

PRELUDE MUSIC

Come Into This Place of Peace

Come into this place of peace, and let its silence heal your spirit
Come into this place of memory, and let its history warm your soul
Come into this place of power, and let its vision change your heart.

GIVING VOICE TO THE SPIRIT - Carol Caouette

**Bright Morning Stars
Hush**

WELCOME - Lisa Borg

Good morning, and welcome everyone, to White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church. I am Laurie Wenker, serving on your Board of Directors.

Service participants today include Victoria Safford, Nico Van Ostrand, and Rev. Jack Gaede, supported by Erin Scott and Anna Gehres. Music today is from Carol Caouette, Craig Hansen, and the Limns.

After the service today, from 11:15 to noon, we hope that you will join us for our Cyber Social Hour. We'll put the Zoom link in the chat box.

Welcome, everyone, to our church. Together we grow our souls and serve the world.

CALL TO WORSHIP - Jack (Rev. Rebecca Edmiston Lange, adapted)

Come in
Come into this space which we make holy by our presence.
Come in with all your vulnerabilities and strengths,
fears and anxieties, loves and hopes,
for here you need not hide, nor pretend,
nor be anything other than who you are
and who you are called to be.
Come into this space where we can heal and be healed, forgive and be forgiven.
Come into this space where the ordinary is sanctified,
the human is celebrated, the compassionate is expected.
Come into this space –
Together we make it a holy space.

Carol Henseler will light the chalice.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE Carol Henseler (no text available)

OPENING WORDS (in unison) - Victoria

Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant:
to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another

HYMN - Every Night and Every Morn SLT #17

STORY - Nico Van Ostrand

This morning's story is also an invitation, in the way that most stories are if we pay close enough attention to them. As I share this story, I hope the things I describe call to mind your own memories and put you in touch with your senses. And my invitation to you is to find your way outdoors at some point after service ends--or even just open the window for a while. And take in the sights, sounds, smells, and feeling of interconnectedness with nature.

In the park near where I live, the grass is slowly turning from brown to green. I love going for walks there, and at this time of year I have the added challenge of picking out a dry path between mud puddles. Often on one side or another of those puddles are paw prints or small shoe prints from a dog or a kid who chose "through" instead of "around." As I turn the corner and pass the baseball diamond, my neighbors are shouting advice and directives to each other during their cricket match. I hear the crack of bat on ball and watch which direction everyone runs to make sure I'm not at risk of being hit by the ball.

During this particular walk, it smells like rain--like Spring rain which is different from Summer rain, somehow. Maybe it's because Spring rain is usually water plus decomposition, and Summer rain is water plus cookout. There are a few leftover clouds in the sky as I head towards the playground, but the sun is out and I can feel it against my skin because for the first time in a while I'm not wearing a coat or even long sleeves. There are kids on the playground today, laughing loudly and running around while their grown ups chat at the picnic table.

As I continue down the path away from the cricket match and the laughing kids, the allergy tickle begins and I curse/bless the beautiful, newly sprouted flowers. It's quieter on this end of the park, and I can hear squirrels making the bizarre noises that they do, and rushing through last year's leaves to scurry up a tree just in case I'm about to try to eat them. And those trees--the wind blows just as I pass, as if to remind me that as I breathe, the trees breathe with me.

Have you ever journeyed through nature like this, and noticed similar things?

During walks like this, I like to take time just noticing, and sometimes that simple acknowledgement of the world around me is enough.

But sometimes, especially when I've had a hard day or I'm feeling particularly deep, I add another layer: For each thing I notice, I notice it again in whether it is currently alive, used to be alive but is no longer, or if it was never alive.

The things currently alive--a new flower, baby animals--I hold with joy.

The things that used to be alive, but that no longer are--dry brown leaves, an animal's skeleton--I acknowledge their life, and their contribution now to the circle.

The things that never were alive--rocks, sunshine--I thank them for their steadfast presence.

And in this noticing, somewhere, I exist.

I hope you will wander out into the fresh air sometime soon and recreate this story for yourself, noticing the things you are connected to, that I am also connected to, and how wonderful and complicated that is.

MEDITATION - Rev. Victoria Safford

[more text here]....

...Watch, now, how I start the day in happiness, in kindness. AMEN

INTRODUCTION TO THE OFFERING - Lisa Borg

Every financial gift to our congregation goes to support the programs we've come to rely on as anchors in our lives: gathering space and materials for children, youth and families, choral rehearsals and music, classes and small groups, justice work and public witness, pastoral care, rites of passage, Sunday services. You can contribute to the offering today by sending a check, or by following the easy prompt to "text-to-give." Thank you for your generous support!

