

*(We gather) for truth sought through a questioning heart and an attentive mind;
and for love, pursued through obstacles inside and outside our own human heart;
and for forgiveness, and all it entails--the place where truth and love meet and merge.*

—Reverend Vanessa Southern

Beginning Again in Love

Welcome

Rev. Clare Petersberger

The Covenant

(Read in unison)

L. Griswold Williams

**LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH,
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT,
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.**

**TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE,
TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM,
TO SERVE HUMAN NEED,
TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL
GROW INTO HARMONY WITH THE DIVINE—
THUS DO WE COVENANT WITH EACH OTHER.**

Opening Words

Learning to Fly

Lora Powell-Haney

I walked out my door Wednesday morning, and encountered the Divine right there in my driveway.

Our front porch faces a street, but there a garden acts as a buffer between traffic and home. As I descended the steps to my car, a Monarch butterfly floated across my path and landed on one of the milkweed plants in the garden. There have been a lot of butterflies this year! Just before I got to the car, I noticed another butterfly, lying on its side on the pavement near my car door.

At first, sadly, I thought it was crushed, but closer inspection showed that it was simply resting, its wings still wet from the struggle to emerge from its chrysalis. Awe and wonder! Carefully, so carefully, I slid a finger under the butterfly, its legs clinging to my fingernail, and raised it to a nearby flower. It spread its damp wings open to the warm sun and rested there.

In that moment, as the butterfly and I soaked in all the light, I realized I am also in the midst of the kind of transformation and change that grows a caterpillar into a butterfly moving from one beloved work as a religious educator to a new calling as a minister. This is a time of letting go of what I have been, a time to set an intention toward what I, what we, may become. So we may shine a light on letting go and on transformation, let us light the chalice this morning together, reading the words printed in the order of service.

Chalice Lighting

(Read in unison)

Rev. Lois Van Leer

**WE LIGHT THIS CHALICE ON THE BRINK OF A NEW YEAR
LETTING GO OF WHAT HAS BEEN
OPEN AND HOPEFUL FOR WHAT MAY COME
RENEWED, RESTORED, READY
TO LIVE LIFE FULLY ANEW
MAY WE MOVE FORWARD WITH VISION AND INTENTION.**

Prelude

“Whoever You Are”

Hal Walker

TUUC Choir

Reading

A Story for the New Year

Dr. Anthony Stringer

Our Jewish neighbors are celebrating Rosh Hashanah, their new year. And Dr. Anthony Stringer offered the following true story for a new year.

[Dr. Stringer tells the story of a director of a food bank, who was touched by the wistful hope expressed by a lonely, ill, and impoverished elderly woman for a holiday meal, especially one which would include sweet potatoes. Upon learning that the food bank did not have sweet potatoes to offer for the meal, the woman promised to pray for a donation of sweet potatoes, explaining that the tuber had been a part of her New Year's meal since girlhood.

Resolving to provide the sweet potato herself, the director was surprised to find her car blocked by a delivery truck, and even more surprised to find that the driver was there to offer his cargo to the food bank. The cargo was . . . sweet potatoes.

There's another happy twist to this tale. Read Dr. Stringer's entire story at <http://www.uuca.org/rosh-hashana-homily-dr-anthony-stringer/>]

Dr. Anthony Stringer concluded with the traditional greeting at the Jewish New Year: “Shana Tovah. May you be inscribed for a good year.” He added, “And may the new year bring those sweet potatoes that you have been praying for.”

Welcome Lora Powell-Haney

Well, as a congregation, we haven't been praying for sweet potatoes. But this new year has brought us something equally sweet—a half time ministerial intern—Lora Powell Haney. Over many, many years various boards of this congregation have talked about becoming a teaching congregation for a ministerial intern.

Essentially, a teaching congregation offers the ministerial intern the opportunity to put their seminary classes

into practice: the opportunity to preach and teach, to provide pastoral care and counseling, to facilitate the congregation's work for justice; and to sit with committees, the O-Team and Program Council, and the Board to learn about and offer helpful suggestions for realizing the mission and vision of the congregation.

