

Our Testimonies Matter

First Universalist Church of Rochester, NY

September 16th, 2018 10:30am

Prelude *Round About the Mountain – Spiritual arr.:* Noel
DaCosta (1929-2002) [Brock Tjosvold]

Words of Welcome [Rev. Lane]

Welcome to the First Universalist Church of Rochester, where we are nurturing the spirit and serving the community. Whoever you are, we welcome you. Wherever you come from, we welcome you. Whomever you love, we welcome you. Whatever your story, whatever you bring into this space, you are welcome here. It is so good to be together.

Announcements [Nancy Gaede]

“Good Morning!” (wait for response)

I am Nancy Gaede, a President of the Board of Trustees.

I extend a warm welcome to our visitors and guests. It is a special pleasure to welcome those visiting with us for the first time. If you have not done so already, we invite you to fill out the Visitor Response card found on the back of the Joys and Sorrows card. This allows us to connect with you if you are interested in learning more about our congregation and its programs. We also invite you to join us for refreshments following today's service in the Clara Barton Lounge. There you'll find some friendly people at our welcome table who can answer any questions you might have.

Please see your insert for an outline of today's service, along with some information on our upcoming activities and events;

The Automatic External Defibrillator (AED) training class will resume October Oct 14, 21, and 28. See Kate Fleury or check the bulletin board in the Clara Barton Lounge and the one on Court Street to sign up.

The Book Group will meet on September 30 at 12:15 pm in the Chalice Room is discuss *The Lightkeepers* by Abbi Geni.

The Ministerial Start-Up Workshop Weekend is October 12 and 13. More details will be available to you very soon. Check the weekly email 'This Week,' as well as the bulletin boards.

Out of respect for the worship service that we are about to share, please be sure that your cell phones are turned to worship mode.

Thank you.

Welcoming Each Other [Rev. Lane]

As we continue to nurture our spirits in community together, please turn to your neighbor and introduce yourself. If you would like something to talk about, you can share a line or two about what you have been up to this week. Let us greet one another.

Opening Hymn #361 *Enter, Rejoice, and Come In*

1 Enter, rejoice, and come in. Enter, rejoice, and come in. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

2 Open your ears to the song. Open your ears to the song. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

3 Open your hearts ev'ryone. Open your hearts ev'ryone. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

4 Don't be afraid of some change. Don't be afraid of some change. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

5 Enter, rejoice, and come in. Enter, rejoice, and come in. Today will be a joyful day; enter, rejoice, and come in.

Call to Worship [Rev. Lane]

We bring so many stories into this space,
Stories of celebration, stories of joy,
Stories of heartbreak and failure,
Family stories- the ones we are willing to tell
And the ones we would not dare utter.
We bring stories of lives long-lived,
Lives just begun, lives lost.
Bring your stories here,

Testimony [Patti Goodwin]

I was at a time of great upheaval in my life. Then a friend suggested I go back to church.

For at least the first month I attended this church, I cried every Sunday. I cried as I heard the words or as I sang the hymns. I felt empty. I stayed here because this is a healing place. But my story is not unique. Many of us came here searching for something. This is what I found:

There is a comfort in the silence—a pause from the frantic pace of my daily life.

There is music which calms the soul and elevates me to realms of beauty.

The sermons and the prayers give me something to think about and something to strive for.

The sanctuary holds all who enter together in an embrace of protection.

And the people...they provide ears to listen, hands to hold, and shoulders to cry on. Then there are the smiles of understanding and the laughter we share.

“We laugh, we cry, we live, we die...” as the hymn says. I’m so glad I have found a place to be together with you.

Affirmation of Faith [Patti Goodwin]

Please rise as willing and able for our affirmation of faith and remain standing as we sing our doxology.

Love is the doctrine of this church;
The quest for truth is its sacrament,
and service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace;
To seek knowledge in freedom;
To serve humanity in fellowship;
To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony
With the source and meaning of life:

Thus do we covenant with each other and with all.

Doxology [Patti Goodwin]

From all that dwell below the skies
Let songs of hope and faith arise.
Let peace, good will on earth be sung
Through every land, by every tongue.

Offering Words [Patti Goodwin]

We could all use more light in our lives. We can look at something hundreds of times, but when the light shifts, we may see that object or idea in a totally different way ...almost as if for the first time. This church provides the light that enhances the way we understand our world and keeps us learning. Our support of this church helps that to happen.

