

“A Single Glorious Thing”
with Guest Minister Bettina Lehovec
October 24, 2021

Welcome and Lighting of Chalice - Worship Associate Barbara Lubin & UUFES Youth

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

Focusing on the big picture can induce overwhelm. “How can I possibly address all that’s wrong with the world?” A more effective strategy is to look at the small things in front of us. Focusing on the particulars renews our energy and shifts us from ideas to actions. It’s also a spiritual practice: Noticing the single glorious thing that makes our spirits come alive.

Centering Music - “Be Thou My Vision/Wake, Now, My Senses”
Shana Aisenberg, UUFES Director of Music

Shared Affirmation

Hymn - “Gather the Spirit”

A Time for All Ages - Marion Posner

From "The Winter Wind" by Michael Rosen:

From the winter wind
A cold fly
Came to our window
Were we had frozen our noses
And warmed his feet on the glass.

A single, glorious thing, at least for the fly! There is so much that we do not see and yet the more we look, the more we will know the richness that is all around us.

I have usually treasured waking up to greet the morning light and a new day. But too often now, a darkening comes between me and the light as I listen to the news of the world. I call it my gloom blanket.

I am sure many of you have, or once had, an imaginary friend. I have one that arrived recently. She is actually made of wood and cloth. She is Petunia from Portugal, Petunia of the Perpetual smile. I told her about my gloom blanket. I told her that I felt overwhelmed, and guilty that I could do so little to help in this troubled world.



“Create a tapestry”, said Petunia. “Stitch in what gives you joy, pleasure, surprise, solace. Even the littlest things, that seem insignificant in the wider picture, can be sewn in.”

“But I can’t sew,” I moaned to Petunia.

“Oh, but I do not much like the words ‘I can’t’ my dear. Helplessness leads to listlessness and we need energy to act, even in small ways to help heal our world. Don’t worry with needle and thread ~ stitch in the air! Go, think of some single glorious things that you have seen, experienced, wonder at and start stitching!” And, with that, as is the way with imaginary friends, she disappeared and went about her business.

It did not take me long to think of stories to stitch, and soon I found myself in Scotland, on a remote part of its coastline, many years ago, on a dank, damp, foggy day. I had seen a tiny symbol of an ancient stone circle on the map. There was no path to it but, through the mist and rain, I saw that someone had splashed a lick of white paint on stones here and there, so that I might find my way through the soggiess of the peat underfoot.

And I found it. The stones loomed, standing high, strong, and patient. I stood with them, feeling their endurance, their resilience, and sensed the hundreds of years of the sorrows and joys the world has known as the stones have stood there, in their silent watch.

On the way back, looking down to keep my footing in the pounding rain, I saw tiny flowers. I looked through the magnifying glass that I carry on such walks, and saw in all its intricate beauty, a sundew. The sticky droplets on its tentacles glistened in the sun like dew. On returning home, I swam in our local Chocorua Lake and there, partly concealed in the fragile moss of the water’s edge, were sundew.

Connections..... Now I understood why Petunia had asked me to stitch a tapestry ~ to stitch connections where the threads will reach, merge, combine, interact, enrich.

Petunia returned, still smiling. “Now, why don’t you stitch in the story about the fly...”

She was carrying lavender, its scent filled the air. I think carrying lavender must be connected to smiling....

I highly recommend that you find an imaginary friend!

Reflection, Part 1 - Bettina Lehovec

Years ago, I decided to try my hand at art using Betty Edwards' book *Drawing On the Right Side of the Brain*. I remember the opening exercise and the surprise I felt to see the image I was drawing take shape under my hand. The author directed me not to focus on the whole, but to start with one small piece, and to reproduce it just as it was, this particular line, the shape of it as it bends to meet the next one, instead of trying to anticipate the whole drawing I will eventually create.

The premise of the book is that most often, when we draw, we draw from the left side of the brain, the place where the analytical function resides, and we're not actually drawing what we see at all. We're drawing a conceptual representation, some *idea* of what is there. This is why we all learn to draw a house like this, or a person like this. A tree. They are representations of the truth. Not the real thing at all.

Drawing on the right side of the brain reverses the process. We don't start with a concept and fill it in from there. We start with the particulars of what we see: The shading of light and dark on the tree outside our window. The way the line of the shoulder meets the curve of the neck. We are training our eye on what is really there, not an image our mind creates.

This, of course, is the spiritual truth the Buddha tried to impart. As he wandered around India after his enlightenment, he met people perplexed by the inner light he radiated. "Are you a god?" they asked. "Are you a wizard?" "What are you, then?"

