

**"I Don't Know!"
Worship Service
Neighborhood UU Church
September 12, 2021**

Invocation Hannah Roberts Villnave (colleague)

The storm is passing over, the old hymn says,
Except
Except
Except
The storm has not passed over just yet, has it?
Here, for this hour together,
We rest in the eye of the storm.

We gather not as a changed people, but as a changing people.

Here in the eye of the storm--
The calm, common center
The place where the pressure reduces
Where the winds die down,
We are finding one another, near and far,
In new ways of being together,
Again and again and again

We gather not as a changed people, but as a changing people.

Looking up the walls of the cyclone
We see towers of clouds and rain and wind
Held up around this hour by the forces of circling chaos.
Because the storm has not passed over after all.

And so, we gather not as a changed people, but as a changing people.

Here in the eye, the pressure goes down.
The winds die down.
Perhaps we glimpse the sun,
Comforted even as we know that this pause is temporary.
We take a moment,
A breath,
To join together
Again.

We gather not as a changed people, but as a changing people.
Changing
Breathing
Being

Knowing that this is but a moment.
Grateful beyond measure for this moment.

Let us worship together.

Prayer for 9/11 - 20th Anniversary Jude Geiger

Spirit of Life, God of Many Names, Source of Love,
Help us to enter this new year with a spirit of renewal. Open our hearts to
the possibility of abundance. Open our hands to do the work of what the
year brings to us, with meaning and integrity; with care and love. Prepare
our lips to speak with truth and care.

All of these blessings will be needed to prepare the road ahead for
justice and healing. We pause once more, as some do every day, to
remember the lives lost 20 years ago on a Tuesday morning. We mourn
the friends we can no longer greet. We hold in our hearts the families that

are missing a parent, or sister, or son. We acknowledge that a new generation has seen its innocence of worldly anguish pass away.

Knowing that each of us must wrestle with memory and loss in our own ways; we pray for the strength of heart to face these difficulties with integrity. That we know, deep down, that a warm community sits all around us ready to stretch out a hand so that the way ahead is a little bit less cumbersome, less solitary, less strange.

May our memory and our grief not alter our prayerful convictions for a world of hope and love. May the harm done that fateful day not deter our spirits one inch from a path of building that world we dream about. May we not learn to become creatures of reaction, recreating harm in the world around us for the harm done in our cities and our planes.

This morning we keep close in our hearts the families and friends [we have lost or who have known loss]. We rejoice in those stories where a caregiver, or sibling or daughter arrived home late at night to a welcoming grateful family. We also rejoice for the congregations, spread throughout this country, who have learned to break bread and share in worship across religious aisles; who appreciate the shared messages of love and healing that are taught by Christians, by Jews and Muslims; by religions the world throughout.

It is in this spirit, that the world may know peace.

Readings

First Reading

"Braver Wiser" 9-1-21

Liz Stevens - reflecting on the experience several years ago of having to shelter in place while an active shooter rampaged through the small town of Moscow, Idaho

Traumatic experiences, by definition, make us feel overwhelmed, out of control, disconnected, and uncomprehending. Pain and grief are not pleasant feelings, either. I'm often tempted to travel as fast as I can through these uncomfortable places, but trauma defies my attempts to rush.

In the weeks and months following the shooting, I stayed in the midst of the pain by letting go of my need for control and tolerating the feelings of powerlessness. Healing wasn't an intellectual process, but an embodied unfolding. I gave myself the space to be baffled and broken-hearted; to lament. I held space for other confused and grieving people, bearing witness to one another in love and celebrating the miraculous ways that together, we discovered a deeper resilience and a greater wisdom.

The paradox is this: the only way I've been able to move through trauma—my own or those of the ones I love—is to sit and stay. When I create space for what is real (however incomprehensible and heartbreaking and unbearably painful), my spirit heals. When I do this in community, I discover a deeper wisdom and a greater resilience. Somehow, the things that are too much to bear alone are bearable together.

Second Reading

adrienne maree brown blogpost 8-19-21

This year has been a brutal and necessary reminder that control and manipulation don't work, for anyone involved. I have had to practice self-awareness of my own controlling nature, I have had to soften my grip on a fearful future narrative and return to the humility of the present. I am not in control of any choices or boundaries but my own. I cannot manipulate others into collective action, into choosing life, not even with all my best words. **I can only be vulnerable, I can only live into my own values, I can only invite others to join me, and to teach me.**

Small circles rooted in love. Relinquishing control and offering love. Mundane practices as acts of love.

Humility in the face of the unknown is self-love. Seeing and shaping the whole, not as a million overwhelming waves, but as a sea - this is collective love. Living in generosity and gratitude, every day, is living love. Being nature, is being love.