Our Plate offering for this Sunday will benefit Rochester City School District School #7. First Universalist's adopted city school is always in need of various items for the children. Your gifts go towards book bags and teacher supplies for special projects for children who are deeply in need of some extra support. Our offering will ensure that a couple of teacher 'wish lists' will be filled and teachers in this underfunded school will feel better supported.

Thank you for your generous support for School 7.

This morning's offering will now be gratefully received. If you are a visitor, you are our special guest. Feel free to give as you wish.

Offertory *Nkosi Sikele L'I Afrika – arr. K. Cann: Enoch Sontoga (b. 1873-1905)* [Brock Tjosvold, Choir]

Message for All Ages *It's A Matter of What You are Listening For* [Janet Clarke-Hazlett]

[Text to Come?]

Hymn of Affirmation
Starr

Sheltering Arms of Love by Nancy

Beneath our arms, we shelter you,
you warm our hearts as you pass through.
May our love guide you as you go,
to help you learn and help you grow.

Musical Interlude
(1931-1964)

A Change is Gonna Come: Sam Cooke
[Brock Tjosvold]

Joys and Sorrows

[Rev. Lane]

We now enter into this tender and reverent time of sharing joys and sorrows with one another.

[Share Joys and Sorrows.]

We share a sorrow this morning for Jonathan Lewis who bore witness to a police shooting on a young, Black man in Buffalo this past week. Jonathan is the son of our Office Administrator, Andrea Lewis.

We hold in our hearts the family of this 30 year old man, Rafael “Pito” Rivera who died following an officer involved shooting this past Wednesday.

And we cast one final stone for all those joys and sorrows that remain in the silent sanctuaries of our hearts, reminding ourselves that our lives are full of celebrations as well as difficult times, that this community is here to hold it all.

Pastoral Prayer [Rev. Lane]

Clear a space in your heart,

Clear room and leave behind the many things that clutter your mind,
Leave behind the to-do list and the things you left behind at home,
Leave behind the next thing, the things you hope to get to this afternoon, after church.
Leave it all behind, just for a moment and bring yourself here into this space.
Let's breathe together for a moment.

[PAUSE]

Each joy, each sorrow, each disappointment, each heartstring tugged, each milestone, each loss, each moment together, each moment apart...

All a story.

All a part of our stories.

This place, this house of love, this created safe space,

This nurturing, this spirit,

This nourishment, this flame,

This service, this pew, this well-worn space.

All a story.

All a part of our stories.

Where can we listen?

Where can we companion?

Where can we share?

Where can we pour out the contents of our hearts and feel heard?

Understood?

All a story.

All a part of our stories.

Amen. Blessed be. May it be so.

Let us share is a time of silence with one another.

[Ring Bell to signal beginning of meditation.

SILENCE.

Ring Bell to signal end of meditation.]

Hymn of Contemplation #396 *I Know This Rose Will
Open* (sung in the round 3x through)

I know this rose will open.
I know my fear will burn away.
I know my soul will unfurl its wings.
I know this rose will open.

Reading *excerpt from When They Call You a Terrorist: A
Black Lives Matter Memoir by Patrisse Khan-Cullors* [Patti
Goodwin]

And I know when I hear Dr. [Neil] deGrasse Tyson say [that we
are made of stardust] he is telling the truth because I have seen it
since I was a child, the magic, the stardust we are, in the lives of the
people I come from.

I watched it in the labor of my mother, a Jehovah's Witness and a woman who worked two and sometimes three jobs at a time, keeping other people's children, working the reception desks at gyms, telemarketing, doing anything and everything for 16 hours a day the whole of my childhood in the Van Nuys barrio where we lived. My mother, cocoa brown and smooth, disowned by her family for the children she had as a very young and unmarried woman. My mother, never giving up despite never making a living wage.

I saw it in the thin brown face of my father, a boy out of Cajun country, a wounded healer, whose addictions were borne of a world that did not love him and told him so not once but constantly. My father, who always came back, who never stopped trying to be a version of himself there were no mirrors for....

Our foreparents imagined our families out of whole cloth. They imagined each individual one of us. They imagined me. They had to. It is the only way I am here today, a mother and a wife, a community organizer and Queer, an artist and a dreamer learning

to find hope while navigating the shadows of hell even as I know it might have been otherwise.

Centering Music *I've Got Peace Like a River- Spiritual*
arr.: Emma Lou Diemer (b. 1927) [Brock]

Sermon *Our Testimonies Matter* [Rev. Lane]

Central to us as individuals and central to any gathered body are our stories. It is no mistake that each week, we dedicate sacred time to listening to the joys and the sorrows of our lives. Each card, each brief sentence is a story. And we don't always get to experience the depth of that story, but we do gather to listen, to share in reverent expression of the narrative that unites us- a narrative of life itself, of being alive in this world.

