

## **Meditation**

When Surgeon General Vivek Murthy is feeling alone or starting to feel despair creeping in, he pauses for this simple meditation.

So just raise your right hand and place it over your heart and close your eyes. And I invite you to think about the people who have loved you over the years, the people who have been there for you during difficult times, who have supported you without judging you, and who stood by your side even when it was hard.

Think about the people who have celebrated your moments of greatest joy with you, the people who saw your successes as theirs, the people who derived such pleasure and fulfillment from seeing you happy. Just feel their love flowing through you, lifting you up, brightening your mood, and filling your heart.

And know that that love is always there, even if they are not physically with you, because you carry that love in your heart. And know that you are and always will be worthy of that love.

*We will pause for 15 seconds. I will keep the time.*

And now open your eyes. Take a moment to turn to someone near you, if you wish, to share the names of those who came to you during the meditation. Say their names and a word that describes them – my mother, my teacher, my friend . . . not a story. I will ring the bowl to bring us back together.

## **Choir: “Choose to Bless the World” -arr. Nick Page**

In the introduction to a 2006 book of poems by Rebecca Ann Parker, Robert Hardie wrote:

“There are times in our lives when it feels like things are falling apart. When loss strips our days of joy. When death robs us of someone we love, or violence shatters our sense of security. When war, genocide, and injustice lead us to the brink of despair.” Nick Page put this poem to music. The poem and the choral music are a response to the question: What Can Save Us Now?

## **Sermon**

This week, there is a confluence of the three monotheistic world religions-the Muslim Ramadan, the Jewish Purim, and the Christian Easter - with pagan, wiccan, and Hindu celebrations of Spring scattered among them.

Being Unitarian Universalists, we are not weighted with a long history, yet, there is a tradition, celebrated religiously by some believers this week on March 28<sup>th</sup>. Anyone? The proper opening day of the baseball season!

January, the cloudiest month since 1951, is behind us. Never mind Joni Mitchell looking at “ice cream castles in the air, and feather canyons everywhere.” January was clouds that “only block the sun, they rain and snow on everyone, so many things I would have done, but clouds got in my way.”

I live in the capitol city that was completely shut down for six months by a devastating flood. City hall, State office buildings, stores, the library, churches, the post office, theaters, the Supreme Court, the court house. No hardware store to access supplies for repairs. Pharmacies.

No coffee shops, bakeries, or restaurants. The Unitarian Church kitchen was destroyed. The elevator motor lost.

When the downtown was closed, in every empty store window, artwork was displayed to lift our spirits. In the Drawing Board window hung this quote from author and marathon runner Haruki Murakami:

*And once the Storm is over  
you won't remember how  
you made it through,  
how you managed to survive.  
You won't even be sure,  
whether the Storm is really over.  
But one thing is certain.  
When you come out of the Storm,  
you won't be the same person who walked in.  
That's what this Storm's all about.*

The residents of Montpelier are not the same. I am not the same. We are living at the confluence of three rivers where, since July, any snow melt accompanied by rain, or every substantial rainfall can raise the water over their banks into the downtown. And, with business owners in debt from the pandemic and the flood, it is clear that the City cannot survive another disaster.

We celebrate that maybe two-thirds of the businesses that once created a vital downtown are open. But we live with the grief of what was lost and the anxiety of what's to come. The storm is not really over. We are witness to climate change. We know our fragility.

Montpelier stood up a Commission for Recovery and Resilience. Part of that is a Long Term Recovery Group formed to support residents for whom insurance, FEMA, and other funds are not enough to make their homes livable. I belong to that group.

Of course, this disaster revealed economic disparity of families who do not have \$100 to \$200,000 to raise their houses above flood level. And even if they qualify for a buy out, it will not cover their mortgages or give them a place to live. Numa and Georgina, members of the Unitarian Church, are living on their second floor with no kitchen, no hot water, and little heat. We will not abandon them.

*The power of your mind  
The strength of your hands  
The reaches of your heart  
can bless or curse the world.*

The Unitarian Church opened its doors as a warming shelter for people with no housing when the temperature dropped to ten above zero. Only one church in town has a functional

kitchen. Now, we all prepare the weekly community lunches in the Episcopal church. In days and weeks like this, we accompany, we walk alongside each other, and we carry the load of our pain and our fear together. “We wear hope like a skin.” (Cary Ambeer Aduyoyo)

Last autumn, I planted 25 snowdrop bulbs in my flower garden. On Wednesday, I was giddy to see what survived the winter: snowdrops, grape hyacinth, hellebore, and buds on the Miss Kim lilac. And the next day, they were covered with snow and it was twelve degrees.

In her poem, Snowdrops, Louise Gluck wrote:

*I did not expect to survive,  
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect  
to waken again, to feel  
in damp earth my body  
able to respond again, remembering  
after so long how to open again  
in the cold light  
of earliest spring –  
afraid, yes, but among you again  
crying yes risk joy  
in the raw wind of the new world.*

It would not be right for me to miss the anticipation of spring. Afraid for my city, yes, afraid for this broken world, but among you again!

*There is an embrace of kindness  
that encompasses all life.*

I will not allow grief to obstruct my joy for those determined little snowdrops who open under clouds that rain and snow on them. My flower garden is my sweet spot in this “slow motion train wreck of climate crisis.”

There is an important anniversary this month for CVUUS to celebrate. On March 5 – just one year ago – this congregation adopted your own version of the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle. “We commit to journey toward spiritual wholeness by *working to build* a diverse multicultural Beloved Community through our *actions* that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

In the Article 2 proposal to change the Unitarian Universalist Association by-laws, “Beloved Community, by definition, happens when people . . . “come together in an interdependent relationship of love, mutual respect, and care that seeks to realize justice within the community and in the broader world.”