OFFERTORY - Everything is Changing

Let nothing upset you, let nothing frighten you.

Everything is changing.

Only now is changeless, patience attains the goal.

Who has now lacks nothing, now alone fills all needs.

Let nothing upset you, let nothing frighten you.

Everything is changing, changing, changing.

READINGS - Victoria

The first reading is a poem by Mary Oliver called "Lead"

Here is a story

to break your heart.

Are you willing?

This winter

the loons came to our harbor

and died, one by one,

of nothing we could see.

A friend told me

of one on the shore

that lifted its head and opened

the elegant beak and cried out

in the long, sweet savoring of its life

which, if you have heard it,

you know is a sacred thing.,

and for which, if you have not heard it,

you had better hurry to where

they still sing.

And, believe me, tell no one

just where that is.

The next morning

this loon, speckled

and iridescent and with a plan

to fly home

to some hidden lake,

was dead on the shore.

I tell you this

To break your heart

By which I mean only

That it break open and never close again

To the rest of the world.

The second reading is a wisdom story from Anthony de Mello

*A man who took great pride in his lawn
found himself with a large crop of dandelions.
He tried every method he knew
to get rid of them. Still they plagued him.*

*Finally he wrote the Department of Agriculture.
He enumerated all the things he had tried
And closed his letter with the question:
“What shall I do now?”*

In due course the reply came: “We suggest you learn to love them.”

Years later, he thought to himself: I had fought them with every means in my power. So learning to love them was no easy matter. I began by talking to them each day. Cordial. Friendly. They maintained a sullen silence. They were smarting from the war I had waged against them and were suspicious of my motives. But it wasn't long before they smiled back. And relaxed. Soon we were good friends.

My lawn, of course, was ruined. But how attractive my garden became!

MUSIC Swim (The Limns)

I've been waiting such a long time
For my ship to come in
And now I've found been pulling on the wrong line
I've got to cut paint and jump in
I can swim

There's water in my blood and skin
It's in the air that I'm breathing
I don't know what I've been hiding
I've got to jump in
And swim

There's water in my blood and skin
It's in the rain I'm feeling
I don't know what I've been hiding
I've got to jump in
And swim

I've been a ship with no rutter
Wandering out on the open water
And now I know that I'm bound to find the shoreline
If I could just be happy where I am
I could swim

There's water in my blood and skin
It's in the air that I'm breathing
I don't know what I've been hiding
I've got to jump in

There's water in my blood and skin
It's in the rain I'm feeling
I don't know what I've been hiding
I've got to jump in
And swim

And it goes like this
Around in a circle
Goes around around around
And it goes like this
Around in a circle
And it's bound to bring me home again
It's bound to bring me home

SERMON - Jack Living in the Midst of Dying

Nature writer Barry Lopez has spent a lot of time exploring the Grand Canyon. He has dwelt for long stretches of time in the Inner Gorge of the Grand Canyon, and he wrote one short paragraph that has really grabbed my attention this month. He says, "The living of life--any life--involves great and private pain, much of which we share with no one. In such places as the Inner Gorge, the pain trails away from you. It is not so quiet there or so removed that you can hear yourself think, that you would even wish to. That comes later. You can hear your heart beat. That comes first." There is just something about the simplicity of his words that stopped me. First, his assertion that the living of life involves great and private pain. Not exactly inspirational or hopeful, but there's something just so deep and true about it. Sometimes all we need to hear is the simplest phrase--a phrase so basic that it almost appears trite. Life involves great and private pain. Okay...that tracks. What's next?

Well, he says that much of this private pain is shared with no one. **Not even one.** Whew! When I think about that possibility, it really breaks my heart. The idea that someone, many someones are living with a great and private pain and they feel unable to share that pain with a single other person. Wow! That just sounds so incredibly lonely. I mean...I know that it takes incredible amounts of courage to open up to others and to share your pain. It takes tremendous strength and resilience to trust that the person who you're sharing with is willing to hear your pain and sit with you, to grieve with you, and to mark your loss. I'm also clear that this very dynamic is one reason that therapy can be so powerful.

It is also a powerful part of belonging to a religious community where you are expected to come in and be fully present with your own vulnerabilities, as well as holding the anxieties and fears of others. And we are able to hold all of that because we also bring in our strengths, and we make room for each other's loves and hopes. That community life is integral to our church. We are interconnected. We feel each other's pain, because we trust each other enough to share it. We give it to each other as a gift, because when you know more about my pain, you know more about me. We are doing this thing called church by making meaning of our lives--**together**. We are trying to see through the pains and losses and challenges that come our way and figure out where our feet can land. We are trying to find our way out of the forests of depression and loneliness where we sometimes get lost.

