

Home Worship for May 17, 2020

The following material is offered for those who want to create a common at home service this Sunday with your families, a few friends, or individually. We wish you all good health as we navigate our new circumstances together.

The Worship Committee

CENTERING THOUGHT: “Praise the World in all its Pain and Blessing” by Maureen Killoran

We are called today, from the midst of pain and challenge, to praise the world. From a world that appears broken, we are called to praise life’s moments of joy and grace. From time that seems to freeze in ongoing exchanges of platitudes and blame, we are called to reach out to those around us...to connect with those we care about...to try to make amends with those from whom we are estranged. The world is too fragile. There is too much pain. Let us bring our hearts together on this day. Let us praise the world, in all its blessing and its pain.

CHALICE LIGHTING:

At the beginning of our services we join Unitarian Universalists throughout the world to light our chalice, the symbol of our faith. It’s flame reminds us that we are part of something much greater than ourselves.

The reading for dedicating the chalice today is “**Out of the Flames**” by Sara Eileen LaWall

Out of the flames of fear
We rise with courage of our deepest convictions
to stand for justice, inclusion and peace

Out of the flames of scrutiny
We rise to proclaim our faith
With hope to heal a fractured and hurting world

Out of the flames of doubt
We rise to embrace the mystery, wonder and awe
of all there is and all that is yet to be

Out of the flames of hate
We rise with the force of love
to celebrate our shared humanity

Out of the flames we rise.

**MEDITATION: Adapted from “Meditation on Hope and Love in a Time of Struggle”
By Alice Anacheke-Nasemann**

We recommend that you follow our worship practice of reading the meditation aloud, then follow it with silence for contemplation, meditation or prayer according to your own spiritual practice.

In a world so filled with brokenness and sorrow
It would be easy to lose ourselves in never ending grief,
To be choked by our outrage
To be paralyzed by the enormity of suffering,
To feel our hearts squeeze tight with hopelessness.

Instead, this morning, let us simply breathe together as we hold our hearts open.

Slowly, breathing in and out:

As our hearts fill with compassion, and we pray for healing in our world and in our lives.
As we open ourselves to the transforming power of love, and pray for peace in our world and in our lives.
As we hold hope in our hearts, and pray for justice in our world and in our lives.

Breathing in, we are the prayer and the healing.
Breathing out, we are the love and the peace.
Breathing in, we are the hope and the justice.

May we know our strength.
May we be filled with courage.
May our love flow from us into this world.

Amen, blessed be, and may it ever be so.

STEWARDSHIP OF OUR CHURCH: “As a Fire Exists by Burning” by John Saxon

“This religious community exists by its mission as a fire exists by burning. But a fire cannot burn without fuel. And it is the time and energy, the imagination, vision and creativity, the compassion, the love, and the financial support of the members and friends of this community that fuels our mission to nurture and sustain a welcoming, inclusive, and diverse liberal religious community that transforms lives and serves the world.

Your support—the free and generous support of each and every member and friend of this community—is what fuels this community and its mission and, without your support, the

flame of justice, community, and love cannot burn brightly to warm ourselves and be a beacon in a world threatened by division and fear.”

Even though we cannot meet together at our church building during this time, our expenses are ongoing. Please remember to continue to honor your pledges, and if you are able to donate as you would have to the offering plate and First Sunday Lunch basket.

Thank you to all who have continued their giving and pledging by sending checks through the mail or via their bank. Another way to donate is to click on [give now](#) which takes you to the church’s website Giving page where you can click on DONATE. You can donate by credit or debit card and do a one-time or recurring payment. (Although the church uses PayPal, you don’t have to be a member of PayPal to donate.)

COMMUNITY—Joys and Sorrows.

Lisa Bovee-Kemper reminds us in her “Circle of Care” that, “ in religious community, we share our joys and our triumphs, our sorrows and our broken places. In this circle of care, we make space for the complexity of life, the myriad experiences that bless and break our hearts. The truth of human experience dictates that on any given day, we each come to the table with hearts in different places.” It is especially so during this period of isolation from one another.

