

Welcome in Spirit
(Welcome Back Sunday)
Rev. Hannah Petrie
September 10, 2017

CALL TO WORSHIP #428

READING

I discovered a wonderful new source of wisdom over the summer while I was on Pender Island, in British Columbia, where my in-laws live. Richard Wagamese, an Award-winning author and journalist was an Ojibway from the Wabaseemoong First Nation in northwestern Ontario. When he died unexpectedly at the young age of 61, just this past March, he was living in the part of BC known as The Okanagan, near Kamloops.

“One Story, One Song” by Richard Wagamese, from the Introduction & the Chapter, What We Share.

PRAYER

We pray not to something, but from something – the innermost sanctuary of our hearts, where our highest intentions are born. We step into this holy space, and allow its peacefulness to penetrate outwards, into our chest, our limbs, and our hands and feet. These hands that help us to love the world, these feet that help us to savor the world, taking us all the places we desire to go.

We feel this peacefulness go up our necks, too, and into our heads, where all manner of concerns clamor for attention.

We pray that this holiness of our highest intentions can calm the clamor, so that we may witness, and welcome in, a new clarity of purpose.

We cannot only save the world. We must also savor it. Along with the marches, the haste to send help to the victims of natural disaster; along with the advocacy we do to halt violence in the world; along with the gifts of food and clothing for the impoverished, we also take time to share our stories, deepen our spiritual fitness, and take time to breathe. Take time to drop into self, to honor who we are, most deeply.

We pray our hearts to prepare welcome, welcome to a nurturing spirit of being, that spirit which contains the wisdom of the ages, the best intentions of our ancestors, and the hopes of our better angels.

Every day there is a choice and a chance, to reconstitute the world, and we begin by nurturing our spiritual home, the home of our souls, where wondrous love, and deep peace, are always right where you left them. AMEN.

SERMON

I love that teaching of John Kakaway. That in order to grow spiritually - or in order to get something - you have to sacrifice something in return. I often consider emotional growth and spiritual growth as one and the same - when either takes place, there is greater maturity, a higher evolution of ourselves, and a deeper understanding of who we are and our place in the universe.

But man, it's hard getting there.

If you wanted to have a meditation practice, you might have to give up watching TV. TV is such an easier way to spend our evenings. If we wanted to be healthier, we'd have to give up sugar and maybe fat and salt too. Bummer. If we wanted to be wiser than we are today, we'd have to have discipline - give up on the mindless pastimes, or at least cut back - so we'd have time to hone the art and practice of listening, as we seek to address the complicated matters of the soul.

Sacrifice is hard, but feeling lost and disconnected is harder. What you'll find is that the more you practice - the more you say no to television, or whatever else, and yes to a spiritual practice, the easier this sacrifice becomes, until you realize it's not a sacrifice, it's a sound way to live your life. Then you look forward to it. Then, you also know that having such presence of mind and the ability to listen doesn't just benefit you, it benefits everyone around you.

This is how we put the horse before the cart, if we want to get somewhere toward healing the world - our aching and hurting world. We have to nurture and heal ourselves first, or strike a balance of taking time to do both.

One of the ways I nurture myself is by making sure I meet with my area UU minister colleagues once a month. We met this last Wednesday for the first time after taking July and August off. We have the meeting right there, we always host since we're the most central of all the congregations. Reverend Matthew McHale - who ministers Emerson UU church in Canoga Park, the same church we'll be combining our new high school youth group with this year - reminded me of the wonderful E.B. White quotation. "Each morning, as I arise to meet the day, I am torn between the desire to improve the world, and the desire to enjoy the world - this makes it difficult to plan the day."

Rev. Matt narrowed it down to this specific conundrum: the choice to save the world, or savor it. As much as I like questions more than answers, today I have an

answer for you: we have to do both. Savoring our unique lives is a part of what inspires us to do our saving work – it gives us strength, grounding, and balance.