Lopez says that when you are there in the Inner Gorge, "the pain trails away from you. It is not so quiet there or so removed that you can hear yourself think [or] that you would even wish to. That comes later." I imagine him standing there in the dry desert heat, hiking up and down the crevices, noticing the native plants and the wildlife, maybe even paying attention for scorpions and snakes and other biting stinging creatures. I even imagine the possibility that overhead might be circling vultures--that ugly-beautiful animal that we associate with death, going around and around just waiting for their moment to pounce and feed on some poor unfortunate corpse. And in this moment, he might be feeling or remembering his pain, but he says that then is

not the time for him to think about it. The brain work and the thinking part--the mental processing of his pain--that has to come later.

He says, "You can hear your heart beat. That comes first." Before you think about your great and private pain, you have to feel it in your heart. The impact beats on your heart...thump, thump. The rhythmic pattern of pain and loss, transitions and change. Right now, we are in the middle of a period of great loss and incredible potential for growth. And as many people who have experienced adolescence know, growth often comes with pain. And right now, we are growing. We are learning things fast--maybe it even feels too fast. Our world shifted on its axis really quickly last spring, and we reacted and adapted as quickly as possible. It was hard and painful, sad and stressful. And now...our world is shifting again, but the shift is happening at a pace that feels glacial. We are doing our best to try to line up our values of justice and equity, access and inclusion with the science and with all forms of health--public, mental, emotional, and spiritual. This work is deep spiritual work, and we are going to be holding it together as a community. We are having four congregational conversations on Zoom over the next few weeks, starting this Wednesday, and I hope you can join us. It will be important to hear from you about the ways you are imagining and dreaming about engaging still with our community and re-engaging with our beautiful building--a sanctuary to so many and in multiple ways.

When Lopez talks about being in the Inner Gorge of the Grand Canyon, it almost feels like he's talking about being in some kind of Inner Sanctum--a holy place for him. A special place which few people travel to and inhabit for long stretches of time. And I understand that well. Don't you? A place where silence weaves together with human longing, pain intersects with wisdom, solace interlaces with activism, and music harmonizes with memory and builds toward a hopeful future. It reminds me of our sanctuary, and I imagine that it might remind Mary Oliver of the place she has found where the loon still cries out

"in the long, sweet savoring of its life which, if you have heard it,
you know is a sacred thing.,
and for which, if you have not heard it,
you had better hurry to where
they still sing.
And, believe me, tell no one
just where that is.."

She has found one harbor herself, and she wants to keep it secret. And we have a different impulse with our building, with our sanctuary. We want to use it wisely and share it with all who come. We want to give access to all in equitable ways while honoring our covenant to help one another, to support the most vulnerable, to welcome newcomers looking for safe harbor, and to honor the cycle of life and death as it visits us. Which brings us back to our monthly theme: mortality.

We know death. It touches all of us. We see it all around us. People die; our pets die; trees fall down; roadkill happens; sometimes we kill our house plants. Sometimes on our nature walks, we encounter an animal who reached its last breath and collapsed. Its carbon particles slowly disintegrating--pieces of the dead animal feeding other animals, flies, bacteria. Its organic material decomposing and reconstituting itself in other forms--in the rich loamy soil, feeding the plants that grow from there, which in turn feeds the bugs and the bees and the herbivores, which again die feeding the carnivores, and it continues. So it goes. We know death. Death is not the enemy. What might happen if we were to say hello to it? Greet it in the morning like an old friend? But how in the world can we become familiar enough with death where we can call it an old friend? Don't worry...I have three easy steps. Embrace. Notice. Encounter.

Embrace your own mortality non-obsessively. Death is not the opposite of life...it is the ultimate result of life. We know this. We see this. And when we are feeling grounded and secure, we might be able to come within six feet of it. But when we are already feeling anxious or insecure, wounded or grieving, our mortality can scare us even more. It can cause us to close up and clam up instead of staying open to the world and all of its complexity--the sorrow with the joy, the pain with the pleasure. There are many ways to remind ourselves how to embrace the reality and the weight of our eventual deaths. There is a Buddhist practice to

name and meditate on your mortality five times per day in the hope that you avoid taking for granted your life, your breath, and your beating heart. The hope is that you will take those opportunities to focus your living on the essentials.