The Buddha answered very simply: "I am awake."

The goal of meditation, and of spiritual practices from many traditions, is to remove the blinders that don't let us see, to wake up, to touch reality as it really is.

We might call this ultimate reality: the sparkle of sunlight on water, the riot of red in a maple tree, the soft down on a beloved face.

Barbara Kingsolver says: "In my own worst seasons, I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon... until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again."

Can we teach ourselves joy? Can we teach ourselves presence? Is it really this simple? Simple but not easy. We slip in and out of these eyes, this way of seeing, this practice of paying attention to what is really here.

Have you had that experience? I imagine most of us have. It's like a curtain draws back, the shadows lift, and we see how startlingly beautiful the world really is.

In Thornton Wilder's classic play, *Our Town*, the young heroine, Emily, comes back from the dead to try to waken people to this simple truth. "*Let's look at one another,*" she says. But they just don't see.

"It all goes so fast," she laments. "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you."

Can we cultivate this way of seeing? This way of apprehending the world in all its beauty? Like the practice of drawing from the right side of the brain, it begins with noticing particulars. Leaving the conceptual realm in which we mostly wander to notice what is right in front of us, right now.

The good folks at Soul Matters, who shared the Barbara Kingsolver quote in their packet on Resilience last year, suggest we practice "resilient staring."

Stare at a single beautiful thing each day, they suggest. Really let the beauty take/fill you. Look long enough for this to happen. You'll know in your body when it does.

This practice of seeing, really seeing what is there, refreshes us. Gives us new energy. Moves us from our thinking brain to our heart center, a more immediate, vivid apprehension of what is really here.

It's akin to the practice of counting your blessings, naming three specific things you are grateful for each day. These are both simple practices that remind us to focus on what we have, instead of our mind's catalogue of things we don't.

So here's an invitation: Practice resilient staring for one week. Notice how it lands in you. Notice the beauty of the world around you, not as a general concept, but as a single glorious thing.

Joys & Concerns - Prelude by Rachmaninoff
Played by Eve Goss

Hymn - "Spirit of Life"

Meditation/Prayer - Bettina Lehovec

Spirit of Life, We gather today with our joys, our hopes, our sorrows, and our concerns. We gather in community, knowing that together we have strengths and solace we do not have alone. We lean into this time of meditation and prayer, a brief respite, a harbor for our bodies and souls. May we know ourselves held by the support of community, by the fire/warmth of love, by the life force energy that infuses all things. May the awareness of that life force fill our hearts and our minds. May our eyes open to see the single glorious thing that is in front of us today.

I invite you to breathe with me for just a minute more. Bring yourself home to your body. Find yourself right here. [hold silence]

I want to lift up a few of the joys and concerns that were mentioned today... We hold these with care, along with any I might have missed. We hold the joys and concerns that were not shared in the chat today. May the balm of community touch those tender places. May you know yourself celebrated and loved. Amen.

Reading - “The Wellspring of Moral Action” by Sharon D. Welch
From *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*

The wellspring of decency is loving this life in which people die, people suffer, there are limits, and we make mistakes. The wellspring, then, of moral action is not utopia, not a counterfactual vision, not a declaration that the world could and should be otherwise. Rather, it is a deep affirmation of the joy, richness, and blessing that the world is. The ground of challenging exploitation, injustice, and oppression is not a vision of how the world could be or will be in the future reign of God, or after the revolution. The ground of challenging injustice is gratitude, the heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is: to cherish, to celebrate, to delight in the many gifts and joys of life.

Reflection, Part 2

Dr. Welch’s words echo the wisdom I was trying to get at before. Shifting our attention from an idealized version of reality to what is really here. The wellspring of moral action is not utopia, she tells us, not some conceptualized idea of life as it could be, but an affirmation of life as it is. She lifts up gratitude as the key for this affirmation. We spoke earlier about beauty: noticing a single glorious thing.

This enables us not only to find our own joy, as Barbara Kingsolver does in her practice of resilient staring, but to address the suffering of the world: to challenge exploitation, injustice, and oppression; to make an impact in some tangible way.

When we focus on the big picture: everything that's wrong with the world, we can get overwhelmed. “How can I possibly make a difference?” What can I do in the face of a global pandemic, racial injustice, climate change, political chaos? The problems are so big and I am so small.

That overwhelm can shut us down. Our good intentions flounder. We’re caught in the concepts instead of the doing. A vision of the world as it should be rather than the one thing in front of us we actually can change.