I don't know about you, but I'm feeling world-weary of late – too many storms, too many fires, too much suffering and fear, too much destruction. We are living in a time of collective traumatic stress. I have close relatives who live in Florida, and while I know they're okay, it's that low-grade worry that can sap us of our energy, our life-force. The way we can protect our vitality is through health and wholeness, which includes our spiritual fitness.

Our worship theme of the month is Welcome. I want us to think specifically today about how we can take action to welcome spirit in. I struggle with this myself. Every summer, there's a little more time to think about things and view our lives from new perspectives, especially if we are able to travel or get back to nature. My summer reading consists of books I want to read that may or not be useful for ministry (such as the biography of the youthful Winston Churchill – great book! Can't use it in a sermon) and books of the more spiritual variety, texts that I hope become sacred to me, because they are good medicine.

I often prefer reading to spiritual practice. I struggle with welcoming spirit in because I am in my head too much. UUs often are. It's hard for me to find quiet time in a special place, where I can listen to my soul in meditation, read my sacred texts and ponder them, burn sage, light a candle, ring the bell. Journal, write poetry. I long to do these things, and have all the materials ready to go, but the busyness of life still gets in the way. Sound familiar to anyone?

Yes, it has occurred to me – I can't ask you all to welcome spirit in to your lives, unless I am doing it myself, too. That's one of my goals this year – to deepen my connection to my soul, to have a little discipline for personal sacred time. I will check in throughout the year in my sermons about how this is going. I am accountable to you, to this community I am blessed to serve, where people love and are loved, and belong.

Richard Wagamese says that what binds us together as a human family is our collective yearning to belong – *what binds us together* – is what brings us here to this moment – the root word of religion is religare, to bind. Wagamese says it is sharing our stories that achieves that deep sense of belonging. The more we share our stories in a context of love and trust, the more we see common motifs in our stories, and how we are, in fact, one – not just individuals bound together, but a woven whole, of earth, sky, and beyond. We are the earth part, the inhabitants of billions.

That's what I really like about Unitarian Universalism, is that we are “down to earth,” as the phrase goes. I'm so glad to announce today that we are launching a program that facilitates deep listening of one another, as we share our stories. It's called Chalice Circles, and we're beginning pilot-sized, with just two circles of 11 people each, including a trained facilitator.

Every month you commit to gather in person for an hour and a half, here at the church. The facilitator lights the chalice to begin a program of personal sharing, and most importantly of all, deep listening. This is a guided spiritual practice that only asks a couple hours a month of your time, October - May.

The way this program works is that you honor and prioritize the commitment to show up. Now I know we live in LA and we're sometimes known for our flakiness. You can't flake on a chalice circle, though of course emergencies or illness are excused. We don't take attendance at any of our events, certainly not Sunday mornings. When push comes to shove, UUism asks very little of us, lest we feel the slightest fenced in. But the Chalice Circles program deviates from this M.O. and says that having the discipline to show up for each other is how the program can work optimally.

We live in a world where some key things are waning: face-time, and the attention-span that deep listening requires. We live in a world where everyone wants to talk, talk, talk, but few are listening. Chalice Circles is a salve for these modern maladies, and it has the magic of 12-step meetings where you gain insight into your own life, by hearing your own story reflected in another's. Like 12-step meetings, it is not a therapy group, though it can be said to be therapeutic. The real magic is in the listening – when we do it for others, and the deep comfort and satisfaction we feel when we know others are really listening to us, really seeing us.

Chalice Circles, a small-group ministry program, also seeks to nurture our spiritual fitness by exploring the worship theme of the month, with questions that are designed so you can ponder them all month, and like John Kakaway taught, allow us to really sit and listen since there are “no simple answers in the matters of the soul.”

Then, at the circle, you'll get a chance to share what insights you have, and what you're still wrestling with. After everyone gets a chance to share with no-cross talk, discussion is opened up before the final reading, and extinguishing of the chalice.