In preparation for this month's theme, I journaled about my own mortality and ~~my relationship to it. I imagined my memorial and what I would want said about me.~~ I wrote about a time when I had seen my own mortality up close. It was September 9, 2004, and I was one year out of college. I was 22, and I owned a house with two friends. I don't want to say that we were clueless, so I just won't tell you how we were. I was working three different jobs, hustling to make as much money as I could at just over minimum wage. On average, I was working somewhere around 60 hours a week, and there were two days a week in a row that I basically worked from 5am-10pm. I guess you could say I was young and thought I was invincible. On one particular Thursday, after having just completed my two consecutive triple shifts, I was driving between my morning and my afternoon job. I was driving down to Lakeville on I-35 at 1pm, and I fell asleep at the wheel. As often happens with traumatic accidents, I don't exactly know what happened next. But I have a vague memory of waking up, seeing imminent danger and trying to brake and swerve, but the next thing I remember was the paramedics asking me questions while I looked straight ahead at the fence on the side of the freeway that I had crashed into. None of it made sense, but I started to become aware of what happened. I realized that there was a small cut on my chin and an even smaller cut on my knee. That's it. No one else got hurt, and I had two cuts--the scars of which are barely visible anymore.

This was my mortality lesson moment. I had to take a long and slow look at my life and how I was living it. I think the universe was helping me understand that I needed to prioritize my living over my money-making. With the help of my close friends, I made a plan to ensure that I made some changes in my lifestyle so that I could actually be around to enjoy them. I made a commitment to a healthy work-life balance. It's been a struggle, but that's life. And I'm grateful that I was open to learning this essential principle. I'm also happy that I didn't become obsessed with my death or decide never to drive again (which could have been my takeaway). That is no way to live. Mystic and poet Thomas Merton says:

If we become obsessed with the idea of death hiding and waiting for us in ambush, we are not making death more real but life less real. Our life is divided against itself. It becomes a tug of war between the love [of life] and the fear of [life]. Death then operates in the midst of life, not as the end of life, but rather, as the fear of life.

After my car accident, I figured out a way to find a healthy and well-rounded way of living that was aware of my mortality without being afraid of it. And this takes courage. I don't want death operating in the midst of life; I would rather be living in the midst of dying.

Okay, so now that we got a handle on Embrace, we move to the second point: Notice. **Notice the natural cycles of life and death all around us.** In the natural world, in the seasons, in the cosmos, and even down to the microscopic level of bacteria and viruses. Every fall and spring, we see death and rebirth all around us. The browning of the fall leaves and the green shoots of irises that poke through them every spring. Mary Oliver tells us about the loons that came to her harbor and died one by one of nothing she could see. One might assume it was a bacteria or a virus or some other living or half-living thing that was trying to survive off the liveliness of the loon. So it goes. Parasites leech off of other life forms and weeds dominate the prairie. But then the plants and animals around them adapt to survive. And then there is another adaptation as a counter-response. So it goes. And by the end of the season, the prairie soil is composed of the interlacing of living and dead grasses, intertwined both above and below the surface of the earth--forming an ecosystem of organic and inorganic matter. So it goes. This is life. This is our world. And Mary Oliver says:

I tell you this
To break your heart
By which I mean only
That it break open and never close again
To the rest of the world.

How can we remain open to the death and dying all around us in nature? We can answer the invitation that Nico gave us in their story to go outside today and take a nature walk. Slow down, look up, and appreciate. Notice the things that are currently alive. Notice the things that are no longer alive. And notice the things that were never alive.

And in that noticing, we begin to wonder about the other beings whose living is bound up with our living and whose deaths are bound up with our deaths? Which brings us to our final point: Encounter. **Encounter and honor the mortality of those around us.** Once we have embraced our own mortality and noticed the cycles of life and death everywhere we go, we can begin to encounter mortality in others. We notice it in small ways--catching an obituary here or there or stumbling upon the news of the death of a beloved public figure. But we also notice mortality in big and deeply personal ways when a family member dies or a close friend almost dies. How do we stay present to the loss and to the waves of grief that come? It would be so easy to shut down, but this is where we get to flex our muscles of compassion. Sometimes a person who we never knew or even met dies, but the death sends ripples through a community or even through a whole country. We say their names. We remember them even though we never knew them personally.

