weiner:

My grandfather, Frank Racine, decided late in life that he should abandon his first career as a school principal, to become a farmer. He had this wish to raise dairy cows and not only that – to grow all manner of things. And so it was that as a small child I'd be bundled into the back seat of the family DeSoto for the drive to Cuddebackville, New York, to the farm. I'd spend hours outside – under the tall catalpa trees with their pods hanging down, crawling around in the grasses between the farmhouse and the barn, picking wild strawberries that were hiding – just waiting to be shoved into my mouth. I'd go out into the lower garden, running behind my grandfather's plow, helping to plant potatoes or later in the summer, to pick corn from the tall stalks. It was a simple escape from city life – well, not that big a city, just New Haven, Connecticut – and it was kind of magical.

I used to wait for the seasons to change, seeing what the mysteries were that would show up as the ground warmed. I never did think much about what was going on in the fallow time, though – and I realize now that I missed a lot of the real magic. As Rumi's quote at the top of the order of service reminds us, in the winter it's quiet – “but the roots are down there riotous.”

Tomorrow's the beginning of Celtic spring. The old religions, celebrating the feast of Brede, or Brigid, marked this as Imbolc. The lambs are being born, the milk is sweet, the butter and cheese – sublime. Soon, even in this snowy and cold landscape, things will start to happen...first as little shoots that sneak up through the once-frozen cracks in the ground, and then, they'll relax into fuller bloom.

What the heck does THIS have to do with church? Any church, but most especially, THIS one?

It has probably not escaped your notice that there are changes all around. The Parish House is back on the market and by golly, this time, maybe there will be an offer that will open a window for a new education- gathering - and meeting space, more convenient and modern and accessible than what is currently available. And yes, it is true that this summer, you will all bid a fond farewell to Ken as he moves off to discover what life after parish ministry looks and feels like. And at the same time, you will be called to discover what life is like without the presence in the pulpit you've enjoyed for more than three decades. It will be time for a new chapter to be written in the very large Book of Life of Old Ship Church. It's a lot.

There's more, of course. Because yes, there are suggestions that our latest COVID isolation may relax soon. That's a good thing, for sure. Add all this up and you've got a boatload of uncertainty – not all of it bad, but all of it unknown. What to do?

I have had a number of conversations – as many of you know – with parents, teachers, leaders, former members and more – about their perspectives around the way they see this congregation, its challenges and its opportunities. There'll be one more opportunity for us to be in conversation again, right after this worship service concludes – so don't go away – your voice should be included!

The most consistent message I heard was the wish that people had for finding ways to open the symbolic doors of this congregation to people not yet inside the space. To feel free to try new

things, to shift what has been to what might be. And that, of course, is not just a matter of literally opening the doors or putting up a public sign that says “open to all” or “you are welcome.” Saying it, and meaning it and making it happen – those are the trickier parts.

Years ago a colleague told me a story about an eminent professor of Starr King School for the Ministry – our Unitarian Universalist seminary in California – who had challenged his group of students with a riddle: “What is the one thing you MUST do in a church?” While they gave him responses that were about deep theological reasoning, he continued to discard their ideas. Finally, he said to them in his stern voice: “The one rule in the church is that once you are inside, you must NEVER close the doors!” So basic. Yet...not so easy.

I would bet that almost all of you here today – whether in person in this meeting house or out there in zoom-land – can remember the first time you came in the door. Some of you were small children. Some of you were curious about whether this place was a museum or a church. Some of you came with children in hand. Some of you were brought by a friend or neighbor. That happens, by the way, on the average of once every twenty-seven years – I kid you not!! But the point, friends, is that once upon a time, we all were new.

If everything works well we discover a spiritual home after we’ve arrived in that new place, and we stick around. And then we start to make connections in ways that engage us in the deeper life of the congregation – covenant groups or chalice circles, adult education, social justice work, or the area that most draws me – lifelong religious education. However you approach it, there have to be ways for you, and those who travel with you, to set down roots – something to hold you in this place.