We have so much to learn from one another's stories. As our message for all ages this morning reminds us, it's a matter of what you are listening for. Beneath each brief synopsis is a depth of detail, experience, and emotion. People have been getting together

ever since people began on this world, ever since languages were invented to tell stories. There are large-picture stories about why the world is the way it is, creation myths, and the like. And there are stories of personal experience, however exaggerated or starkly honest they may be. Each story we tell helps us to shape our own understanding of who we are and how we are in relationship outside of ourselves. Stories are so deeply powerful.

And I have been listening to your stories in the months leading up to this day. I will continue to listen to your stories as we meet one-to-one to hear a little bit about who you are, to hear a little bit about where we are. You would be amazed at the amount of storytelling that goes on in just one hour.

I have been realizing anew how much there is to learn in the act of listening. Just staying there and devoting complete attention to another person. I will be the first to admit that I don't always do it perfectly. And I will also be the first to admit that I have so much to learn about this community, about all of you. You have some fantastic stories. I don't want to hog all the good listening to

myself, so there must be a good way for us to be sharing our stories together and listening to one another.

One thing I am continually learning in the listening is that I have no idea who you are just based on looking at you. It is a heart-expanding and mind-expanding act to listen to the stories of those who have different experiences from us. We learn something new about how the world works or how the world looks through another set of eyes. And there is always something unexpected about a person's story, something that my initial judgements based on appearance could have never told me.

When you hear the phrase, “a Black Lives Matter memoir,” what are you expecting to hear in that personal narrative? [Pause] What images come to mind? [Pause] What do you think that story might be about? [Pause]

I was deeply inspired by the social justice Project Team in this congregation when I heard a discussion would be happening next month on the book, “when they call you a terrorist: a Black lives matter memoir” by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele. I was so inspired, I decided to take up the book for some summer reading

to see what this memoir was all about. I have to admit- I had some preconceived notions going into this memoir. I was expecting to read deep calls to action, to hear difficult details, to be challenged to get further involved in this justice struggle. From what I had seen in the news, I was expecting to read about loud protests, about violence, about rage.

Instead, I heard the stories of the life of Patrisse Khan- Cullors. These are heartfelt stories about her origins- about her parents that we heard in this morning's reading. Stories about addiction, about racial profiling, about mental illness, about family, about a heart in a community of hearts stirring for something bigger, for lives to matter even when people would say they didn't. This is a story about poverty, about how poverty intersects with race. This is a story about children being born, about romantic relationships, about the theology that supports an activist.

I'm doing my best not to spoil the plot here as I hope you will read it and join in the discussion with our Project Team in October.

But what I'm telling you this morning is that this story is way bigger than I could have ever imagined. And it opened my heart to

what the experience is of a Black, Queer woman growing up in Los Angeles and seeing over and over again the ways that Black lives were not mattering, the way Black lives are not mattering to folks who are white. Hers is a powerful story and I am grateful for the gift to listen in. I cannot know what it is like to be Patrisse Khan-Cullors. I can only listen and learn about her experiences.

Humans are so very complex. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us of the danger of a single story in a TED talk she did in 2009¹. She highlights through the eyes of her college roommate in the United States the many ways that we tell a single story of Africa. Adichie's roommate upon meeting her wanted to hear her "tribal music." She didn't believe that Adichie would know how to use a stove, she didn't expect her to know English.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie grew up in a relatively middle class home in Nigeria, where English is one of the primary languages. A single story has often been told in the United States about Africa—that it is a poor continent (sometimes referred to as a country) that has been through catastrophe after catastrophe.

¹ Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi; The Danger of a Single Story; https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en#t-606363

A single story is dangerous. It tells us that this one group of people is a particular way. Often the single story is told about folks who are not part of a dominant class of people, who are not granted power in a structural sense. And we tell single stories all the time through popular images in the media, through advertisements, news stories, and social media.

I know that a single story could be told about my life. I know that you can look at me and see that I am relatively young. In that way, I can fit into the single story of being inexperienced, of being tech-savvy, of being any number of stereotypes out there about young folks these days. But none of that honors the experiences I have had thus far in my life or the wisdom of a fresh perspective. When I tell people I identify as Queer, there is often a single story there as well. And when I say I am a minister, this can be a really tough single story. Folks feel they cannot swear around me, feel like I should be acting a certain way, put me on a pedestal, and expect that I pray more (maybe not so much from a UU perspective). A single story is dangerous. And it could be told about any one of us.