Please see the “UUs Together” and Friday Update emails for the concerns of our members and friends if you wish to lift them up by name or send them messages of support.

We set aside this time, to share the joys and sorrows of the members of our church family and to lift each of them up in our thoughts. We send:

- Shared joy to those who are celebrating good news or joyous events in their lives to wish them well.
- Comfort to those who are struggling with loneliness during this time of isolation from friends and family, and those who are mourning the loss of a loved one.
- Strength, courage and restoration of health to those who are ill.

If you are able to please drop a stone for each of these in a bowl of water and let the ripples remind you that what affects one of us affects us all.

HOMILY: “Making Meaning in a Tie of Nonsensical Noise, Part II” by Andrew Davis

Our faith community affirms and promotes the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. We affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. These declarations are the first second, and sixth guiding principles of Unitarian Universalism. They are no more or less important than our other four principles, but they

are bound to orality in ways that our other four principles are not, and it's the implications of this bond that I want to explore today.

As I mentioned last week, orality is one of three modes of communication, the other two being literacy and secondary orality. Orality emerges from the spoken word, literacy from the written word, and secondary orality from electronic communication, which means that orality finds meaning in relationships, literacy in logic, and secondary orality in images.

The two people most responsible for showing us these modes and their implications are Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, so I'll be referring to them as I go, and I'll start where McLuhan started, with *King Lear*. McLuhan didn't write many words about the play—not quite seven pages worth of probes, barely enough to even qualify as analysis—but he used them as a jumping off point to explore how literacy and the printing press forever changed the nature of orality's relationships, and in turn our ideas regarding dignity, justice, equity, compassion, peace, and liberty—the *essential* elements of our first, second, and sixth principles. Now, I know that might sound a bit hyperbolic, and many critics thought McLuhan was, shall we say, less than sane when he first put forward his ideas, but sometimes a little premeditated insanity is a *good* thing, especially when it's a response to the madness of *King Lear*.

Imagine if you will, Shakespeare sitting with his buddies, trying to come up with an idea for a play to follow *Timon of Athens*, which, as you might guess, didn't do all that well because most people have never heard of it. Suddenly, Shakespeare jumps up and says, "I've got it! Imagine this old guy who's King. Used to be smart, but now he's losing' it, and we show him going all the way over the edge. He knows he wants to step back from the work of being king, but he really does like the perks that come with the life. I mean, who wouldn't? So, he decides to have a contest between his three daughters to see which one loves him the most by having them each declare their love for him."

Shakespeare pauses to see his friends looking at him skeptically, but then continues undeterred. "Trust me. We'll have Lear give the best land to the daughter who makes the best declaration of love to him, so that he can spend the rest of his life being spoiled without doing any real work. And as a special gift to *all* of his daughters, they'll have the privilege of showing him excessive gratitude as he moves from one daughter's home to the next, and back again, with 100 unruly knights in tow. What could possibly go wrong?"

Because it's Shakespeare, everything.

The two older daughters, who both hate the old man, lie through their teeth to win the contest. The younger daughter, who really does love her dad, refuses to play the game, saying, "unhappy that I am, I cannot heave/My heart into my mouth. I love Your

Majesty/According to my bond, no more nor less,” while her older sisters force back a smile, pretending to be offended at their sister’s lack of professed love.

And there you have the split between orality and literacy.

One daughter, who believes love is knowing your role and sticking to it, embodies orality; her two sisters, who believe relationships are whatever we want them to be and love is nothing but a tool to help you get your way, reject orality for literacy. Now, I’m sure I’m not the only member of an audience who has wondered aloud how Lear could be so stupid. After all, it is an easy question to ask about a man who today would surely believe the emails sent to him from a Nigerian prince, but it’s also the wrong one to ask.

The question we need to ask is this: why can’t Lear see past what’s right in front of him? For McLuhan, Lear is fooled because he is a child of orality benumbed by the transition to literacy. In Lear’s world, information is performed: if it looks and sounds good and true, surely it must be both good and true. Performance is all. Tradition is all. Or as Shakespeare put it, “Ripeness is all.” For Lear, no individual would dare challenge life as he knows it because as king, Lear is the center of *all* life. His younger daughter, Cordelia, is right there with him, even though he foolishly banishes her because she can’t perform a lie. She’s as stuck in her role as Lear is in his, and to paraphrase Goneril and Regan, the two older sisters, a “Stupid little fool.”