As long as I have known this congregation, this has been your intention. With this covenant, you are making this a spiritual practice. This covenant has led you to Paula Cole Jones – to the concept of creating communities within community. This is a whole new adventure.

Perhaps some of you remember a time when the leaders of the Council of Committees met monthly at Brett and Karl's home for a potluck. As Vice President, Brett was the convener. We shared a meal, shared our lives, and then shared with each other the ups and downs of leadership, discovered how our committees were inter-related. We called this collaboration "shared ministry."

Taking big steps comes with change, and change comes with anxiety. But you have been preparing for this shift in paradigm from congregation as one family to communities within community.

I want to lift up some of the steps that you have been taking to accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions. Jean Terwilliger and Mike Greenfield offered book groups from *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*, to *Caste*, to *Just Mercy*, from *White Fragility*, to *Woke Racism*, *Asian American Histories*, and currently *Rough Sleepers*.

You begin worship with a land acknowledgement. Fly the Black Lives Matter and Rainbow flags. You are intentional about diversity – from the music you bring into worship services, to the groups you choose to share the plate, to the groups you host from the wider community – including the Mexican consulate and the Addison Allies ESL class.

What's more is that I imagine many of you are beginning to embody this covenant. To feel the change within yourself.

There are times in the history of Unitarian Universalism when we had to stand up for the core values of our faith. We are in such a time. The backlash to the Black Lives Matter movement, to immigration, and threats to transgender people, to women and abortion providers are tearing our society apart and endangering lives.

Some percent, possibly a majority, of the country wants to *build* multiculturalism, dismantle racism and other oppressions, use the democratic process to make decisions, while the other percent, possibly a minority of the country wants to *limit* accessibility and inclusion in citizenship and attack democratic institutions. We seem to be losing our moral compass.

I don't know if, like me, you are fearful for our institutions. This is a nation built on the rule of law. It is our foundation. In a recent letter, historian Heather Cox Richardson wrote: The Founders had used their passions to create a system of laws, but the time for passion had passed, lest it tear the nation apart. The next generation must support democracy through "sober reason," Abraham Lincoln said. He called for Americans to exercise "*general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws.*"

We are not even certain that the Supreme Court reveres the constitution. We are not sure how to stop this sledge hammer to our foundation.

We are such a small association of congregations and the challenges are so great! We need to partner with others *to* stand up for what is fair, what is just, and for core values. To have the moral courage to speak truth to the powers that are attacking the migrant and trans communities, advocating violence against women, taking away health care, denying climate change, throwing children into poverty, and attempting to erase the history of racism in America.

I vacillate between fear and rage. There is so much to lose. I resent having to manage fear- especially coming from social networks. Rage only makes me feel powerless. Michael J Fox says “if you obsess on the worst case scenario and it actually happens, you’ve lived it twice. I don’t want to do that.”

We don’t necessarily become adults equipped with the skills we need to face our fears. We are constantly learning. Haruki Murakami says: “What seems threatening is just the echo of the fear in my own heart.” (repeat)

Jack Russell and Glenda Otto from the Center for Self-Sustaining Leadership say that “most of us have fears, often the same universal fears. It’s part of being human. We all try to cover up, hide, avoid, and deny our fears ... but they don’t go away. Having fear is not ‘bad or wrong.’ It’s human. If we are willing, our fears can inform us. Facing into fear is a powerful option. We can embrace and change our fear. It’s also part of being human.” In their courses, they teach skills to move from fear to love.

Rebecca Parker names the skills of “speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting . . . any of these can do the work of justice or offer love.” Vivek Murthy reminds us that “When you stand in strength, you allow others to find you. And every time you act out of love, whether that’s to a member of your own family or a moment of kindness you express to a stranger, you are telling people around you that it’s okay to give and receive love as well. You are inspiring people to be a new way and to be a new person in the world that constantly seems dark.”

And he says, “in a world that is full of despair, small acts of kindness are radical acts of defiance, and they’re the force that we need to ultimately build the world that we all need.”

*I skipped this part in italics because we were running over:*

*UUs and the UUA showed up to fight racism during the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1990’s the General Assembly passed a resolution to become an “Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppression, Multi-Cultural” organization. In the last three decades, the UUA has steadily provided materials and training to congregations for the work to overcome oppression and racism, and promote multi-culturalism.*

*Many UU’s of color are “calling for something more.” In the words of the Rev. Marta Valentin, “calling for the pale center to turn and face the edges where a rainbow of faces and colors” are “engaging in a Unitarian Universalism that breathes love into its very core from our well-worn hearts; they will find us no longer waiting but creating a Unitarian Universalism of our own for everyone.”*

*Delegates to the virtual 2024 General Assembly in June will cast a historic vote on whether to update the Association’s by-laws with a new set of core values. “Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of six shared values,” it states. “We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.”*

Vivek Murthy assures us that “There are others out there who want what we want. A world that is more connected. A world where we can actually be there for one another. A world

that's actually powered by love. And that is within our grasp. We only have to see it, to name it, and to start taking *actions* in our day-to-day lives to *build* that world and *reflect* those values."

We don't have to do the work alone. "Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—can be used to bless or curse the world. The choice to bless the world . . . draws you into community, the endeavor shared, the heritage passed on, the companionship of struggle, the importance of keeping faith . . . None of us alone can save the world. Together—that is another possibility, waiting." Choose to bless the world.

Closing words:

You who light the world. You who love the world.

Be the light today. Be the love today.

Choose to bless the world.