Last spring, Lora Powell Haney, who was completing her first year as a student at Meadville Lombard Theological School and her work as the Director of Religious Education at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick began looking for a half-time ministerial internship. She reached out to us. And when the Board said, "Yes," she chose us.

Lora will be meeting weekly with me, and monthly with a Ministerial Internship Committee appointed by our Board. Her ministry with us is part of her formation as a minister, and will be discussed by her advisors at Meadville Lombard and, ultimately, by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association. So her relationship with our congregation will be exciting and meaningful and transformative for both Lora and for us.

In affirmation of this, I invite Lora Powell Haney and Dr. Neil Porter, our Board President to come forward with their order of service. And I invite us all to rise in body or spirit to join in the responsive covenant of shared ministry printed in your order of service. You will see that the congregation begins.

RESPONSIVE COVENANT OF SHARED MINISTRY

Congregation:

AS MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF THE TOWSON UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH WE GATHER TO DEEPEN OUR ETHICAL AND SPIRITUAL LIVES TOGETHER AS WE WORK FOR RACIAL, SOCIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.

Board President:

Today we celebrate and welcome our new Intern Minister, Lora Powell Haney, who will join us for the next nine months in living our mission of spirituality, community, and justice.

Minister:

Lora will serve our congregation as she lives into her calling to become an ordained minister in our living tradition of Unitarian Universalism. Please join me in a covenant of shared ministry between Lora and this congregation.

Congregation:

WE PLEDGE TO THE BEST OF OUR ABILITY TO JOURNEY WITH YOU, TO SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE, TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE, AND TO LIVE IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH OURSELVES, THE WIDER COMMUNITY, AND THE EARTH. WE PROMISE YOU OUR MUTUAL TRUST AND SUPPORT.

Intern Minister:

I am grateful for the opportunity to serve this congregation. To the best of my abilities, I pledge to be open to learning from each of you; to act and minister with integrity and love; to support and care for the well-being of all the members and friends of this congregation; to live our shared Unitarian Universalist principles and support the mission of this congregation. I promise to you my mutual trust and support.

Congregation:

LORA, WE WELCOME YOU WITH OPEN ARMS AND OPEN HEARTS.

Hymn

#392 Hineh Mah Tov.

Prayer/Meditation

Lora Powell-Haney

I invite you into a time of reflection.

Settle into your seat, focus on your breath flowing in and out; perhaps place a hand over your heart. During the pauses between each spoken line, I invite you to take a focused breath in and out. I will prompt with the word 'Breathe.'

Spirit of Love and Mystery, be with us this hour as we contemplate forgiveness.

Breathe. (One breath-long pause)

May our hearts be open to forgiving ourselves for causing harm to another being.

Breathe. (One breath-long pause)

May we sincerely try not to repeat the mistake.

Breathe. (One breath-long pause)

May we work to heal the hurt we caused.

Breathe. (One breath-long pause)

May we act with deeper compassion and awareness in the future.

Breathe. (One breath-long pause)

May we begin again with love. Breathe. (One breath-long pause)

Amen. Aho. Blessed be.

Musical Interlude

Al Shlosha D'varim

Allan E. Naplan

TUUC Choir; Tracy Hall, piano

Translation: The world is sustained by three things: by truth (scripture), by justice (action), and by peace.

Homily

Beginning Again in Love

Rev. Clare L. Petersberger

Tonight, our Jewish family members, neighbors, and friends will gather with their congregations to consider the beginning of humanity and what sustains us between birth and death. The first thing they will do is hear the blowing of the shofar, or ram's horn, marking the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The biblical name for this holiday translates to the "day [of] shouting or blasting." So the tradition of making a lot of noise at the new year goes back much further than Time's Square on December 31st!

Rather than beginning 2018 years ago, the Jewish calendar goes back to when the Jewish people understood that the first human beings, Adam and Eve, were created. That was a long, long, long time ago. Traditionally, at Rosh Hashana, our Jewish family and friends say to one another, "May you be inscribed for a good year."

What does that mean? According to tradition, ten days later, on Yom Kippur, God writes down in the big Book of Life who will live and who will die, and then closes the book. Rosh Hashanah is a reminder of human creation; Yom Kippur is a reminder that all human beings die and that we don't have forever to pursue truth, justice, and peace.