So, how do we liberate ourselves from the single story?

And I am using that word liberate intentionally here². To liberate means to set someone, whether it be ourselves or others, free. To be free. And I would say that those who buy into a single story are as much in need of freedom as those who the stories are being told about.

How do we liberate ourselves from the single story?

The liberation comes in the listening. It comes in the relationships of trust that are built when we ask someone to tell us their story. As we hear and read stories of those who we may know a single story about, we begin to learn about how much more is below the surface, how much we had not and could not have seen without listening to others.

And the liberation, the life-giving comes when we tell our own stories as well and feel fully heard. Being able to share pieces of ourselves in our communities, in relationship is so important to our well-being. When we tell our stories, we tap into a piece of our own lives. We are invited to go deeper than just the one sentence or two we give to folks in passing or the two lines we have available on the

² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/liberate?s=t>

Joys and Sorrows cards. To tell our story is to complexify the single story that is told about us. And what I am learning about this community is that there is no single story that can describe you.

This brings me to the art of offering testimony. Last week, Joy Lecesse brought forward a story of taking a step outside of her comfort zone to serve on the Faith in Action Council here at First Universalist Church. Today, Patti graciously offered her experience of coming to this church in a difficult time and finding here a worshipping community that held her. Each one of us has a story to share here. Each one of us can speak to the ways this faith and this community has asked us to grow in directions we would have never expected. Even if you are here for your first Sunday ever, you have taken one courageous step to begin in a community you are just newly learning about. You have a story to tell as well. Save all of us from the single story of the newcomer (Please)!

When I think of the term testimony, I often think of folks getting up in church and speaking to the ways they have been saved. In looking up the word, it is defined as an open declaration or a

profession, as declaration of a witness³. Here, when we offer testimony, we are invited to witness to the transformative power of this community, to the transformative power of our faith.

This past summer, alongside “when they call you a terrorist,” I also picked up the book (you wanna know what we do to prepare for ministry? We read...) “Testimony: The Transformative Power of Unitarian Universalism” edited by Meg Riley, Senior Minister of the largest church in our denomination, a church without walls or borders called the Church of the Larger Fellowship. This book shattered my single story of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Stories were told from the perspectives of lay members, clergy, religious professionals, and folks of all ages. Special to this book is including the personal stories of incarcerated and formally incarcerated Unitarian Universalists who are a part of the Church of the Larger Fellowship’s prison ministry, called Worthy Now. I come fairly pre-inspired around being a Unitarian Universalist, but this book was really giving me life. Each time I read a story, I was more and more excited about this faith. And I

³ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/testimony?s=t>

want you all to share in this excitement with me. Let's liberate ourselves from the single story of what it means to be a part of this community!

We tell our stories not solely for the sake of our own growth and transformation. Stories have the power to connect us to the stardust that is our source. They help us to know that we are not alone. They help us to be in touch with both the similarities of human experience and the vast and beautiful differences that exist among us. Our stories, our testimonies matter. They have the power to heal, to bring life more sharply into focus, to liberate each one of us from the single story, and to bring us to a place of understanding rooted in empathy.

I wish for each one of you to get to a place of telling your story, whether it happens in a public forum like this pulpit or it happens one-to-one. I wish for each of you a time of deep listening that leads you to a place of liberation from a single story that had been holding you back. May we know that our stories, our testimonies, along with the testimonies of our neighbors and those we have yet to meet, matter.

Amen. Blessed be. May it be so.

Closing Hymn *#1008 When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place*

When our heart is in a holy place,
When our heart is in a holy place,
We are bless'd with love and amazing grace,
When our heart is in a holy place.

When we trust the wisdom in each of us,
Every color, every creed, and kind,
And we see our faces in each other's eyes,
Then our heart is in a holy place.

When our heart is in a holy place,
When our heart is in a holy place,
We are bless'd with love and amazing grace,
When our heart is in a holy place.

When we tell our story from deep inside,
And we listen with a loving mind,
And we hear our voices in each other's words,
Then our heart is in a holy place.

When our heart is in a holy place,
When our heart is in a holy place,
We are bless'd with love and amazing grace,
When our heart is in a holy place.

When we share the silence of sacred space,
And the God of our heart stirs within,
And we feel the power of each other's faith,
Then our heart is in a holy place.

When our heart is in a holy place,
When our heart is in a holy place,
We are bless'd with love and amazing grace,
When our heart is in a holy place,
When our heart is in a holy place.

Benediction [Rev. Lane]

Postlude

Extinguishing the Chalice [Patti Goodwin]