

**First Unitarian Church of St. Louis
February 3, 2019 Worship Service
Led by Norma Vogelweid**

IN SEARCH OF THE MAGICAL OTHER ... THE MAGICAL MINISTER

CALL TO WORSHIP

We are being called to stand naked before the gift of life.
To stand before the summons to spiritual personhood
To stand before the summons to religious belonging.

MEDITATION

It is the heart that enables us to radiate the joys of another.
It is the heart that enables us to cradle their sorrows.
I invite you to join me – for ONE minute – meditating on a simple prayer, *May my heart be open.*
Sit comfortably, eyes open or closed.
I will set a timer for one minute and ring the bowl. Then rest your mind on the wish: May my heart be open ...
and gently soften your chest.

RESPONSIVE READING

The Responsive Reading is the poem by Billy Collins that was central to the Worship Service in October.

Aimless Love

This morning as I walked along the lakeshore,
I fell in love with a wren
and later in the day with a mouse
the cat had dropped under the dining room table.

*In the shadows of an autumn evening,
I fell for a seamstress
still at her machine in the tailor's window,
and later for a bowl of broth,
steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.*

This is the best kind of love, I thought,
without recompense, without gifts,
or unkind words, without suspicion,
or silence on the telephone.

*The love of the chestnut,
the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel.
No lust, no slam of the door –
the love of the miniature orange tree,
the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower,
the highway that cuts across Florida.*

No waiting, no huffiness, or rancor –
just a twinge every now and then

for the wren who had built her nest
on a low branch overhanging the water
and for the dead mouse,
still dressed in its light brown suit.

*But my heart is always propped up in a field on its tripod,
ready for the next arrow.*

After I carried the mouse by the tail
to a pile of leaves in the woods,
I found myself standing at the bathroom sink
gazing down affectionately at the soap,
so patient, so soluble,
so at home in its pale green soap dish.

*I could feel myself falling again
as I felt its turning in my wet hands.*

READING

Today's reading is excerpted from the novel "Astonishing the Gods," by Ben Okri. A Nigerian poet and author. It is a bewitching fable about the relationship between creativity, love and suffering. I invite you to pay attention to the imagery. To let yourself enter into it.

He found himself at the foot of a fabulous bridge. The bridge, completely suspended in the air, held up by nothing that he could see. He was afraid to step on it lest he would plunge down below.

"What holds up the bridge?" he asked his guide.

"Only the person crossing it, came the reply.

"You mean that if I am to cross the bridge I must at the same time hold it up, keep it suspended?"

"Yes."

"But how can I do both at the same time?"

"If you want to cross over you must. There is no other way."

"And if I do not cross the bridge?"

"You will be nowhere. You will find yourself in an empty space. You will stiffen. Become the statue of your worst and weakest self. In the morning, you will be collected by the garbage men and set up in the negative spaces of the city as another reminder to the inhabitants of the perils of failing to become what they can become. I assure you, it is better to try to cross that bridge and fail, than to not try at all."

The bridge was now invisible. He found himself looking into an unfathomable abyss. He stood at the foot of the invisible bridge, with Time howling around him. "I did not come from nothing, and I will not die in nothing," he said to himself. Soon he felt his senses falling under the beautiful seduction of the abyss. The perfect place to rest, the safest harbor from so much anxious questing. In the space of a moment, he felt himself turning to stone, with a vacuous happiness on his face. The vision filled him with horror.

There was now nothing behind him. He felt that he was living the meaning of his life for the first time. The bridge now appeared in the form of water. Then turned into a bridge of stone. Then into a bridge of fire. And

he knew that if the bridge turned from fire into anything else he would be doomed forever in nothingness. Screaming he ran onto the bridge of fire.

He became aware that the faster he ran the less distance he covered and the hotter the flames were. It occurred to him to slow down. The heat from the fiery bridge lessened. Then he remembered that the flames were supposed to burn him. And he felt himself burning. Suddenly, he felt himself flailing and kicking. Halfway across, the bridge had turned into water.

Bewildered by the sudden flooding of the bridge, he started to swim, in a panic. The faster he swam, the slower he moved. And then he remembered because he didn't want to have to go through it all over again. So he swam more gently.

Then he found himself in midair. The bridge had turned into air, and into dreams. When he found himself on solid ground, he did not have to look to know that the bridge had become solid again.