During these ten high holy days, people reflect on how to become better people—and how to pursue truth, justice, and peace together. The Reverend Lynn Ungar writes: "... the Book of Life does sound just a little bit like Santa Claus's list of who's been naughty and nice. But here's the thing. God, it seems, is not necessarily interested in the kinds of resolutions that people most often make in January. You don't get into the Book of Life by promising to go to the gym or eat more vegetables or lay off the Krispy Kremes ..."

Lynn continues, "No, the way you get written in the Book of Life is to make things right with the people around you. During the Days of Turning, the faithful are expected to think carefully about who they have quarreled with, insulted, ignored or generally not treated right, and then to go and apologize and work things out. The Days of Turning are about asking for forgiveness."

Lynn concludes, "They are also about offering forgiveness. Making things right is a two-way street. If someone comes to you sincerely and apologizes for having wronged you and asks for forgiveness, your job is to forgive them—within that period of ten days ..."

None of this is easy. Unitarian Universalists tend to focus on the positive side of human nature and all the good things we do. Long ago in our history we rejected the idea that human nature is inherently depraved. What is our first principle as Unitarian Universalists? "We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person." I'm grateful for this. But the truth is that from time to time we all say or do things that are hurtful to other people. We may not plan or intend to say or do these things. But we say and do harm because we are imperfect beings.

The Reverend Bruce Southworth writes: "Sometimes we are like a job applicant I read about. When asked to list strengths, this person answered, (and I invite all scouts and former scouts to join me) "Sometimes I am trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent." Under the heading, "List your weaknesses," the applicant wrote, "Sometimes I am NOT trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent."

We are like that job applicant. Sometimes we live up to our vision of what it means to be a good person. And sometimes we do not. And when we do not, we need the chance to begin again. But it's not easy to seek forgiveness. There is a *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon in which Calvin says to Hobbes: "I feel so bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it."

Hobbes helpfully suggests, "Maybe you should apologize to her."

Calvin thinks about this for a cartoon frame and replies, "I keep hoping that there is a less obvious solution."

It is not easy to seek forgiveness. It means letting go of our pride and our need for perfection. It means admitting that we are fallible. It means saying, "I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me."

But it is not always easy to offer forgiveness. Forgiving another means letting go of the need to be right and the energy of self-righteousness. It means putting the relationship ahead of the hurt we have endured.

As I was sharing with a spiritual director a "someone done me wrong" narrative, she looked at me and said, 'It does no good to keep going over and over what happened in the past. Yes, it was hurtful. Yes, it was wrong. Yes, no one deserves to be treated like that. But the real question is, 'Where do you want this relationship to go from right here, right now?'" She concluded, "Focus on forgiveness for the sake of the future."

I couldn't have been more startled if she had blown a shofar in the room. I realized she was right. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It is the act of liberating ourselves and our relationships from the prison of the past—like the butterfly emerging from its chrysalis—in order to create relationships here and now and for the future grounded in truth and knowing, in healing and love. Fundamentally, the experience of seeking and giving forgiveness is the experience of loving and being loved.

Steve Martin illustrated this in sharing the story his father's last days. For much of his adult life, Steve Martin did not feel close to his father. After Steve Martin won his first Emmy award for comedy, his father growled, "Well, he's no Charlie Chaplin." But Steve Martin went to see his father as he was dying.

Martin remembers: "I walked into the house they had lived in for 35 years, and my weeping sister said, 'He's saying goodbye to everyone.' A hospice nurse said to me, 'This is when it all happens.' I didn't know what she meant, but I soon would."

Steve Martin continued, "I walked into the bedroom where he lay, his mind alert but his body failing. He said, almost buoyantly, 'I'm ready now.' I understood that his intensifying rage of the last few years had been against death, and now his resistance was abating. I stood at the end of the bed, and we looked into each other's eyes for a long, unbroken time. At last he said, 'You did everything I wanted to do.'

I said, 'I did it because of you.'

It was the truth . . . I sat on the edge of the bed. Another silence fell over us. Then he said, 'I wish I could cry, I wish I could cry.' At first, I took this as a comment on his plight, but I am forever thankful that I pushed on. 'What do you want to cry about?' I finally asked. 'For all the love I received and couldn't return.'"

