

Sunday, September 27, 2020
“The Surprise of Grace”

Welcome and Lighting of Chalice

Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes. I am Rev. Betsy Tabor. Wonderful to connect almost every week - a touchstone at a challenging time.

We begin with some words about Unitarian Universalism. Good morning, Meghan & Dan....

Welcome. Here we seek justice and truth and understanding.
 Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.
 Here we seek healing and wholeness. Welcome, all.

Our service is about noticing the place of surprise in life. Some surprises shut us down, and others open our hearts. This morning we light our chalices and candles in the spirit of spiritual growth.

Centering Music - “Tzedek” (*righteousness*) Written and performed by Shana Aisenberg in honor of Ruth Bader Ginsberg

Shared Affirmation

Love is the spirit of this Fellowship,
 The quest for truth is its sacrament,
 And service is its prayer
 This is our great covenant:
 To dwell together in peace,
 To seek truth in love,
 And to help one another.

Hymn - “Amazing Grace”

A Time for All Ages - Alice Posner “In My Heart” - a poem book by Jo Witek

Reflection - Part 1 Rev. Betsy

Tuesday, when the last hope died of filling the Supreme Court vacancy after the election, I despaired. I Googled “antidote to discouragement” and up came a flood of religious websites saying that the antidote to discouragement is praising God.

Really, how many disappointments can a person take? The cynics among us say, “Nothing can surprise me now – I’ve seen it all!” And then, life proves us wrong again.

Not that all surprises bring bad news. When a job offer comes through, a letter of acceptance, a ruling goes our way, we exhale a happy, relieved “Whooh! Thank heavens!” When a blood test shows hoped for results – we cheer. When we need company and an animal turns up needing a

home...or when we get a call announcing an engagement, a due date – the reminder of love – the surprise makes our day.

Surprises act like re-set buttons. They bring us something we didn't know. Our landscape shifts, and we respond, change our plans. The word "surprise" is the same as the old French "*surprise*" – past participle of a verb that means "to seize, grasp, overtake."

Some surprises are hard on us. Game-changers. They overtake, overwhelm us. Our whole body reacts. Physically. Often starting with a sharp intake of breath. We react to a death: A stranger blurts out in an online meeting that Ruth Bader Ginsberg has died. On the screen, heads snap up. People gasp. Cry. Shout out, "No!"

Some surprises that bring us up short are private: Test results weaken the knees. We must sit down –shocked, scared, nauseous. Everything has change in an instant. A sudden disappointment does that – an unexpected break-up or rejection. A betrayal of trust. It stops us cold – and a deep freeze can set in, paralyzing and numbing.

The news, too, can take our breath away. We remember the moment we heard about the 9/11 attacks or when JFK was shot. An ad for headache relief from black-and-white TV days was a cartoon of a huge hammer pounding, banging on a miserable guy's head.

What saves us when life throws hard surprises our way? What has saved you? You've had your share of surprises and shocks. Most of us have. And here we are, still at it. We've weathered them. Learned a thing or two about the world and about ourselves. There's a reason we're still here.

Think about it. Let's give that a breath....When life has taken your breath away, what has saved you?

Joys & Concerns "Klokkeklang" (*bell ringing*) from the Lyric Suite by Edvard Grieg, played by Eve Goss

Hymn - "Meditation on Breathing" Written by Sarah Dan and performed by Kim Hamel

Meditation and Prayer

We give thanks for these days of turning
Leaves turning, the season turning,
our attention turning to what most deeply matters.
As autumn begins to blaze,
so does our longing for goodness and truth and fairness.
We pray for our country, we pray for the world.

We are grateful for each other in this circle
heartened to find strength in our shared values
comforted by each other's caring
inspired by each others' gifts.

We hold Warren Lindsey and Doug Burnell in the light this week. They have both been in the hospital. We remember friends unable to live at home – Phyllis, Willie, Joan and others.

With sorrow we remember the passion and eloquence of Elandria Williams, whose unexpected death has stunned those who met Elandria at General Assembly. A young African American, E (as she liked to be called) was a fiery, inspiring co-moderator of the UUA these several years. E's brief time on this planet gifted the world.

Let us hold a silence of remembrance for those no longer living but dearly loved and missed.

In the name of all that is good and true and holy, Amen.

[Respond to Joys and Concerns.]

Reading

“Grace” by Judith Wright

Living is dailiness, a simple bread
that's worth the eating. But I have known a wine,
a drunkenness that can't be spoken or sung
without betraying it. Far past Yours or Mine,
even past Ours, it has nothing at all to say;
it slants a sudden laser through common day.

It seems to have nothing to do with things at all,
requires another element or dimension.
Not contemplation brings it: it merely happens,
past expectation and beyond intention;
takes over the depth of flesh, the inward eye,
is there, then vanishes. Does not live or die,
because it occurs beyond the here and now,
positives, negatives, what we hope and are.
Not even being in love, or making love,
brings it. It plunges a sword from a dark star.

Maybe there was once a word for it. Call it grace.
I have seen it, once or twice through a human face.

Reflection - Part 2 Rev. Betsy

The world has thrown awful surprises at us these days: Covid surges, police brutality, census disruption, attacks on fair elections, disregard for the truth. Even a campaign in my town today urging people to drive into neighborhoods and intimidate liberals.

Discouragement can breed discouragement. It's hard to find hope. And tempting to zero in on fear. We're wired, after all, to look for threats.