When he did look back, he found himself at the end of the most magnificent bridge he would ever see. He thought of it as the bridge of self-discovery. When he looked back again, he was astonished to find that the bridge had disappeared. It occurred to him that he had somehow managed to walk across emptiness. ... a small miracle he had enacted in his life.

SCRIPT FOR SERMON (NOT READ)

You may have already noticed that on the back of the Order of Service are two books by James Hollis. As usual when I have the gift of being a worship leader, I like you to know the primary sources for the sermon. I will make lots of statements this morning; but however forceful my language, remember always that they are offered up for your consideration. Consideration in the light of your own spiritual wisdom and religious experiences.

All relationships begin, and end, in separation. Through the bloodweb of our mothers, we start out connected to the pulse of the cosmos. Then we are thrust out, separated. All the relationships of our lives we close though that separation we call death.

Yet . . . perhaps the more significant relationship loss we spend so much of our journey on earth suffering is the loss of relationship with our own best selves.

Here we are, in the sanctuary of our Church. An insert in the Order of Service lists ministers, whether settled or interim, who have served First Church since 1937: the Reverends Plank, Clark, DeWolfe, Holt, Reed, Lovely, Meyer, Schaal, Marino, Perchlik, James. One way or another and in varying degrees, each of us, as part of the congregation, suffers the loss of these relationships too.

Yet . . . perhaps the more significant loss our congregation spends so much time suffering is the loss of relationship with First Church's own best self.

This is the sense I have since the beginning of my affair with worship here fifteen years ago. That was when Rev. Suzanne Meyer was the minister. Eventually I made a public commitment to my relationship with First Church by signing the book with Rev. Sam Schaal.

During the first week of January I walked into a restaurant and ran into a First-Church member having dinner with friends. When saying goodbye, I added: "Hope to see you at my service on the 13th."

"What's the title."

"Search for the Magical Other, the Magical Minister."

With a spontaneous kind-of sarcastic laugh, the long-time member quipped: "I think our church is too diverse to have a successful minister." I jumped: "Y...o...u weren't at my worship service in October when I talked about familiar plotlines and how they lock out imagination."

"Oh no," he defensively asserted, "I'm open. Not others." "T...h...a...t's part of your familiar plotline. Come to the worship service."

I don't know if the member went home and went to First Church's website to read the October 7th sermon. A sermon that offered gentle provocations like these:

When a service leaves congregants unoffended yet unfulfilled ... when a congregation experiences conflict over traditions or innovations in worship, it is because they are not asking themselves:

Is my heart, my soul, propped up in the pew on its tripod, open to worship this morning?"

Do I have to give up my idea of worship in order to discover what worship is – my idea which is laced through with personal preferences for theological language, readings, style of the minister or worship leader, manner of the worship assistant, music?

What familiar plotlines do I need to reexamine in order to feel that I belong to our community as we are, just as we are today, not when I joined, not when William Greenleaf Eliot brought Unitarianism to St. Louis.

That was October. The bedrock of today's sister sermon is the assertion that the quality of all our relationships is tethered to, led by our relationship to ourselves.

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You may nod your head in easy agreement with these words. You may stop nodding when you hear what your agreement demands of you.

There is a current of thought that powerfully courses through both individual lives and collective culture in many countries of the world. A thought that we know is delusional, false, but we cling to infinite ways to deny or rationalize otherwise.

The Fantasy of the Magical Other, the notion that there is one person out there who is right for us, will make our lives work. Similarly, the Fantasy of the Magical Minister. The notion that there is a minister out there who will make this congregation congeal and its membership multiply, all the while she reliably holds my hand as I search for meaning. Popular culture inseminates an idea of romance that stunts growing up. She's my better half. He completes me. A fantastical idea of rescue through others rather than inspiring a desire for personal growth.

If I outsource inner work, how much of a chance do I have for getting anywhere near a lasting sense of wholeness in my lifetime. Such outsourcing is a mindset programmed for disappointment. Adulthood teaches us all that the Other – friend, lover, parent, church leader or minister – the Other is a simple, flawed

human being just like ourselves. The Other can never carry the weight of our inner responsibilities. Nor can we carry the Other's.

No Magical Other... No Magical Minister.