More than a decade ago, as a younger member of the Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus, I remember that we used to sing a song about those we lost to the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. At one point, the conductor asked how many people had lost a friend or lover to the pandemic and nearly every person in the room raised a hand--some had tears in their eyes, some had memories--still others had resolve. Some were still HIV-positive themselves. There were about five of us present in our 20s, and we were the only ones without hands in the air. There are days that I forget the ancestors that came before me--the ones who opened doors and who paved the way with their tears and their hopes, their fears and their tenacity. And there are some days when I get a glimpse of that tragedy. I realize the weight and depth of the suffering held by those who came before me. I have heard of a few jaw-dropping anecdotes that certain people living through the AIDS pandemic lost nearly one in every three friends. 33%. I think about this sometimes while on a nature walk with my queer family--12 of us all told, and I try to imagine which four wouldn't be around if we had been born 20 years earlier. Would it be me? Would it be my guy? Or would we have been one of the lucky friend groups with a lower statistic?

I'm reminded also of the underresourced queer and trans folks of color who created the drag queen scene and ballroom culture. Despite a pandemic claiming their lives and the lives of their friends and with poverty nipping at their heels and in the giant shadow of the greedy corporate drug-fueled boom of 1980s Wall Street, they still put on boisterous underground balls, where queens and kings and fairies and butches donned fabulous outfits and walked and twirled and vogued and competed. They were crowded, popular, bold, and brash celebrations of life right in the face of death. The winners took home cheap trophies and more pride than they could carry.

This subculture has had incredible influence over popular culture even to this day, including slang that has survived for more than 40 years, and queens still use it to describe someone living boldly in the midst of pain and persecution. It is language that is used to honor a person who is stepping out (as Carol said in her Chalice Lighting). Someone who is activated and prodded into action by the injustices of our world--and I don't mean just racism. Our oppressions are intersecting, interlocking, and they are multitude. Our earth is groaning...as are our cities under the weight of economic inequality, gentrification, and our legacy of racist real estate laws and city planning. Our trans and nonbinary siblings are being attacked by bigots and state governments, and let's not forget that many of them are also potentially being oppressed or marginalized for any number of other reasons as well--ageism, poverty, colorism, harmful immigration policies, or discrimination based on disability--whether or not that disability is visible to others.

To celebrate life in the midst of dying is radical. It's counter-intuitive and counter-cultural, but it's also necessary. Death is always around us. It is the natural end result of living. The only way one could avoid the pain of dying is to live one's life so small that once you die, people won't even notice the difference. And that's no way to live.

*Finally he wrote the Department of Agriculture.
He enumerated all the things he had tried
And closed his letter with the question:
“What shall I do now?”*

In due course the reply came: “We suggest you learn to love them.”

Years later, he thought to himself: I had fought them with every means in my power. So learning to love them was no easy matter. I began by talking to them each day. Cordial. Friendly. They maintained a sullen silence. They were smarting from the war I had waged against them and were suspicious of my motives. But it wasn't long before they smiled back. And relaxed. Soon we were good friends.

Can we learn to love the dandelions? I'm not asking you to love COVID or HIV or other viruses. I will not do that. But I am asking you to love the world...and this world includes viruses and loons and dandelions and orchids, cancer and eagles, pain and good fortune, heartbreak and humor, vultures and prairie grasses, coincidences and intention, witnesses and activists. Our world is full of these tensions and complexities. And in the midst of all this dying, there is living. We did a lot of living this year, and we will remember this year for many years to come. How can we remain broken open and never close again to the rest of the world?

Please join me in singing “We Are a Gentle, Angry People” #170 in the gray hymnal.

HYMN We Are a Gentle, Angry People #170

CLOSING WORDS Lisa Borg

Please join me in the closing words:

May peace dwell within our hearts, and understanding in our minds.

May courage steel our will, and love of truth forever guide us.

FAREWELL - Jack Gaede

Thanks, everyone, for joining us today. If you're new to our church, welcome. We are so glad that you are here. Please join us for our cyber social hour, starting at 11: 15. All are welcome. It's a wonderful way to connect with fellow churchmates--the veterans and the newcomers. The link to the gatherings is in the chat box. And please join us next week for a special service honoring Earth Day.

Let's get busy living in the midst of dying. It's what we always do anyway...whether we know it or not. We are sending you love from Minneapolis, White Bear Lake, Stillwater, and 328 Maple. Keep practicing resilience, friends. And don't forget...embrace, notice, encounter. Go in peace.

POSTLUDE I'll Fly Away

Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away

To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away

I'll fly away, oh, Glory, I'll fly away

When I die, Hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away

When the shadows of this life have gone, I'll fly away;

Like a bird from prison bars has flown, I'll fly away

I'll fly away, oh, Glory, I'll fly away

When I die, Hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away

Just a few more weary days and then, I'll fly away

To a land where joy shall never end, I'll fly away