But, as people of conscience, we mustn't go down the rabbit hole of discouragement. When unwanted surprises come our way, we have to take care of ourselves. We need to, so that we have what it takes to *uphold and champion what we believe*. Even from her hospital bed last week, Elandria Williams reminded us of the crucial need to take care of ourselves. Elandria wrote, "We are worthy enough to be restored and well."

Taking care of ourselves means paying attention. Even in the face of the worst things, the world offers life-giving surprises.

Out of the shock of loss, growing as slowly as a white oak, can come sweetness. *New Yorker* writer Roger Angell names dozens of loved ones now gone and says, "The surprise, for me, is that the accruing weight of these departures doesn't bury us, and that even the pain of an almost unbearable loss gives way quite quickly to something more distant but still stubbornly gleaming."¹

Out of difficult surprises come chapters of self-realization and purpose. Healing, too. Many of us here know such stories. I used to visit with cancer patients hooked up to chemo – gratefully, joyfully, they'd tell me about angels in their lives, love they'd never have known had they not gotten sick. A man, stunned to be laid off after decades of loyal service, notices in days that a longtime chronic condition is self-correcting.

Not that every difficult surprise has a silver lining. But the world abounds with life-giving surprises – we can easily miss them if we're pouring energy into what upsets us.

Paying attention to the grace of surprise is a muscle worth strengthening. Like all those varieties of pink and green coleus during Eve's astounding bell-ringing piece – I passed those plants all spring and summer but didn't see them until they jumped out at me a few weeks ago. Each leaf a bold mosaic. And those curly edges? A thrill!

Nature delivers surprises by the second. Birds and bears arrive from nowhere, demanding our attention. Gifts from the garden surprise us with so much more flavor than what comes out of a grocery bag.

¹ Roger Angell, "This Old Man," *The New Yorker* at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/17/old-man-3>

Well chosen words open our hearts. Music does too. Shana's fresh, new composition. Kim's voice. Eve – again bringing us a new piece. And – we'll hear in a moment – Mary singing "Grateful." Our tears surprise us.

Meanwhile, the Inbox overflows with invitations to music nights, lectures, films, poetry slams. Covid-19 has lit up the world with creativity! A guy here has put months into making a miniature fire tower, my height, with stairs, rope pulleys, buckets, Smoky the Bear. Every day a new surprise - now the observation deck has real windows.

Go there! The next time the news cycle dishes out another downer, look out the window. Go out there. Listen. Behold the world.

Behold each other. Delighting in one another opens our heart. Reminds us how wide this life is. Life-giving surprises slow the momentum of our spiral of distrust and worry...strengthen our resolve...fuel our ability to persist.

Google has a point. An antidote to discouragement *is* praise. Praising the world. Praising life which turns out one magnificent surprise after another. "Look! Listen!" they shout. "Admire! Praise!"

Call it abundance. Call it grace. Call it God. But most of all, pay attention to life-giving surprises. Smiley eyes over the top of a mask. A "we're all in this together" moment with a stranger. Encouragement from someone: I see you and am thinking of you. The gift to you when you write a note or check in. The miracle of a seed.

Take stock of life's surprises. Measure them. Treasure them, as the hymn goes. And gather your daily grace, like the chipmunk under the bird feeder, waiting for dropped seeds. Cheeks full, darting back and forth to their hole.

May the re-set button of surprise enliven our days and nourish our spirit. May grace awaken our senses, our awe of each other, our reverence for life. With our eye on the prize of our hopes for tomorrow, may we go forth, grateful.

The Morning Offering "Grateful" By John Mark Harrison, performed by Mary Edes

Community Response

An invitation: Share physical feelings of surprise...and a recent life-giving surprise.

Experiences of surprise (from Chat):

That warm feeling around my heart when I see a friend here at this service - shock, dismay, deep disappointment - a happy jolt in my heart - awe when each morning the leaves have turned even more into such gorgeous colors - the incredible, indescribable happiness I felt when I found out I was pregnant with my son (surprise!) - heart shattering - I did literally gasp when I learned of Elandria's passing....deep sadness - prickly feeling on the back of my neck - a warm tightening behind my eyes and a quick smile - surprised

the country is going down this road, I could never imagined it a year ago - shoulders drooped in resignation - person turning down deal of the century at UUsed - shaking head - heavy feet, heavy lower body, difficulty moving forward when hearing bad news - the bear peeking over the hedge on a the drive in the blue ridge :) - the amount of joy from a simple meal shared with loved ones - fingers hitting remote mute button when Guess Who comes on the screen - Me (when Daniel was 5 years old): You'll always be my baby, even when you're 50! Daniel: But Mommy, when I'm 50 I'll be in college, and you can't bring your Mommy to college! - Kim's voice, so soothing and love-filled - first crop of hazelnuts, squirrels haven't gotten word yet - 1st awarenesses of transition, profound joy, relief - watching the deer that hit the side of my car suddenly get up and run into the woods, so relieved! - the juvenile bald eagle at the outlet of the Bearcamp River into Lake Ossipee - crickets at night patching up the people's chaos - this morning's cold dip into the Bay at high tide....

Hymn - "Life is the Greatest Gift of All"

Extinguish Chalice/Candles

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.

Benediction

Welcome the re-set button of surprise. Surprises of all kinds will continue. We can count on them to enliven our days. To teach us, heal us, and remind us to pay attention to keep our eye on the prize of our hopes and dreams for tomorrow. May the surprise of grace bless you always.

Postlude "Harvest Home" Irish hornpipe song

View this service online until December 27, 2020:

<https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/el6UEhC2ABT0iRv5aYcvL5YAY0QYxtezAbecZbn6mg84OakeqHrybxEAHPF8oHmc.ALorJCegEvGfXHDr>

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