It certainly feels like love is the way.

Sermon

I'm going to tell you a little secret about ministers. Many people think that we spend much of our time reading and reflecting on high-minded and sacred words of wisdom. And we do, sometimes. But quite often many of us read things of a different nature: murder mysteries.

I can't speak for my colleagues, but I know for myself it is certainly not because I enjoy stories of murder. What I do enjoy is puzzles. And very often murder mysteries are puzzles that are neatly wrapped up and solved by the end, unlike almost anything else in ministerial life. And to increase the satisfaction of the experience, I often listen to audible books of murder mysteries, while solving jigsaw puzzles on an iPad! SO satisfying.

One of my favorite series is Louise Penny's Inspector Gamache stories set in the French provinces of Canada. They are well-told stories with complex plots and eccentric characters, but really the best thing about them is Inspector Gamache. I want to be Inspector Gamache! Because he is so wise.

Gamache says this to everyone who comes to work for him. There are four sentences that lead to wisdom: "I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry. I was wrong." I'll repeat them: "I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry. I was wrong." Needless to say, his new recruits actively resist this wisdom. And I do too, at times! You're probably wondering if you agree with them. Especially those of us who were raised to believe that it is our job to offer answers that are clear and comforting.

But this year and a half has made this wisdom all too clear to me. Especially the "I don't know" part!

Quite frankly, I've grown a bit tired of endlessly talking about how traumatic this time has been. Yes, we all know that it's been traumatic! But

I also know that I am the kind of person who tries to walk whistling past the trauma with the vain hope that will get me more quickly to the other side of it. So perhaps it is time for me to heed the advice I often give to others: You cannot recover from trauma by denying it or refusing to process it. The wisdom of my colleague Liz Stevens that I shared in our reading makes sense to me, to sit and stay in the midst of trauma. But boy, is it hard for me to practice.

The Milwaukee airport has a special zone it has created once people have passed through security to try to put themselves back together. There is a big sign atop it called "The Recombobulation Zone" If only it were that easy. We could just walk into that special zone and put normality back together again, easy as tying up your shoe laces.

And of course, as we are told over and over again, there is no going back to the old normal. There's no real idea about what the new normal will be. We are in a state of liminality, a term we've become all too familiar with.

In her excellent book, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where Your Going*, (best title ever, in my humble opinion; I think that Elizabeth Sadlon has made this book her bible this year) the minister and organizational consultant Sue Beaumont says this:

Organizational life is full of liminal experiences—seasons where something has ended, but a new thing has not yet begun. Seasons where watching and waiting can be difficult, overplanning can be futile, and it simply isn't helpful to pretend that we understand what happens next.

We approach a condition known as "pure liminality," when temporal and spatial personal, group, and, societal forces all move into a liminal state at the same time.[11] When this occurs, the disorientation is severe, and the existing infrastructures fail to hold.

Structure gives way to anti-structure, and organizations and institutions begin to collapse.

That's a cheery thought, isn't it? Particularly in religious organizations where we are already buffeted about with so many unknowns: where will the money come from? What should we do about the broken world around us? It is especially hard to confront the abyss that now stands before us. And, quite honestly, I find it overwhelming at times. I've talked in previous sermons about how I am usually able to embrace change with a fervor. But the changes that are before us stretch even my capacity for such an embrace.

And yet, when I am able to calm my anxieties I find glimmers of excitement for what might come. The founder of Pixar, Ed Catmull put it succinctly: "There is a sweet spot between the known and the unknown where originality happens; the key is to be able to linger there without panicking." There is so much opportunity that lies in the unknowing, if we can but sustain ourselves in spite of the distress.

There is ancient wisdom that reminds us of this. In the Tao te Ching Lao Tzu asks: Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself.

It is here where we confront our issues with control. Let me be more specific: it is here where *I* confront *my* issues with control. Though I do believe I am not alone in this discomfort among Unitarian Universalists. Much of our religious tradition is founded upon the idea that we do not have to wait for some old man in the sky to fix the world for us. It is up to us to take responsibility and make the changes that are necessary. But, like any good trait, if taken to its extreme it becomes a terrible fault. We

have been confronting that fact with the Truth and Reconciliation we have been doing when we own the ways in which euthanasia derives from this fallacy of control.

This is where I come back to something that I say often. It is possible to look at two completely opposite ideas and know both of them to be true. And in fact one truth without the other is often dangerous. In my view our theology is well-grounded when we can simultaneously affirm that (1) we must take responsibility where we can and (2) we are not fully in control.

This is why I find adrienne maree brown's work so compelling. She reminds us that we are but a part of a larger reality, a manifestation of nature that is in relationship with all else in nature. That, as she said in our reading, "I am not in control of any choices or boundaries but my own. I cannot manipulate others into collective action, into choosing life, not even with all my best words. I can only be vulnerable, I can only live into my own values, I can only invite others to join me, and to teach me."