Steve Martin realized his father had kept this secret, his desire to love his family, from Steve and from his mother his whole life. Martin said, “It was as though an early misstep had kept us forever out of stride. Now, two days from his death, our pace was aligning, and we were able to speak.”

Steve Martin concluded, “I sometimes think of our relationship graphically, as a bell curve. In my infancy, we were perfectly close. Then the gap widened to accommodate our differences and indifference. In the final days of his life, we again became perfectly close.” The movement of our lives is like this—celebration for births and beginnings separations through words said and things done out of differences or indifference or both and, sometimes, reconciliation through deeper understanding and forgiveness.

The late Unitarian Universalist poet, Nancy Shaffer, wrote, “Because we are imperfect and love so deeply, we will never have enough days, We need the gift of starting over, beginning again: just this constant good, this saving hope.”

The world is sustained by by truth, by justice, by peace by hope, by good, and by love. These Days of Turning between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur offer the Jewish people the opportunity to forgive and to be forgiven and to begin again in love. May we, too, reflect on our lives and relationships, seek and offer forgiveness when necessary, and begin again in love. Amen.

Offertory

Erev Shalom

Gary Schocker

Donn Teubner-Rhodes, flute; Tracy Hall, piano

Of Yarn and Forgiveness

Adapted from Rev. Kristin Grassel Schmidt

JOYCE: In a few days, our Jewish friends and neighbors will celebrate the holiday called Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement. Does anyone know what atonement means?

Atonement is really just a fancy word for saying we’re sorry, righting a wrong, or making friends again after we’ve hurt someone. Another way of thinking about atonement is that it’s the things we do to ask forgiveness.

LORA: Yom Kippur is the day that the Jewish people come together as a congregation to ask God’s forgiveness for the ways they fell short in the past year. And while we don’t observe this holy day in exactly the same way here at this church, we do believe in saying we’re sorry when we’ve done something wrong, and we believe in forgiving others when they apologize to us.

Together, we’re going to think about saying sorry, what it means, and how it changes us. You can help by finding a white envelope under the far right chair of the two center sections and the far right chairs of the Choir section. If you are sitting on the short rows on the far sides, we invite you to move in to fill in the center or the back rows. Take the yarn that’s inside your envelope and stretch it out so that everyone in your row is holding onto a piece of it. An adult in each row is invited to hold onto the scissors until further instructions are given.

REV. CLARE: Many, many generations ago, rabbis used to teach that our relationship to one another, and our connection to God, was like a piece of yarn. Throughout our lives, we are connected to the human family and to the mystery of life. But when we do something hurtful, or when we fail to live up to our ideals, it's like the yarn gets cut. The adult in each row holding the scissors is invited to cut the yarn in between each person sitting in your row.

JOYCE: Now, all is not lost once the yarn is cut. How can re-attach our pieces of yarn to one another's? ("Tie them together!")

That's right. And so, the rabbis taught that when we say we are sorry, when we atone for the ways we've missed the mark and when we promise to try to do better, our connections to ourselves and to God are tied back together.

LORA: Did anyone notice what happened to the yarn when we tied it back together? ("The yarn got shorter!" or "We're standing closer together.")

Yes, our yarn got shorter. And so, it was the teaching of these wise rabbis that each time we say sorry, each time we seek forgiveness, it's like tying reconnecting our piece of yarn with other people's and with God's. Our work to reconnect actually draws us closer to one another.

REV. CLARE: As a symbol of the power of forgiveness, an adult in each row is invited to cut the yarn again so that each person has a length of yarn to take home with them. If you feel like it, you can wrap it around your wrist and make a bracelet, to remind yourself of the power of saying sorry and the connection you share with all living things..

Hymn

#1037 We Begin Again in Love

Closing Words

Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern

The Book of Life is open before us. It tells stories of sadness and happiness, despair and hope, stagnation and change, and a peaceful stillness that transcends both.

May you be written in the Book of Life. May you write your own name there, in shining ink stirred together from the tears of the past and the sweet flower essence of the hoped-for future.

May you know who you have been and who you are and bless your future self with loving, brave intention.

L'shanah tovah—to a good new year.

GO NOW IN PEACE.