

**First Unitarian Church of St. Louis
May 5, 2019 Worship Service
Led by Norma Vogelweid**

EQUANIMITY AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come into worship. Into the essence of what reverence is for you.

Meet me there.

Where we drop disguises, disrobe hubris

MEDITATION ON DISCOMFORT

As you comfortably sit, settle, I invite you to relive the moment you learned that the Search Committee does not have a final candidate to present to the congregation. When you knew that the end of three years of interim ministry was not yet in sight. If you are not a regular worshiper at First Church, I invite you to relive any moment in your life of deep disappointment, which you felt powerless to do anything about. A fresher one, if possible.

I will set a timer for one minute and ring the bowl. Then bring up the whole cascade of thoughts and emotions. Breathe it in allowing the discomfort completely in. Take notice how your body is reacting too. Notice any parts getting uneasy or tensing, tightening, calling out. Your mind, like mine, will wander. Maybe resist doing this entirely. Notice and gently remind yourself: no settled minister in sight.

RESPONSIVE READING

Poem "Famous," by Naomi Shihab Nye. Poet, songwriter, and novelist. She was born to a Palestinian father and an American mother.

The river is famous to the fish.
The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.

*The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.*

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

*The idea you carry close to your bosom
is famous to your bosom.*

The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,

which is famous only to floors.

*The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.*

I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.

*I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.*

not because it did anything spectacular,
because it never forgot what it could do.

READINGS

*Today's **First Reading** is one I shared in my February worship service: the excerpt 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. Come back with me into the imagery and the terror.*

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.

"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."

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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

*Today's **Second Reading** is excerpted from the article "You, Sounding Through Me," by Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew, a novelist who also tends the spiritual lives of writers and readers.*

Endel, an artist friend of mine, believes that the audience for a work of art emerges from the artist. Whoa!

This makes my head spin. Endel traces the noun "audience" back to its Latin origin, *audire*, the verb "to hear," and embraces its implied receptivity. "To audience," he writes, is to "receive from Source by truly hearing in the act of sacred listening."

Artists "audience" inspiration, and this then plants an "audience seed" in us. We cultivate the seed by making art. The audience grows as the art grows.

The word "person," he points out, means "sounding through."

If this is true, then some part of you is deeply within me. By writing I tend that part until it's strong enough to reach out across cyberspace to sound within you. Which means you wrote this piece. Thanks! I'm mystified, but grateful.

SCRIPT FOR SERMON (NOT READ)

Artists "audience" inspiration, and this then plants an "audience seed" in us the artists. We cultivate the seed by making art. The audience grows as the art grows.

That's it. That explains how the special worship services came about this year. Some part of you that is deeply within me and George has written the sermons of the worship services we've led for this interim year. You are sounding through us. We are sounding through you. And the art of worship grows.

There is an incredible spiritual generosity within Unitarian Universalism: a generosity that gives a freedom to the pew equal to the pulpit. Freedom of the pulpit – that is the Minister is expected to express personal and faith values consistent with our understanding of the covenant that binds us. Freedom of the pew: the person in the pew – whether a member of our congregation, friend, or visitor – will never be required to agree with the minister. These freedoms our religion stands for demand something in return from anyone standing where I am and anyone sitting where you are. Sacred listening.

On March 31st sitting in the pew, when I heard "We do not have a final candidate to present to the congregation today," disappointment froze me. The longing to have a settled minister is intense within me.

You too, I imagine. I didn't stay frozen for long – in an instant, I felt myself burning, flailing, kicking, just like the young man in *Astonishing the Gods*. As Worship Committee Chair, I knew there would be another worship service to worry about. From Sunday until Thursday I ran and swam in a panic to conjure up a guest speaker.

A koan in Zen Buddhism teases: "In the end how do you have steady equanimity? The wind comes, trees move; the waves swell, boats lift. In spring, sprouting; in summer growth; in autumn, harvest; in winter, storing. With the same calm, everything completely uses itself up."

Koans keep popping up in my worship services since last July. Koans have their origin in ancient sayings or records of conversations between people interested in the secret of life. They are paradoxical statements to exhaust the analytic intellect, thus readying the mind to entertain a response on the intuitive level.

I have become intimate with this particular koan on equanimity. In Buddhism, equanimity is considered neither a thought nor an emotion, it is rather the steady conscious realization of reality's transience. Neither a thought nor an emotion. Steady conscious realization of reality's transience. If I were willing to train in relaxing with whatever came, there might be nothing wrong with difficulty or sorrow. When I feel dispirited, overwhelmed, it might be taken as a request to sit down and feel more of my life. Or maybe I am happy, there I would sit too. It doesn't matter. If I don't ask sorrow to leave, or try to make happiness stay, either might be something merely present. Then, both happiness and sorrow can be interesting and even, paradoxically, satisfying. Nothing wrong with waiting longer for a ministerial candidate, nothing wrong suddenly having to handle another worship service. Training in equanimity has become a spiritual practice for me this past year. And there's a good reason for this. Because I became the Chair of the Worship Committee. Leading the committee in has been non-stop triggering for me. It kept "the wind coming and the waves swelling."

