

**WE COME AS CLOSE AS WE CAN**  
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**OPENING WORDS**     *We Are Not Alone* ~ *From Gates of Prayer, A Jewish Prayerbook*

The universe was brought forth by an inexhaustible creative power. It pours out torrents of energy still. Awesome and wondrous and mysterious, it is the source of our being.

Matter was formed out of chaos. Time passed, time beyond imagining; matter crossed a boundary and became life. Time passed, and life gave birth to – us!

Our universe is being formed at every moment. We too are not yet grown to full height. But ours is a special gift, for a special task: to help in our own shaping. For we were made to be free: free to love or to hate, free to destroy or to create.

We are like mountain climbers on a perilous ascent. Often we stumble; sometimes it seems we may dash ourselves on the rocks below. But there is hope, for dimly we have seen a vision, and felt a presence, and faintly heard a voice not ours.

The blazing stars, particles too small to see, the smile of children, the eyes of lovers, melody filling the soul, a flood of joy surprising the heart, mystery at the core of the plainest things – all tell us that we are not alone. They open our eyes to the vision that steadies and sustains us.

We are not alone, my friends. May our time together this morning steady and sustain our stumbling and ever-growing selves.

**STORY FOR ALL**     *Where Oliver Fits*     ~ *Cale Atkinson*

*(A puzzle piece tries to fit in, by changing their colour and their shape, but finally decides it's best to just be themself.)*

**READING**     *Mr. Bergy's Christmas*     ~ *Garrison Keillor*<sup>1</sup>

*Garrison Keillor, well-known for the Prairie Home Companion on Minnesota Public Radio, read this Christmas piece on his show in 1991. Ben Wolfe shared a much abridged version; you can hear the whole story from the link below.*

**MESSAGE**     *We Come as Close as We Can*     ~ *Rev. Stoneberg*

Let me clear the air about Garrison Keillor, if that's even possible. The story Ben shared was so artfully told, and the message so perfect for today that I wanted to include it. And, yet, as more and more personal stories are told of misogyny and abuse, it is hard to appreciate a piece of art, or see a movie, or support a politician when the key player is known to have badly misconducted....and it's difficult to know how to respond to the reality that good and evil are possible in each of us...and we struggle with what to do with our anger and despondency

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<sup>1</sup> Abridged and altered transcription of Mr. Bergy's Christmas, beginning at about minute 37:  
<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2006/12/22/middayxmas06>

about the misuse of power in so many places in our world.

Negotiations and settlements hide the whole of Garrison Keillor's story. But I absolutely believe the women who reported his misconduct, so we can't use, or allow ourselves to appreciate his story, without also naming their reality.

What I do believe is that how we respond to the wrongs out in the world bears some correspondence to how we respond to our own failings and shortcomings. I'll come back to this in a bit.

For now, I'd ask you to connect as best you can with the message of the story of Mr. Bergy...the story of two brothers who despair over a long-ago hurt that they have been unable to confront or to heal. A story of regret and disappointment. A story of two hearts that reach out across the short mile that separates them, yet they just can't get to each other's door. A story of what-ifs and could-have-beens.

Do you feel sadness for these brothers? Maybe a bit of consternation? Is it a familiar story to you? Or not so much?

Last week at our congregational meeting, Ben described the accessibility issues here as a wicked problem...that is, a problem that is difficult to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing information. A wicked problem is one in which every element affects the others, so that any change or motion moves things around in unpredictable ways. A problem where there is, most likely, no single solution.

Well, our very humanity...our potential for both good and bad...our ability to forgive ourselves and others, or not...our resilience or our defeatism...our longing for connection and the daily reality of our isolation...this is a wicked problem. It is, for some of us, especially evident at the holidays. We create high expectations of how it 'ought' to be, and have a clear vision for the perfect gift, the perfect family gathering, or the perfect holiday experience. And then, like Mr. Bergy, seeing those beautiful visions off in the distance, when the reality of our experience is something quite different, we get stuck in a deep snow bank, far from the road.

And we do this, not only in our relationships and gatherings, but also within ourselves. We set high standards of perfectionism, about what is right and proper and pleasing... and when we fall short of those expectations, we feel...what?

Disappointment? I'm a Unitarian, after all! I should have known, or been, better.

Hopelessness? There's no point; I never get it right.

Despair? This probably was my last chance, and I blew it!

Isolation? No one will ever love me, or at least they wouldn't, if they really knew me. I'm like Oliver;<sup>2</sup> I can't really ever be myself, because then I wouldn't fit in.

The voices go round and round, keeping us in a place of self-loathing and imperfection. Stuck in the Ford Broncos of our four-wheeling minds.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to the Story for All Ages...the story of a puzzle piece who can't find the place they fit.

<sup>3</sup> Refers to Mr. Bergy in the earlier reading, who accidently drives off the road in his Ford Bronco, getting stuck in deep.

It's probably true...that we could have done better. That we don't quite measure up. But, you know what? Perfect is an illusion that cannot occur in reality. And while I like Oliver's story, I don't think it ever actually works out like that. There is no perfect fit for any of us...not anywhere, with anyone. We just come as close as we can, and then work with what we have.

Perhaps this is the way to work with the wicked problem of being a human being.

Let go of the idea that there is one perfect solution. Accept the reality that we will fall short, and that 'good enough for now' is just that. Darn good enough. Observe what's going on and reflect on it in light of where we want to go and who we want to be. Learn from our mistakes, and then try again, knowing that all of life is an experiment, and that we're sure to fail again.