Individually and as a living congregation we all carry families of origin with us – a kind of haunting. In reading the names of First Church's ministers, I know that every beating heart in these pews has personal highs, lows, or longings related to First Church. You may have heard me say how I came to belong to First Church. As I reached the sidewalk after my first worship service, I realized, for the first time in my life, nothing had seriously irritated me. That, however, does not explain why I am still here. Because in the last 15 years on occasion I have been seriously irritated. In fact, once it took all the willpower I have to not stand up, step over people's legs to walk out during a sermon.

You, too, may have had wounding moments, caused by another member or a minister. Perhaps you still hurt sometimes, no matter how long ago they happened. Simultaneously you may have hallowed memories of glory, great times, personal as well as ones handed down to you. Often sustaining collective nostalgia. There is something that goes on when I perpetuate nostalgia or resentment. I collude in making these experiences defining chapters for me in the plotline of First Church. But, gee, my memories are not the whole truth. Memory is faulty, biased, a bit fictional. Isn't yours too?

Ugh, Norma, more reflection? We've checked that box so many times already – completed a survey, showed up for a Focus group, came to the Mid-Winter Meeting, cheered on and perhaps criticized the Search and the Transition Committees.

Yes to all that...AND... yes to more questions belonging in our tool box for creating new perceptions. "What am I expecting of this Minister Other, that I ought to be doing for myself?" "What are we asking of this Other, this Minister, that our community ought to be doing for itself?" "What are we trying to outsource onto our minister?"

Open-mindedness, maybe? Recall the statistic from the Search Committee that 95% of respondents say a minister who is open-minded is very or extremely important. Okay. Now here are some familiar narratives I hear about First Church. As I repeat them, consider where they would be on the spectrum of open-mindedness.

The sanctuary – its fixed pews in rows, dark wood, dominating mural, beautiful Christian church architecture. Our sanctuary's ambiance fits better with a more formal, pulpit-centered, Logos-driven style of regular worship. Mixing in more celebratory, barrier-free, Eros-infused tones jars with our sanctuary. We like powerful musical performance, but such intense feeling coming from the chancel just doesn't mesh with our spiritual inheritance.

Legacy – our church's history is one of local prestige. Seems to be a Single Story of Glory Days, to quote Bruce Springsteen. A Single Story without mention of the controversy and conflicts that certainly went on. How open-minded are these narratives?

And, there's this statistic of the Search Committee's work: 77% of us would be "a bit" or "very" uncomfortable with a minister who is politically conservative. An honest statistic. It says nothing negative nor

positive about us. It does call for, from my perspective, self-reflection on open-mindedness. We are adamant that our settled minister be open-minded. Are we equally adamant that we individually and communally work on our open-mindedness, consciously work on it?

Leaving political leanings aside, let's circle back to worship because our top priority for a new minister is being a worship leader. How open-minded is my idea of worship? How often on Sunday mornings do I shut down, smug in my irritation over an aspect of the sermon, the worship leader, the worship assistant, the music? Only complaining to those who will agree with me. I have an alarm bell when shutting down during a service. It's physical: I notice my chest tightening. Ding, then I notice my critical thoughts. And I know – my heart is closed. Closed to what is coming from the chancel.

The prayer we meditated on was "May my heart be open." The congregation expects the Search Committee to find the minister who is the best fit for First Church. No minister can be a "best fit" unless we dedicate ourselves to practice opening our individual hearts. And from there nurture a relationship with our congregation's "best self."

Let me declare publicly: I belong in this religion, in this congregation. Furthermore, I long for a settled minister. The spiritual generosity of UU frees me to have a dynamic, interactive relationship with a minister. A Minister "Other" can enable me to glimpse the immensity of my own soul and journey. Likewise, a Minister "Other" can enable us, as a religious communal body, to glimpse the immensity of our Church's soul and unfolding.

Like the young man in today's Reading from *Astonishing the Gods*, if need be, we can scream in terror, but go we must onto the bridge if we are to embrace our settled minister. Recall what the Guide said when the young man asked: "And if I do not cross the bridge?"

"You will become the statue of your worst and weakest self. I assure you, it is better to try to cross that bridge and fail, than to not try at all."

Recall what happened once he had crossed:

"The bridge had disappeared. It occurred to him that he had somehow managed to walk across emptiness. ... a small miracle he had enacted in his life."

Performing a small miracle is within the power of this congregation.

BENEDICTION

In Benediction I offer these words from Rainer Maria Rilke.

First in the original German: "Darin besteht die Liebe: Daß sich zwei Einsame beschützen und berühren und miteinander reden."

Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.