They can say this because they are children of literacy seeking to step outside of the roles that orality has given them. While Lear and Cordelia can only see orality, Goneril and Regan can see both orality *and* literacy. For them, information is stored and therefore a commodity to be sliced and diced with logic and point of view. The individual is all. Change is all. Winning is all. If dad gets in the way of change, then dad has to go. If sis is stupid enough to stick with him, then there’s more for us.

Now, Shakespeare would never have analyzed his own work this way. He was living through these changes and reflecting them in his art, not analyzing his art to explain the changes. I’ve barely scratched the surface of all the tragedy he put in his play. There was so much change swirling around him that Shakespeare couldn’t see an end to it, so he matched the pain in his play to the change he saw swirling around him.

With *King Lear* as a preface, then, it’s easy to think that everything about literacy is bad and we should just go back to the good old days of orality—but we’d be wrong to think so. In his book *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong argues that oral thought is, among other things, conservative and traditionalist, emphatic and participatory, human referenced, and situational: the perfect soil in which to plant the seeds of morality and let them grow into moral codes the world over.

After all, moral codes are about relationships: relationships between people, relationships between peoples, relationships between gods and people, between nature and people, and between the universe and people. The shalts and shalt nots from the TANAKH, or Old Testament, are just one big “how-to” guide for relationships. The stories from Hindu mythology only show us right and wrong relationships. The five precepts from Buddhism, nothing but relationships.

The *Analects of Confucius* were so grounded in relationships that everything in Confucianism grew out of The Five Relationships: father and son, older brother and junior brother, husband and wife, older friend and junior friend, and ruler and subject. Every native American, Polynesian, African, Celtic, and Aboriginal legend, myth, or tale only show us how to do relationships well or poorly. Sumerian and Egyptian mythology? You guessed it, also about relationships. Regardless of the culture, if it began in the time when orality ruled the world, stories about life were stories about relationships, which means they were stories about morality because morality is nothing more than the set of rules that govern human behavior in relationships and the roles our relationships require of us so that it's easier to remember the rules we're supposed to follow.

It is tempting at this point to think that oral cultures were somehow better than our own, but we would be wrong to give in to such temptation. Orality created both the Ten Commandments *and* slavery. It gave us both a pathway to nirvana *and* a caste system that trapped the less fortunate in a hellish, earthly existence. It put an end to the Period of Warring States in China where entire populations were put to death just because the victor wanted to show off, but it also made women second class citizens who were barely more than slaves.

My point is that at its best orality was a very good way of ensuring dignity, justice, equity, compassion, peace, and liberty for the privileged people in a culture. For everyone else it was varying degrees of not so much. But, without orality literacy would have had nothing to build on.

Lucky for us, Ong doesn't just address orality. He also tells us that literate thought is, among other things, abstract, objectively distanced, analytic, and creative. Literacy is the soil in which reason and science grow and thrive, but first literacy has to wrestle orality to the ground and bend it to its will without breaking it. You see, literacy drives us into ourselves and demands that we create an interior self that gives substance to our relational self; thereby, giving us ethics, which means we are no longer bound to the status quo, but can create a new status quo, which we can also update whenever we want.

We know from *King Lear* that if used incorrectly, ethics destroys morality, but if used correctly it strengthens morality. Unitarian Universalism may not be perfect, but we are trying to use ethics correctly, and this isn't just wishful thinking on my part. Our seven

principles are the result of ethical, not moral thinking, which means that dignity, justice, equity, compassion, peace, and liberty aren't what they used to be because we aren't what we used to be. Women aren't chattel. Slavery's an abomination. The caste system is not only obsolete, but antithetical to the goal of liberation.

We know we still need morality to survive, but we no longer need to insist on one morality for everyone, and not because we've become dangerous relativists who think anything goes. Quite the contrary, it's because we've become responsible relativists, meaning we know how to put limits on ourselves.