We don’t really have to wait for all the changes to take place at Old Ship, because those who have been carrying forward this church’s religious education program can tell you, firsthand, how it’s been happening this year. Although you do not have a settled or interim religious education director this year, your religious education committee and volunteers have been making things happen and riding the waves of change. And to a person, everyone I spoke with talked about their experiences with the ways that the religious education programs here have literally saved lives.

I know – because I’ve been doing this a while – that it’s not uncommon for me to be talking with you and for you – some of you – to be thinking, “ah, religious education. Yes, I had children in that program. They’re grown, and religious education is for the younger people. Not for me.” Here’s what I want to say to you, and please listen, because there are several realities I really want you to understand.

One is that we have been living in a pandemic. That, I know, is no news to anyone. And the people who have been hardest hit – they are the ones who are actively parenting. They are the ones who have been trying to home school their kids, to keep them connected to their friends even when they couldn’t be with them, to find safe places to go, to not have them fall apart (quite literally) because of isolation. Friends: these are not the people who are in a position to also be running your religious education program.

The other part of this story is about legacy, something I know many of you care about, particularly in this time of great transition. I know that you are wondering what Old Ship Church will be like after Ken retires. I know some of you can not imagine this place without him. And I believe that many of you are wondering what will happen to this church in this time of great change. Perhaps you have been thinking about what legacy there will be after Ken

leaves, maybe even after YOU leave. Lots of people think about this stuff in terms of money – like, the ways in which you make a legacy gift to an organization you care about. And I’m not saying that is unimportant.

But there’s a more present kind of legacy – the one that has to do with how this congregation will not only endure, but prosper, after you have gone. That is about building a living legacy. The way that this congregation will live on is through the newcomers, and the members AND CHILDREN who are a part of it. As some smart person – I think it was Ken Read-Brown - said, “the continuity is the community.”

Friends: there are lots of magical things that happen in nature. Growing a community, and sustaining a religious education program, aren’t on that list. Those things happen by intentionality – by inviting your neighbors and your loved ones in. And once they are here, being open to the unique gifts and yes, even the changes, that are brought by those people.

I’d like to encourage you to spend a couple of moments, some time this day, thinking about the best experiences you’ve had in this space, and why you chose to spend time here. And then to take a piece of that, and offer it to someone who isn’t here right now. That’s not proselytizing, it’s sharing. And sharing what you care about – that is an act of love. That is the kind of love that can help those roots go down deep, where indeed, they will be doing riotous things. Even underneath the winter snow.

Ken Read Brown:

My parents first joined the South Nassau Unitarian Church in Freeport on Long Island at an awkward age.

For me, not for them.

I was eleven years old at the time, and a little shy. Up till then I had attended (though I can’t recall how often) Sunday school at the Rockville Centre Presbyterian Church, where not only my parents, but my father’s parents had been members. As for Sunday school at the Unitarian church (this was just before merger with the Universalists) I only remember attending once – not terrible, but not a happy memory. I did spend many pleasant Sundays in a back pew of the very modern new church building with one or both of my parents: Dad often taking notes about the sermon on the back of the order of worship; and my piano teacher, Ray Koos, leading the choir. It felt safe and pleasant.

Ah... that order of worship. On the cover of the order of worship was a circle of symbols representing many of the world’s religious traditions. This so intrigued me... as did a white marble sculpture at the front of the church in the form of a mobius strip – you know, the winding enclosed ring with no inside or outside, all in the vague shape of the sign for infinity.

So... no seeds were planted in my growing soul by the Sunday school program at the South Nassau Unitarian Church (I wish it had been otherwise)... but seeds *were* planted nevertheless in that church community, seeds that (I probably don’t have to add) eventually led me right here.

And in these past 35 years here, I *have* seen the power and the beauty of seeds planted in the lives of our children and youth through our religious education programs – Susan and my children to begin with, along with many of your children... many now grown into beautiful, ethically and spiritually grounded adults.

We see the early shoots of such growth from spiritual seeds planted in our children every time we celebrate our Coming of Age youth and listen to these young people nearing the cusp of adulthood share their personal credos, their faith statements.