As I have listened this week to all the reflections about 9/11 and what we may have learned, and what we have not learned, I've been struck by how many talk about how right after the attacks we were more united as a nation than ever before. People from all walks of life came together to dig life out of the ruins. Clearly this is possible after a great collective tragedy. We saw some of this in the early days of the pandemic as well: people coming together to help those most vulnerable. And then once again we devolved into the entrenched divisions that alienate us from one another.

But it is also true that deep wisdom can come from trauma that helps sustain us. I think of what is often called the Greatest Generation, some of you still among us, who came through world wars and another

pandemic and instead of giving into despair, developed an ethic of selflessness and concern for others. They were awakened to deeper values of love in the midst of loss, the value of working hard not necessarily to buy more things but to make sure you contribute something good to the world.

Susan Beaumont says "As dangerous as a liminal state may feel, it is also alluring. The suddenly malleable situation invites experimentation and risk-taking. We are free to question traditions, which also invites originality, generativity, and creativity. We may also grow in our sense of agency, free to discover and design a future unencumbered by the past."

It can be hard to see and feel that promise right now, especially when we look at the wider world and our inability to come together to learn and to heal. But if we narrow our focus and think about what we can do here, in this community, it feels like it just may be possible. Not as a way of hiding out from the world. But a way of practicing among one another what we believe the world needs to learn.

Again, from adrienne maree brown: "Covid keeps adapting, like a shepherd herding us as a group through the one gate that leads forward. When we think we alone can run off and stop attending to the whole, a variant emerges to gather us back groupward. The idea of being herded generates such resistance in me, "WE ARE NOT SHEEP!", "I AM NOT A COW!" ("imspecialimspecialimspecial")...and yet, are these not also sacred and communal creatures from whom I can learn? In this moment, perhaps theirs is the wisdom we need. **Can we adapt to be herd, to be meek, to belong, to move together, to be humble together?**

Even in this community of brilliant, capable, skilled people, we will not be able to control what comes next. And, indeed, trying to control it will most likely be our downfall. These are questions as challenging as the

sentences of Inspector Gamache: "Can we adapt to be a herd, to be meek, to belong, to move together, to be humble together?"

Interim time in the life of a congregation is, by definition, a liminal time. You have come through what felt known, even if you were not happy with it, and you are not yet able to concretely imagine the future. We spend a great deal of time in interim work examining the past, not so that we can recreate it (though there will be that temptation) but so that we may learn from it. We recognize mistakes that have been made, not to castigate ourselves, but to honestly reflect. We confront ways in which we might have been participating in larger social patterns of inequity and supremacy, not to ridicule or punish but to help us let go of past ways that may have been harmful.

And the only way we can get through these very difficult processes is to find the enduring values that we want to perpetuate, to remember that love must be at the core of all we do, to let go of believing that we can single handedly control what is happening now or into the future. As Liz Stevens reminds us: "When I create space for what is real (however incomprehensible and heartbreaking and unbearably painful), my spirit heals. When I do this in community, I discover a deeper wisdom and a greater resilience. Somehow, the things that are too much to bear alone are bearable together."

"I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry. I was wrong." Can we find the courage to stay in this terribly uncomfortable place? Can we listen again to Lao Tzu: "Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?"

We will not make our way through this traumatic time by finding incontrovertible answers. We can best make our way by holding each

other as we ask the questions. I know that love wide and deep exists in this community. Holding onto that, remembering that, honoring that, noticing that, will help us find our way.

Again from adrienne maree brown: "Humility in the face of the unknown is self-love. Seeing and shaping the whole, not as a million overwhelming waves, but as a sea - this is collective love. Living in generosity and gratitude, every day, is living love. Being nature, is being love. It certainly feels like love is the way.

Amen and blessed be.

Benediction Lynn Ungar 9-9-14

Giving Up

Let's just say it. You might not
get what you want. Not just now,
but ever. Could be that ship has sailed,
or never left the dock, or hit a sandbar,
or got tossed over in a storm
and is now harboring octopus
on the bottom of the ocean.

The perfect job, the perfect child,
the perfect love, the fame or fortune
that you crave—it could be

just around the corner,
but then again it might have
dropped an axle on the freeway
and been towed away for good.
I'm not saying you shouldn't try.
I'm not saying good things don't
come to those who wait.

Give it what you've got.

But when the time comes—
whatever that time may be—
consider what is possible.

Open the door
of your expectations
and step outside.

Stop. Breathe.

Walk out into the cold moonlight,
into the sharp, clear air
of a different way.

Amen. Go in peace