We still need to talk with one another, to encourage one another, to challenge one another as we navigate our way through right over wrong, but in the end we each get to make those decisions on our own. You see, the argument that people have individual rights, one of which is the right to think for themselves, makes it impossible for the orality gods to successfully force a single moral code on a large group of people.

Literacy won't allow it. Orality fanatics may attack science and the very possibility of earned expertise. They may seek to ban some books and rewrite others. They may try to redefine science to include religion, and intentionally blur the lines between history and propaganda. So yes, there will always be someone trying to turn back the clock, especially when people are afraid of a world that seems out of control; but in the end, once people realize they can carve out an interior self for themselves, most will choose to live in the present, rather than harm themselves and others by trying to return to the past.

By the end of *King Lear*, nearly everyone was dead. The two major characters who survived only did so because they learned to balance orality with literacy. For them, relationships mattered, but not so much that they were blinded to reality. For them, logic mattered, but not so much that they abandoned decency. For them, morality mattered, but only when strengthened by ethics. In other words, they each knew their role, but weren't about to let it destroy them, so they created new roles for themselves.

Likewise, we too know that roles still matter, but we also know that we all have many roles in life and aren't stuck in any of them forever. This is why our first, second, and sixth principles find their origins in the morality of orality, but reach their maturity through the ethics of literacy.

We cannot affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, unless we believe every person has the same inherent capacity for worth and dignity—regardless of their gender, race, sexual orientation, economic status, religious belief (or lack thereof), or nationality. We know this because of the universality of relationships *and* logic, the power of morality *and* ethics, the significance of orality *and* literacy.

We cannot affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, unless it's for all humans, regardless of whether or not they are friends or strangers, rich or poor, members of a majority or a minority, like us or not like us—whatever it is that “like us” might mean. We know this because of the universality of relationships *and* logic, the power of morality *and* ethics, the significance of orality *and* literacy.

And we cannot affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all unless all means all, regardless of country and language of origin, the color of your skin or the texture of your hair, the food you love or hate, the traditions you value or don't—whatever it is that makes you similar to or different from another group. We know this because of the universality of relationships *and* logic, the power of morality *and* ethics, the significance of orality *and* literacy.

But we *do* apply our principles to everyone, by which we mean that we aren't the boss of others and that they aren't the boss of us. Of course this also means that our principles have never been more important. It's our principles that let us assess the validity of our roles, and change them as we see fit. In a world of orality, we were forgiven for all the damage our roles allowed us to do so long as we were good and faithful servants. If we were loyal to a fault, then our faults were overlooked. If we became immoral because our morality demanded it of us, then found comfort in knowing we did evil for the sake of good.

In a world of literacy, however, there is no king to take on the sins of his loyal subjects, and we can't excuse away bad behavior because our role demands it of us. It's our fault when we do wrong. Our honor when we do right. And when each of us finds the perfect balance between orality and literacy, living a life of honor is actually easier than living a life of fault.

To close, I'd like to consider an old question that seems applicable here: when you look in the mirror do you like what you see? In the world of orality, as long as you followed the rules you were given, you always liked what you saw. You weren't responsible for yourself as long as you followed your role. But in the world of literacy, you only like what you see when you look in the mirror if your physical self is consistent—not perfect, but consistent—with the principles your interior self chooses.

As a group, we've chosen seven principles to live by. We all get to add whatever other principles we like for ourselves, but those are for us individually, not the group as a whole. And while I think we have to acknowledge our failings and try not to repeat them, I also think we don't improve ourselves unless we remember our successes and try to build on them. So as you move through this week I encourage you to reflect on a time when you were tempted to reject a principle you hold dear, but know you overcame that temptation and remained consistent with your guiding principles.

Until we meet again, stay safe, be well, and may the balance of Brigit be with you always.

CLOSING: “Blessing at Departure” by Robin F. Gray

We call for this blessing on all gathered together whether in body or in spirit...

May the flame of our community ignite a love bold enough to share.

And, in return may we all be embraced by a love that remains constant in times of sorrow and in days of great gladness.