And viewing it this way is more possible if we are clear about core beliefs and assumptions. The no matter whats. Things that are true whatever else. Your list might be different, but here's mine:

1. While human beings are messy and complex, we are enough, and we are worthy of love.
2. Mistakes are perfectly normal. Flaws are what make us, and life, real.
3. We're in this together. We are wired to offer and accept help from one another.
4. It matters that we keep trying, keep engaging. Some things are worth doing, even though we can't do them perfectly.

Simply do the best we can, and learn from what is. It's very Buddhist, isn't it, to set intentions and then to let go of outcomes? To set our intention to know our worth, to love ourselves and others, to act out of that love, and then, to not get bent out of shape with what happens.

Believing that each person has inherent worth is core to Unitarian Universalism, yet to unflinching affirm that inherent worth is also one of our greatest challenges. As in so many challenges, we are imperfect, and we fall short of the ideal. As I said at the outset, I believe that how we deal with our own shortcomings and failures is reflected in how we deal with those of others. It's easier to be kind and compassionate to those around us when we accept that we ourselves are messy and imperfect, and that we were made that way.

Now, it would be an injustice to say that the harm done by such as Keillor is simply human imperfection. And, such action as his can't be reconciled simply by showing compassion. This is another aspect of the wicked problem of our humanity. Intention and impact have no direct correspondence. None of us can control another's actions, or know the depths of what is in another's heart. Our ideas of justice often do not match those of others. And yet, co-existing with others is a given, and what happens 'out there' can deeply affect our own hearts and feelings. Again, maybe a list of core beliefs about relationships is helpful. Here's mine:

1. We all have the potential to change and grow, even when we show no evidence of that. Even those such as Keillor.
2. The only person I can change is myself.
3. Other people and their actions are not responsible for how I feel or act, nor am I responsible for their behaviour or feelings.
4. Still, the actions and energy I choose to put out into the world matter.

We simply come as close as we can.

I went looking for an image of someone playing trumpet in the snow to put on the front of the order of service...and I found one! Here's the real-life story from the Globe and Mail, where the photo appeared.<sup>4</sup>

Last year, along Alberta's Highway 1, near Banff, terrible winter conditions caused a semi to jackknife, blocking the highway in both directions. Cars trying to turn around got stuck too, and it was expected it would take over an hour to open the road. Jens Lindemann, a world-renowned trumpet soloist on his way to a concert in Vancouver, got out of his stuck vehicle, took out his trumpet, and serenaded the stranded travellers. The article called his action 'pretty darn Canadian', but I would say it was 'pretty darn human'.

You see, in all of our imperfections, and all of our stuck places, we have the capacity to seek ways to relieve our despair and our disappointment. We might not get exactly where we're going, but we do come as close we can. And it matters that we move in that direction.

I do believe in your inherent worth. I do believe that there is a divine spark inside each of us, and whatever else happens, we can move toward that inner light.

A short poem by Michael Leuing captures this. It's called "At the Top":

At the top of the tallest building in the world  
Sat the saddest man in the world  
And inside the man  
Was the loneliest heart in the world  
And inside the heart  
Was the deepest pit in the world  
And at the bottom of the pit  
Was the blackest mud in the world  
And in the mud lay the lightest, loveliest, tenderest,  
Most beautiful, happy angel in the universe.

Deep in the heart of each of us lies loveliness, tenderness and beauty. We can choose to come as close as we can. It is awesome being human.

I end with a Sanskrit chat, my trumpet solo to you, which translates as "Peace. No matter what else, no matter what you've been given, peace to you."

Om, shanti, shanti, shanti hari om. Blessed Be.

**READING**      *Winter Lake (abridged)*<sup>5</sup>      ~ Elizabeth Lerner

One crisp, frozen, winter night, as the snowfall drifted to its conclusion, I walked with friends down from my old cottage...to a nearby lake. As the last flakes wafted down, they fell from a sky of clear and darkest black. The stars shone in unparalleled numbers and allure. The lake was frozen solid and covered in fresh snow – a cleared expanse of

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<sup>4</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/4511256/trumpet-player-stranded-drivers-alberta-highway/>

<sup>5</sup> *With or Without Candlelight: A Meditation Anthology*, Victoria Safford, ed.(Skinner House Books:2009) p.58

white without even a branch to bare it. We admired it – and then...we walked on water. ...

We came in silence, walked out onto the lake, and watched the wide night sky above... We bent down and brushed the snow from the surface of the lake. We saw the gleam of the ice and the blackness of the sky reflected in the blackness of the frozen lake with the white snow all around. ...The midnight, midwinter woods kept silence.

The landscape was without colour or sound, yet it wasn't bleak. It was filled with magic and mystery, with intense, unprecedented beauty. .... It was not the lake I knew...

This was ... a place of clarity and cold and black and white, sky and land and water and peace such as I had never beheld before. ... It was as though the universe came down and touched our planet there and the two merged – single and eternal, though all would be changed there in minutes and hours by the life that was in fact everywhere concealed, protected, waiting.

Life is laden with opportunities for miracle or beauty, moments of choice that bless us if we seize them, even in the cold season. I have entered the storehouses of the snow, ... seen ice birthed on the earth, ... walked on water hard as stone, and looked into the frozen deep – and it was good.

#### **CLOSING WORDS** *Suddenly Awake with Awe (adapted) ~ Gretchen Haley*

Do not fail to be surprised By the catching of your breath

The quickening of your heart The fullness of your eyes

Wide and Suddenly awake With awe.

Here is a place filled with wonder That still there might be

Something new born today

That we might be born anew today.

Do not fail to notice The changing life full and abundant

Already beginning By our coming together

...to become more together,

and to forgive: again, and again the falling short

that is always/already here.

With each in, and out, of breath Each word, each pause, each song

We give thanks, To be on this journey In this faith

Together

May peace be yours, no matter who you are, and no matter what else you are given.

Peace. Amen. Blessed be.

#### **EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**