

**“ONCE ONLY”
January 8, 2023**

**Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode
Service Leader: Bob Nuffer
Musicians: Harmony Rutter, LeRoy Davidson
Story for All Ages: George Stratton
Slide Prep: John Huffstetler
Technician: Dan Parrish
Zoom Hosts: Dianne Whitaker, Bryce A. Bennyhoff**

Quote for slide prior to service

“For last year’s words belong to last year’s language
And next year’s words await another voice.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.”

(T.S. Eliot, from “Little Gidding,” in *Four Quartets*)

Lighting of Chalice

In times of darkness, we stumble toward
the tiny flame.
In times of cold, we seek
the warming fire.

In times of repression, we reach for
the lamp of truth.
In times of loss, we pray for
the comforting light.
In times of joy, we light
a candle of celebration.

Spirit of Life, as we kindle this light,
help us find what we need this day.

(Brian Kiely)

Opening Words

Holy and beautiful the custom which brings us together in the presence of the Most High:

To face our ideals, to remember our loved ones in absence, to give thanks, to make confession, to offer forgiveness, to be enlightened, and to be strengthened.

Through this quiet hour breathes the worship of ages, the cathedral music of history.

Three unseen guests attend: faith, hope, and love.

Let all our hearts prepare them place.

(Rev. Robert Leavens, 1878-1961):

Greeting & Introduction to Service Theme

Greetings to all, both to those of you here in the sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually.

This past week I had a chance to review your “Luminescence Service” from last Sunday in which you greeted the new year – on New Year’s Day itself – with readings and the lighting of five candles representing important values in our circles, then concluding the service with each person having the opportunity to light their individual candle.

And though I wasn’t physically present, it feels like a beautiful ritual tradition that you have created and maintained.

This morning, on this second Sunday of January, I would like to introduce you to another ritual related to the turning of the year, a ritual known as a “Composting Communion” designed to clear space and make energy available for whatever is before us in the coming year.

This “Composting Communion” will take place at the end of today’s service, immediately following my sermon message.

Opening Hymn #55: “Dark of Winter”

Our Opening Hymn is titled “Dark of Winter,” the words of which will also appear on the screen.

I invite those of you in the sanctuary to rise in body or spirit – while those of you Zooming in are encouraged to sing along, or hum along, or simply attend with appreciation – as Harmony and LeRoy lead us in singing.

1. Dark of winter, soft and still, your quiet calm surrounds me.
Let my thoughts go where they will; ease my mind profoundly.
And then my soul will sing a song, a blessed song of love eternal.
Gentle darkness, soft and still, bring your quiet to me.

2. Darkness, soothe my weary eyes, that I may see more clearly.
When my heart with sorrow cries, comfort and caress me.
And then my soul may hear a voice, a still, small voice of love eternal.
Darkness, when my fears arise, let your peace flow through me.

(Shelley Jackson Denham, words & music)

“ONCE ONLY”

Introduction

The month of January is named after the Roman god Janus, a deity depicted with two faces placed back-to-back – one face looking backward, the other forward.



On this second Sunday of January of January, I will use a poem as the text for my sermon message – a poem that, Janus-like, looks both backward upon what is now behind us in the old year and the past, and which looks forward to what we can take with us from the past into the new year and the future.

The poem comes from the hand of Denise Levertov, who lived from 1923-1997. She grew up in England but spent most of her life in the United States, her last eight years in Seattle, living near Seward Park on Lake Washington with a view of her “beloved Mount Rainier.” She is buried at Lake View Cemetery in Seattle. The poem is titled “Once Only” ... but I’m going to read it twice, as poems are often difficult to take in at a first reading.

Once Only

All which, because it was
flame and song and granted us
joy, we thought we’d do, be, revisit,
turns out to have been what it was
that *once*, only; every invitation
did not begin
a series, a build-up: the marvelous
 did happen in our lives, our stories
 are not drab with its absence: but don’t
expect to return for more. Whatever more
there will be will be
unique as those were unique. Try
to acknowledge the next
song in its body-halo of flames as utterly
present, as now or never.

(Denise Levertov, “Once Only,” from *Selected Poems*, pp. 199-200)

Positive experiences that block us

In this poem, Denise Levertov seems to me to have perfectly hunted down in words a common human misconception that undermines our well-being and happiness.

The experiences the poet is talking about in this poem are very positive experiences, “marvelous” experiences, as she says – experiences that have, perhaps, delighted us, surprised us, moved us, lifted us, illuminated us, and filled us with joy and beatitude.

Ironically, however, the way we take in these positive experiences, and the expectations we develop around them, thwart us and block us from having these experiences again.

Our tendency, says the poet, is to believe that a very positive and beautiful experiences in our lives form the *base* from which similar or even more glorious experiences will arise.