I know this program well, as I was in charge of it for many years at my last post. The key to its success is both consistent attendance and excellent facilitating, which I know you will receive with Nancy Holland and Vickie Vining, our facilitators. It's going to be first-come, first served, and the sign-up sheets are on the bulletin board, just outside our sanctuary doors. But if we run out of space, please write your name down, so we can have an accurate sense of how much demand we need to meet so that we might possibly create a third circle for this year.

In some congregations, this program is called “Covenant Groups” because another way the program works well is by everyone honoring the covenant that creates safe space as you venture forth together in your spiritual explorations.

So, inwardly this year, we are going to share our stories and deepen our relationships with one another, for this is the real substance of our covenant – it's how we live out, "to dwell together in peace." We're also going to encourage one another to deepen our individual spiritual practices – including my own!

Outwardly, this year, we are going to explore another piece of wisdom of Richard Wagamese. "What we need to look for in this world," John Kakaway told Wagamese, "are the things we share. There are as many things that make us the same as there are those that make us different."

In our deeply divided world, I cling to this teaching, as a source of hope, *and* as a plan of action. Again, the answers are not simple as to how to go about this, but if we look deeply enough, we find this teaching to be true in so many ways. The extent to which neighbors are helping neighbors in Texas has been astounding – never has it been more apparent how similar we are, all needing safety, shelter, food and clean water. We've probably only heard a fraction of all the heroic stories so far. They all add up, like Wagamese says, to "one story, one song."

I treasure this idea of how we are more similar than different – we can embody this quest in the series of promises our congregation is making. I love that the formerly named "Social Justice Group to Prevent Gun Violence" has recently been re-named to "Gun Violence Prevention Promise." Covenant is a fancy word for promise – I like this idea of making promises and keeping them. It's how we walk our talk, it's how our faith informs the fabric of our lives. So not only are we making a promise to prevent gun-violence, we're also making promises to serve our neighbors, beyond our walls, neighbors who are a part of our community.

We're making a promise to help veterans, who are a big part of our rising homeless population in LA County. Early in 2018, we are scheduling a Habitat for Humanity build, that will be housing for homeless vets. We're making a promise to immigrants, whose future in our country of immigrants remains uncertain. Soon I will do a sermon about what immigrants face, and how advocating for the California Values act, Senate Bill 54, could make a huge difference toward ending the fear and suffering of immigrants. Finally, we're making a promise to the impoverished, as we continue to give donations of food and clothing each week, and fund-raise for organizations such as LA Community Partners, who helps give the poor a leg up.

In the process, I encourage you to seek out and take in the stories of veterans, immigrants, and the poor – look for the details you share with these folks we think are so different than us, look for how we are the same. We don't seek to just give a hand-out – we seek to live in right relationship with our fellow human beings, we seek to actually take responsibility for one another – a native, more tribal concept of welcome that is radical and powerful, but now currently only lives amongst people who are the same, within isolated enclaves. I'm talking about looking after people, making promises to those we would otherwise never encounter.

Finally we're going to make a promise to be a bigger part of our larger UU community, by attending a wonderful all-day workshop at Reverend Nica Eaton-Guinn's church in Conejo Valley called "Love Resists." This is a free workshop that includes lunch, and will be facilitated by an amazing leader in UU circles, Reverend Kathleen McTigue, who is the Director of the UU College for Social Justice, based in Cambridge, MA. In her words, we'll learn to *"see more clearly what we face, imagine more boldly the ways we can act, and live our values more radically and courageously on the side of justice."*

I've already registered myself, and hope that we can all Caravan together from the church. It's on Saturday, October 21. There's a flyer on the bulletin board, and we'll have a link to register in our e-bulletin in the coming weeks.

So. welcome, welcome, indeed! Welcome in spirit, a richer spiritual life, as we begin the new congregational year in our beloved spiritual home. Let us welcome in new friendships, new relationships in our wider community, and let us welcome in most importantly of all, the sharpened ability to listen. If we listen to a story deeply enough, it can touch our hearts – that space in the innermost sanctuary of our beings, where we know who we are, and how very much we share with the souls with whom we share this world.

Welcome!