Dr. Welch calls this “a middle class failure of nerve.” Overcome by the big picture suffering, we decide we can’t do anything at all. People living on the margins of society don’t have this luxury, she points out. These folks have no choice but to engage the suffering. [They don’t have the luxury of retreating into middle class angst.]

For all the good work that UUs do — and we do a lot — we also have a tendency to get caught in the conceptual. To think about the world’s problems, to talk about all that’s wrong with society, and sometimes not to do very much about it.

Dr. Welch tells us that we’re caught in an ethic of control: needing to know the outcome of our actions before we take action. Unwilling to engage a situation in which we might not emerge victorious.

Trying to draw from the left side of the brain, with the completed picture in mind, instead of looking at what’s right in front of us, right now.

Dr. Welch advocates an ethic of risk: Taking steps, not in an orderly march toward some desired goal, but to create the conditions in which change *can* happen. Opening up a matrix of possibility. Seeing what happens next and taking next steps again.

Jane Goodall said something similar when I heard her interviewed on NPR last week. Goodall has just released a new book, *The Book of Hope*, with co-author Douglas Abrams. She’s reaching out to the many young people who feel “helpless and hopeless” in the face of global crisis, she said. What Dr. Welch calls “a middle class failure of nerve.”

Dr. Goodall questions the now familiar adage, “Think globally. Act locally.” Thinking globally can overwhelm us, she said. Instead, think locally. Look around you. What one small thing can you do? Join with others in your community — our UU congregations are a great place to do that — to affect one small change.

This begins an upward spiral, Dr. Goodall said. We realize other people are doing the same thing, taking concrete steps for change in their own local neighborhoods. All around the world, people working for change.

You’re doing it here, in this community of UUFES. Writing letters to state reps. Protesting for justice. Donating food and household supplies to local food pantries.

This is hope, Dr. Goodall said. Not a pie in the sky, rose-colored glasses kind of hope. But hope grounded in action. “See if there’s something you can do,” she said. “Then roll up your sleeves, and do it.”

It looks different for each of us. This is part of Dr. Goodall’s philosophy, too. That we each have a particular way we can impact the world. Follow your interests. Follow what’s in front of you.

My friend Ridgely Fuller became aware of a controversy surrounding a statue of her great-grandfather, Melville Fuller, one time chief justice of the US Supreme Court. One of his descendants, a cousin of Ridgely’s, had commissioned a statue to stand on the grounds of the Kennebec County Courthouse in Augusta, Maine, where Melville Fuller was from.

The problem was that Melville Fuller had presided over the most damaging legislation of the post-Reconstructionist era, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 decision that established the “separate but equal” doctrine that paved the way for decades of racial segregation.

It turns out the Maine court justices were not crazy about the statue, but also were reluctant to offend the donor. After searching her conscience, weighing hurting her cousin versus confronting painful family history, Ridgely started a letter writing campaign. Hundreds of people wrote letters protesting the statue. Those letters were just what the state needed to return the statue to the donor.

We don’t all have famous ancestors with legacies to challenge. But we can all do something. Something local. Something personal. Something large or something small...

If you’re looking for a place to start, you might try this: Allan Johnson suggests making a list, ordering possible interventions from the easiest to the hardest, and starting there. My list, which is posted on my fridge, says this: Read a book. Lead a book study. Preach a sermon. Call my state reps. Talk with people outside my circle. Join a demonstration or a march. Get arrested. Step in with my body, i.e. Selma.

What does your list look like? Where can you start, today?

This too is a practice, like focusing on gratitude. Focusing on joy. Focusing on one thing in our immediate environment we really can do moves us from overwhelm to action.

What single glorious thing is calling for your attention in the realm of social change? What additional action can you take, alone or with your community of friends?

The Morning Offering

Anthem - “Grateful” by John Mark Harrison

Performed by Mary Edes

Community Response

Query: Name one small way you might enact change. Where in your community might you plug in, or maybe already are plugging in, to create positive change?

Query: Name one glorious thing that you’ve noticed in the past week. When has your attention been caught by a moment of beauty or gratitude?

Hymn - “Wake, Now, My Senses”

Performed by The Musicians of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland

Chalice Extinguishing

Benediction

We live in a world of heartbreak and joy.

May you find the one small action you can take to effect positive change.
May you see the single glorious thing that lights your spirit today.

Postlude - “Thankfulness” by Shana Aisenberg

“Thankfulness brings you to the place where the Beloved lives.”

This service can be viewed until January 24, 2022 at:

https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/r1HB_5BAy_4Yji3nSwF-vKU4U76Kv0py6f8rzeEtnMgKKn6NrF7I4Wa9pLkYT3ji.gS0ig79JAehI6cGO
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