We tend, says the poet, to take these experiences as the first in “a series” that will continue upward and onward; or, if not always upward and onward, at least experiences or a state of being that we can return to, have again, or “revisit.”

And here, says the poet, is where the problem lies ... because, sorry, that’s not the way life is.

These marvelous experiences, these illuminations, these ecstasies, these glories, these beatitudes are what they are.

They are not twice, or thrice, or ever again; they are “*once*, only.” They belong to their time and place and cannot be carried forward or transferred to another address.

That was the moment!

Can you think of times in your own life where everything seemed to be clicking and you had something going on that was delightful, precious, and beautiful – say a circle of friends, or a family life, or a career situation? And there seemed no reason for this to end. But it did end.

Friends moved away.

 Separations took place.

 Children grew up and made their own lives.

 Your career path took a very different turn.

 Age came upon you.

 Illness occurred.

 Local, regional, national, world events took an unforeseen turn.

Looking back, you see that you didn’t really appreciate what you had at the time ... and, largely, because you assumed it could go on ... and on ... and on.

You took that time for granted. You thought you could live there forever. You thought you could build upon it. You thought that life would always be like that ... and perhaps even better ...

... but, no, *that* was the moment! It was *that* moment!

“Invitation”

The poet uses an interesting word to describe these glorious experiences of our past. It's the word “invitation.”

The poet doesn't deny that these past experiences are “invitational,” but she suggests that we misapprehend and misunderstand the nature of the “invitation.”

We tend to think that these past experiences are an “invitation” to try to repeat or re-capture them, to build upon them, and to consider them as the beginning of a series.

But just here, writes the poet, is where the error lies ... for it's not an “invitation” to repeat or re-capture the past; rather, it's an invitation to see that life is always *to the moment* ... that each moment, that each time of life, holds its own meaning and value and miracle ... if and when one is open to it.

So, the “invitation” is this: If you have once experienced that life and being has “flame and song,” then you know that life and being is capable of being miraculous. You know that the glory is here.

And our task, then, says the poet, is to:

“Try
to acknowledge the next
song in its body-halo of flames ...”

And what a phrase that is: “body-halo of flames”!

Moses and the “body-halo of flames”

It brings to my mind the story in the Hebrew scriptures from the third chapter of the Book of Exodus in which Moses comes across a bush in the desert engulfed in flames, yet the bush is not being consumed.

Puzzled by this strange sight, Moses goes to investigate and discovers that he is standing upon holy ground.

Why? Because the flame he has stumbled across is not an ordinary flame – it does not strictly belong to time and space.

Moses finds that he is in the presence of a Power that he did not create.

Moses is instructed to take off his shoes.

And I can't help but wonder if Denise Levertov, whose father's background was that of a Russian Hasidic Jew, also had the story of "Moses and the Burning Bush" in her mind with her use of the word "flame" and "flames" in the poem.

Whether or not that is the case, in that story and in that place, Moses came across an ordinary desert bush in its "body-halo of flames." In other words, Moses beheld:

- * The "Unoriginated Flame" that is both prior to and posterior to time and space!
- * The "Transcendent Flame" that is greater than all material reality, yet present in each particle of material reality!
- * The "Infinite Flame" that is ablaze in everything, every day!
- * The "Eternal Flame" that is always burning, that never diminishes, that is never extinguished!

In that desert place, the film was lifted from the eyes of Moses! He beheld ordinary reality in its "body-halo of flames."

How to miss the magic

Thus, the fault in missing the miracle of life and being is not in the product; the fault is in our vision; the fault is in our approach to life and being.

We tend to think that we control things. We tend to think that we are the creators of the "flame and song."

But, no, says the poet, you can't capture that "flame and song." You didn't create it, and you can't buy it.

As a matter of fact, the more you seek the magic, the further it recedes from you; the more you insist on its presence, the greater grows its absence.

The "flame and song" is there, it's true; but you can't force the magic to appear.

It's "*once, only,*" here and now ... *this* moment, *this* place, *this* confluence of events!

Thus, the "invitation" is an invitation to the ego-part of our being, our psyche, to stop in our tracks, to surrender ... and like Moses before the burning bush, to take off our shoes and to behold the glory.

The ego-part of us – which may be called "the organ of conscious awareness" (Robert A. Johnson) – does not create and it cannot ultimately control. Its main role is to become aware,

to focus attention, to recognize, to acknowledge, and to praise. Its main role is to wake up, to awaken to:

“Whatever more/ there will be...”

The poet says that whatever future marvelous experiences and stories there will be for us, they will be “unique” as those past experiences and stories were “unique.”

“*Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)*”

And, certainly, the poet here must be playing off a song that was popular in the time of the poet’s life in the mid-1950s, a song sung by Doris Day that many of you, many of us, will remember, the song, “*Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)*.”