Tears may come as we listen.

I see it again a few years later when I have breakfast with the high school seniors and their families, and the seniors talk about their hopes, their fears, as well as the values and gifts they intend to bring to the next chapter of their lives, whether college, or work, or whatever it might be.

Maybe more tears...

Tears of gratitude and appreciation. With awareness that whatever else we do as a Unitarian Universalist religious community, we have surely done something right... and inestimably important... when it comes to helping our children and young people grow into the rest of their lives.

What could be more important?

And none of this happens in a vacuum. It happens in community. Community which creates safe space for our children and young people (not to mention the rest of us) to discover who they are at levels deeper than surface appearance: who they are spiritually, who they are when it comes to gender identity, to what they believe, to how they want to live.

Now... many of us adults are exploring the ancient Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*. At the outset of the text, the warrior Arjuna is immobilized by doubt as a great battle is about to begin, a battle in which family members are arrayed on both sides; he doesn't know what he should do – the killing all seems wrong, even in a good cause.

Fortunately, Arjuna's charioteer is Krishna, an incarnation of the God Vishnu. Krishna proceeds to instruct Arjuna (eighteen chapters worth) before the onset of battle – which is, it must be said, a metaphor for the battlefield of our lives

The root of Arjuna's problem, his indecision, his doubts? One commentator (Stephen Cope) puts it simply: Arjuna doesn't know who he is... and if you don't know who you are, you won't know how to act.

Who you are: as an individual, with particular gifts and roles to play in life, duties (*dharma* is the Sanskrit word), and also who you are as part of the larger whole – Brahman or Krishna or God, but which we could just call cosmos or the interdependent web of all existence.

So Krishna plants eighteen chapters of seeds in the heart and life of Arjuna, different sorts of reminders to Arjuna so that he can discover or realize who he truly is and therefore how he would want to act, to live.

This is what we – collectively in community – strive to do for our children and youth (who are of course often plagued by the same sorts of questions and doubts about who they are and how they should live) – to support them in their journey of discovering who they are and how they want to live.

(This is, too, what we strive to do for all ages: after all, our ministry is for lifelong learning and growing.)

We do this by creating safe and supportive space and time in community... for exploration of ideas and identities... that won't be judged. Since as Unitarian Universalists we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and, further, affirm that we will support one another in our spiritual growth and in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Well... you get what I'm saying.

Religious education, “educating minds and hearts” as our Old Ship ministry describes it, lifelong learning and growing... can indeed take place in solitude; but like plants in a garden, is

more likely to thrive in community... roots, as in the second reading “tangling and intermingling... interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.”

Marge Piercy continues that passage, encouraging us as Deb did a few minutes ago to “Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in...” knowing as “every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.”

Our religious education program for children and youth was quite tiny 35 years ago. Then we grew and it became quite large indeed. In recent years it has again become much smaller – and the pandemic has not helped.

But our Religious Education Committee has continued to plant and dig, continued to weave community. This said, as Deb Weiner reminds us, the entire Old Ship community is invited to be part of this weaving, this planting and digging, so that the next seasons of flourishing, harvest after harvest, will arrive.

Remembering, too, that community is never a static thing, but is generationally overlapping, hands touching hands, hearts moving hearts not only here and now but over time and change and transitions of all sort.

And sometimes – maybe much or even most of the time – we won’t see the flourishing of a life beautifully well-lived that we had had a hand in tending years and years ago.

Just as whomever it was who decided to put that circle of religious symbols on the cover of the order of worship at South Nassau Unitarian Church will never know (probably they are long gone into blessed memory by now) how the seed they planted had a formative role in the life of the guy sitting with his Dad in the safe place of a back pew, the guy who has been your minister for these past three-and-a-half decades.

Well... I, for one, have deep, abiding trust in this Old Ship community’s ability, during this liminal time in the life Old Ship, to plant and nourish seeds in the deep-piled snow, seeds for all ages as we grow into the next chapters, next era, of our ancient congregation’s life.

May it be so.