"In the end how do you have steady equanimity?" ...How can I have the calm which allows everything to use itself up. I meditate. Mindfulness meditation is understood as focusing your attention for a period of time, on the breath, an image, part of the body. All by itself, meditating in this way brings me face to face with my life as it is, thoughts coming, going, coming, going. Contemplation of koans does other things as well. Koans are a mysterious place to inhabit. This particular koan on equanimity has become not only part of my sitting practice. It hums, like a tune, within me during my day.

With the Search Committee's announcement about having no candidate, the wind came – at gale force, the waves swelled to the height of a tsunami. No doubt all our church leaders experienced the same. I was caught in the undertow of uncertainty and disappointment within our congregation. Slowly because I continue to work with the koan, I became the tree and felt the wind come. Duh, how could my branches not whip violently, my trunk, no matter how sturdy, not bend over? With this opening to self-compassion, space began to appear between my mind's thoughts, thoughts that were conjuring an unfathomable abyss below me, thoughts obscuring the solid bridge that I stood on. More space, fewer thoughts woke me up to the fact the wind had calmed. I relaxed enough for conception to happen. I felt within me the embryo of this worship sermon and the meditation on discomfort.

When I invited you to relive your reaction to the news there is no candidate, you were doing a classic meditation exercise. Diving back into an experience of distress, discomfort with the intention of noticing what is the mind's script, what gymnastics happen in your body. Often when I sit down and set my timer, I go back into a situation that knocked me to the ground, even imagining the hit worse than it was. Let my mind run down the darkest of alleys. Tremors jerk through me, a physiological reflex instilled by insomnia in my past.

Why, you might be wondering, would Norma consciously bring on tremors? You see, I have learned the truth of this teaching:

Difficult circumstances serve my interior life.

The more my equanimity muscles are strained, the richer my interior life can become.

Grief, heartbreak, loneliness, vicious circles in relationships, illness, helplessness – the list of synonyms for pain is endless. No doubt, everyone in this congregation has stories to tell. Perhaps you were tutored like I was in how to “talk yourself up,” “see the big picture, the long run,” “replace bad thoughts with good thoughts,” “this too shall pass,” “be grateful, be grateful, be grateful,” “praying for help.” By my fifties I could do all these in several languages.

Then in 2003, after twenty-five years, I chose to leave a lifestyle I loved in other countries and relocate to the US. I was clear what I was giving up, and what I intended to gain. My parachute of self-confidence was well constructed. Once here the ego-erasing alienation of the country frayed the cords little by little. Until an event snapped them. When it happened, my mind, in self-defense, issued an emergency declaration to my heart: “I will not feel this pain again.” It was at 11 o'clock at night. My physical body leapt to high alert and lock down, which shut out sleep, that night, the next, the next. All the tactics I'd learned could not penetrate the armor of fear of feeling such pain. In the ensuing months, years, I found ways to let sleep sneak up on me. In 2009 without sensing any connection to my fears or to my closed heart, I started to meditate every day, starting with five minutes. Five.

Having a meditation practice is a gift. It allows me simply to be, which is how it lets luminosity penetrate the scars I carry.

I know now from experience and study that a closed heart is the root of suffering. Keeping my heart open – that is the essence of my spirituality. That means that I am emotionally exposed to the human pain of my individual existence, and to the inexhaustible struggles within my family, friends, church, city, country, world.

Thus the criticalness of steady equanimity. Of transfiguring an adversarial relationship with pain into a friendship. Mindfulness is my method and its base is a daily sitting meditation practice. It's hard for me to properly explain, yet it changes everything. The formal sitting trains an essential skill for steady equanimity. NOTICING: sitting still in my front room for twenty-five minutes gives my mind loads of opportunities to plan dinner, brainstorm the Worship Committee's agenda, worry about my daughter. In other words it gives me loads of chances to NOTICE. The more I notice being hooked by my storylines, without judging them, the more I can let them go. Staying on the spot with the rawness they cause in my body, I detox my addiction to, craving

for a life I should have, but don't. It is an excruciating slow, haphazard path. Evenings and nights, my susceptibility to storylines ratchets up.

Training in equanimity, whatever method you may use, allows us to see our reactions as habits of mind, workable habits that are not immutable.

Today's entire worship service hopes to grow the equanimity that exists in our congregation while we cross the bridge to eventually embracing a new minister. By trusting uncertainty, not refusing reality's transience, we can individually be more sensitive to the shift in energy happening in our church. We can choose to fully participate in the small miracle being enacted.

I have a confession. In our congregation, I hope to become famous.

In the way a pulley is famous

In the way a buttonhole is famous.

BENEDICTION

Let us **stay** standing before the summons to spiritual personhood.

Let us **stay** standing before the summons to religious belonging.

Let us **stay** standing before the gift of life that this church is.