(“*Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)*,” written by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, published in 1955; sung by Doris Day Hitchcock’s 1956 film *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.)

Doris Day is not here today to sing this song. However, fortunately, my wife Flossie, has agreed to lead us in singing this song, inviting you to join her in the chorus. And she will be accompanied by LeRoy Davidson, who I learned this week is “a forever fan of Doris Day.”

Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)

When I was just a little girl,
I asked my mother, “What will I be?
Will I be pretty? Will I be rich?”
Here’s what she said to me”:

“Que sera, sera
Whatever will be, will be
The future’s not ours to see
Que sera, sera
What will be, will be.”

When I grew up and fell in love,
I asked my sweetheart,
“What lies ahead?
Will we have rainbows day after day?”
Here’s what my sweetheart said:

“Que sera, sera
Whatever will be, will be
The future’s not ours to see
Que sera, sera
What will be, will be.”

Now I have children of my own,
They ask their mother,
“What will I be?
Will I be handsome?
Will I be rich?”
I tell them tenderly:

“Que sera, sera
Whatever will be, will be
The future’s not ours to see
Que sera, sera
What will be, will be.”
“Que Sera, Sera!”

“It’s now or never”

Thanks, Flossie ... but don’t leave quite yet ... because there’s more.

Says the poet:

“Whatever more
there will be will be
unique as those were unique.”

So, the poet does, it seems, have faith that the future has more marvels in store for us ... that the Creative Power of Life and Being is not dimmed or diminished. And our task, as she says in concluding the poem, is to:

“Try
to acknowledge the next
song in its body-halo of flames as utterly
present, as now or never.”

And, again, the poet is clearly playing off another song that was popular in the time of the poet, a number-one hit single in 1960 sung by Elvis Presley titled “It’s Now or Never.” (Flossie, a couple of lines, please.)

“It’s now or never,
come hold me tight
Kiss me my darling,
be mine tonight
Tomorrow will be too late,
it’s now or never
My love won’t wait.”

The difficult task of letting go of expectations

So, the magic is here awaiting us ... if we are in a position to engage it, to behold it, to receive it, to grasp and accept it ... if we have “eyes to see and ears to hear.”

But before we can get there, we must acknowledge the “*once, only*” nature of things ... which is one of the very hardest tasks we have in life: the task of letting go of expectations.

It’s a task that especially shows up in the glorious Christmas season that is now rapidly receding from us ... a season that has so many expectations connected to it ... so that one tries to set the conditions just right ... and works like the devil to make it “just so” ... and meanwhile our young children (and cats) enjoy playing with the boxes that the gifts came in.

The value of form and tradition

But I don’t think that letting go of expectations means that you don’t have traditions and rituals that you repeat.

And it doesn’t mean you have no form or structure in your life.

And it doesn’t mean you don’t return to places that have been beautiful and meaningful to you.

And it doesn’t mean that you don’t see movies that you have seen before, or read books that you have read before, or listen to songs from the past that you have enjoyed.

And it doesn’t mean that you don’t make commitments in life and keep them.

But what it does mean, I think, is that you make an attempt to approach these things in humility and wonder and openness ... that, as the poet says, you

“Try
to acknowledge the next
song in its body-halo of flames as utterly
present, as now or never.”

To be present to the present doesn’t mean that you don’t carry commitments with you that are related to a past life; but it does mean that you have to “try” to let go of expectations from the past so that you can be committed to the present.

Sacrifice

And so that’s the first thing that we need to do in greeting this New Year that is now upon us and before us.

We “sacrifice” the glories and beauties of the past so that new life has a place to thrive and grow.

“Sacrifice,” says depth psychologist and author Robert A. Johnson, is the art of drawing energy from your old life so that it can be re-invested into your new life.

Thus, we attempt to clear the ground and create space for the New Year, to surrender what has been in the past ... for the present that is ... and for the future that will be.

Inwardly, we say: “Que sera, sera – whatever will be will be.”

“Composting Communion” – a Ritual at Old Year’s End

And, now, to assist us in saying “goodbye” to the Old Year and the past and to clear ground and create space for the New Year, I invite you to participate in a ritual that a ministerial colleague of mine, the Rev. Debra Thorne, introduced to me, which she called a “Composting Communion.”

It’s a ritual in which we symbolically let go of the products and outcomes of this past year’s energy so that this energy can be made available for us in the year that is now upon us.

Debra Thorne, who was a ministerial intern with me eleven years ago in 2012 and who is currently the minister of the First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo, British Columbia, said of this “Composting Communion”:

“A Composting Communion is a joining together of our past experiences, a time to put back into the earth our knowledge and experiences so that they may become one again with the earth through the organic natural process of decomposing, and thereby become the source of our wisdom.

“By doing this in fellowship as a communal experience, we are expressing our understanding of our place in the cycle of life and death and rebirth. We recognize that it is not just our bodies that return to earth to become the source and energy for new life, but also our experiences – all our experiences.

“We humans have our own cycles of growth and flourishing, and our times of fallow and resting. In this turning of the year, we now recognize that we need, like the earth, to put back what we have accumulated in experience, our joys and sorrows, the highs and the lows, from the past year.

“We return to the earth what we have learned, struggled with, triumphed over, and celebrated in this past year. In this giving back, we know that through the organic processes of life our past experiences will transform into the nourishment, the wisdom, and the inspiration for our new year.”

Here's the way this ritual works: Those of you here in the sanctuary will be invited to take a little piece of paper from a basket that our ushers will pass in a short time, and on this piece of paper you are invited to write a word or phrase that is related to some investment of your energy from this past year. (And those of you tuning in virtually can also find a small piece of paper so that you also might participate along with those in the sanctuary.)

What you write on the paper can be related to the energy that has gone into some activity, project, or task from this past year, or from some experience you have gone through. It can be what you regard as a positive or a negative investment of your energy – for both of these involve our energy. So it could be:

- * a joyous *or* a sorrowful experience,
- * a triumph *or* a loss,
- * an achievement *or* a failure;
- * or, again, it could be an investment of energy in a fear, or an anxiety, or a longing;
- * or it could be an investment in an opinion, or an attitude, or a certain belief.

Whatever you write down, the idea here is to release this energy back to the earth and to the Creative Powers That Be so that it can be re-cycled and made available for you in the coming year.

Then, after you have written your word or phrase, those of you in the sanctuary will be invited to come forward and put the piece of paper into this composing pot – tearing the paper into pieces – and here I will mix the paper containing your words into the soil, which will then be returned to the earth. (And those of you tuning in virtually can take the paper and put in it a flowerpot or garden, etc.)

Now, while the baskets with the pieces of paper are being passed and while the “Composting Communion” is taking place, we will play a meditative piece of music by Snam Kaur singing/chanting:

“May the long time Sun
Shine upon you,
All love surround you,
And the pure Light
Within you
Guide your way on.”

We conclude our “End-of-the-Year Ritual” with these words from T.S. Eliot:

“For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.”

(T.S. Eliot, from “Little Gidding,” in *Four Quartets*)

Greeting the New Year

And now, having ritually said “goodbye” to the Old Year and having cleared space for the New Year, let us conclude our service by turning toward that New Year with a Responsive Reading that I’ve titled “Facing the Unknown.”

MINISTER: On this Sunday near the beginning of the new calendar year, we gather in our sanctuary to prepare our hearts and minds for the year before us.

CONGREGATION: We do not know what lies ahead of us in this coming year.

MINISTER: There may be challenges we have never had to face before.

CONGREGATION: There may be sorrows we have never had to bear before.

MINISTER: There may be kindnesses we have never received before.

CONGREGATION: There may be joys we have never glimpsed before.

MINISTER: What lies ahead of us in this coming year belongs to the unknown.

CONGREGATION: But we have stood before the unknown in previous years and have found our way.

MINISTER: And now, with anticipation and wonder, fear and humility, once more we stand before the unknown, seeking again to find our way.

CONGREGATION: We depend upon strength and courage that may be more than we now know.

MINISTER: We depend upon resources from hidden springs to arouse and sustain us.

CONGREGATION: And we depend upon each other, for we do not journey alone in this adventure.

MINISTER: We walk together into this new year, strengthening, supporting, encouraging, and caring for each other.

CONGREGATION: One and all we commit ourselves to the unknown, ever searching out and enlarging the significance of life and being.

(“Facing the Unknown,” Bruce A. Bode)

Closing Hymn #318: “We Would Be One”

1. We would be one as now we join in singing
our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves anew
to that high cause of greater understanding
of who we are, and what in us is true.
We would be one in living for each other
to show to all a new community.

2. We would be one in building for tomorrow
a nobler world than we have known today.
We would be one in searching for that meaning
which bends our hearts and points us on our way.
As one, we pledge ourselves to greater service,
with love and justice, strive to make us free.

(Samuel A. Wright, words; Jean Sibelius, music)

Closing Words

Our Closing Words, as we engage the New Year, are from the Rev. Gary Kowalski.

Go in peace,
Speak the truth.
Give thanks each day.
Respect the earth and her creatures,
for they are alive like you.
Care for your body; it is a wondrous gift.
Live simply.
Be of service.
Be guided by your faith and not your fear.
Go lightly on your path
Walk in a sacred manner.

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment,
Or the Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sequim/Port Angeles, WA on Sunday, January 8, 2023. Rev. Bode retired as Senior Minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018 and is now Minister Emeritus.)