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# The Mystic Messenger

www.winchesteruu.org 478 Main St Winchester MA 01890

## Themes: Awe, Integrity, Resilience

### Awe

By The Rev. Heather Janules

Perhaps, like me, you have taken one of those online quizzes that asks you what you call different things to determine where you grew up. Do you call a sweet, carbonated beverage “soda” or “pop?” Is a large sandwich in a bun a “grinder,” “sub” or “hoagie?”

The word “awe” – more specifically in the form of “awesome” – reminds me that I grew up in New England when I did. Throughout my childhood, use of this word was as common as black flies in the Great North Woods in summer. We would describe so many things as “awesome” – a delicious dessert, no homework assigned for the weekend, new sneakers. (Of course, it was also a regional trait to amplify the “awesome” quality of something by adding “wicked” in front of it.)

I am embarrassed to say it took me a long time to figure out the authentic meaning of the word. Something is “awesome” if it inspires the experience of “awe.” And “awe” is a rare and special occurrence, a feeling of profound amazement that changes us and our understanding of the world. No matter how delicious the dessert, liberating the lack of homework or style of the new sneakers, appreciation for these things falls short of an authentic experience of “awe.”

This month of December, we will explore the experience of “awe.” It is a fitting theme, considering the thread of profound amazement that runs through the holidays of this month. To recognize the returning of the light, to remember the miracle of light shining for eight days instead of one in a sacred space reclaimed, to celebrate the birth of a child of humble origins who grew to become a revolutionary healer and seeker of justice, to honor the values of a community that, against

all odds, survived and endured; awe is at the heart of all of these ancient stories.

Every year around this time, I marvel at the collective pursuit of awe. We buy so much, eat so much, go to so many social gatherings so our holidays will be “merry” and “happy.” But as we know, sometimes “the holidays” is not a time of awe at all. Sometimes our experiences are, at best, in the same emotional category as new sneakers or delicious desserts and, at worst, stressful, painful and incredibly lonely. Experiences of awe can come at any moment, at any time of the year. Yet feelings of awe may become buried by the seasonal shopping and feasting and socializing. A paradox.



I try to remember each holiday season that if I want to truly experience holiday joy it requires pacing myself in these activities of cheer. It requires slowing down. It requires spaciousness. It might require silence.

*(Continued on page 5)*

### Inside this issue:

- Awe | 1
- Integrity: Honoring Our Nation's Promise | 2
- Resilience | 3
- No Longer a Stranger in Strange Lands | 4
- The 2019-2020 Concert Series | 5

# Integrity: Honoring Our Nation's Promise

By Marianne DiBlasi, Intern Minister

In our country's history, wave after wave of immigrants have come to the United States. Some migrated by choice, others endured a forced migration, such as enslaved Africans who were transported here from Africa. It is only those who have Indigenous ancestry who did not immigrate; instead people from foreign countries invaded their land. The United States has a complicated history with colonization and immigration.

Yet, opening our country's doors to welcome the stranger is part of our country's identity. When Music Director, John Kramer, came across a letter written by George Washington in 1783, he discovered it is one of our country's founding values. An excerpt from Washington's letter reads, *"The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions."*

This value of welcoming the stranger is reinforced in the words inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty: *"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"* These are more than poetic, idealistic words; this is our country's promise to the world. But what has happened to this promise?

Syrian refugees are currently the largest population seeking resettlement, yet how many of those huddled masses are granted refuge in the United States? According to the Center for Immigration Studies, the number of Syrian refugees allowed into

the U.S. has dropped from 12,587 in 2016 to only 62 people in 2018. In Central America, families flee their homes and walk hundreds of miles over mountains and deserts in the blazing sun, in the hope of seeking safety from violence; only to be met at our borders with guns, walls, and inhumane detention centers.



Along with other U.S. citizens, many members of the Winchester Unitarian Society feel compelled honor the integrity of our Nation's promise to the world. In 2017, In response to increasing hostility to immigrants, WUS voted to become a Sanctuary level 2 congregation and is now part of an interfaith coalition that provides protection to those who are at risk of being deported. WUS has offered dedicated worship services on immigration, including one featuring testimony from youth who visited the US/Mexico border and an original cantata composed by John Kramer, *The Immigrant Experience*, which looks at some of this country's complicated immigration history. WUS participates in interfaith vigils at ICE immi-

gration detention centers to remind detainees they are not alone or forgotten.

A local non-profit, Lexington Refugee Assistance Program (LexRAP) is also honoring the integrity of our nation's promise by providing a network of community support to more than 50 refugees who are living in the local area. LexRAP volunteers provide shelter, food, clothing, transportation, English tutoring, employment and financial assistance. But, perhaps most importantly, they offer care and friendship to refugees who are strangers in a strange land.

A small group of people in Winchester have been supporting a local refugee family which recently became a LexRAP client. I had the pleasure of meeting this family and the group of volunteers at an outdoor gathering in September. I was immediately drawn to the warmth and affection between volunteers and members of the family. I smiled watching the father chase his young child around the yard. They laughed, hugged, and explored the area for treasures. And, when music from their home country began to play, they danced!

The mom was socializing, smiling, and talking with people; practicing her English. At the end of the gathering, I spoke to the mom. I learned her family has lived in multiple places in the United States before coming to Massachusetts. At one point, she glanced at the people bustling around, packing up food for her family to take home. I saw tears begin to well up in her big brown eyes and she quietly said, *"We feel love again."*

Four simple words *"We feel love again"* that say volumes about what  
*(Continued on page 4)*

# Resilience

By Rebecca Kelly-Morgan, Director of Lifespan Religious Education



All actors fumble. They learn early in their careers that they will skip a line, or misspeak a word or forget their cue. They also learn how to recover. They can insert the line at another point, they can make up something to catch up, and they can pretend they meant to do “that” all along. The audience is unlikely to know the difference, if the actor keeps going. If the actor stops and apologizes, loses the plot line, berates their fellow actors, or in some way allows one error to compound itself, then the audience will know. Pro tip - don’t do that. This ability to recover in the middle of a scene is a form of resilience.

In life, we also are called on to recover, to move on as if nothing had happened, to get past many things. We are reminded again and again that we slip up and when we do, identifying with the mistake, rather than all the things we got right up to that point, will not move us and the plot line of our lives forward. Unlike the stage, we may need to review the errors, make amends as needed, and consider how to move forward before we can do so. But when that’s done, and we’ve done everything we can, allow yourself the gift of resilience, rather than continued self re-crimination.

Then there are the things that we

have absolutely no control over - not our personal errors, but the unforeseen events that impact us. The delightful ones, a bouquet of flowers, an unexpected windfall, a sunny day - are easy to engage. We go with them. It’s the difficult things that come our way that trip us up - losses, emotional or physical injury, personal and societal changes that we didn’t see coming. There are many ways of responding to difficult circumstances. We could blame and \*other\* those in control. We could give up and give in. Or we could keep our minds free and go find something else to do with our thoughts and the actions that follow. It is true for many that although we cannot always choose our circumstances, we can choose our response. That choosing is another form of resilience. And sometimes we choose to be tough, and to quote a Latin class joke, *illegitimis non carborundum*.

Notice, I wrote “for many.” Not all people can choose their response. Although trauma is somewhat vogue these days, that doesn’t mean it’s not real and that trauma responses don’t challenge our resilience. Personal circumstances and history can keep some of us locked into a place where it takes everything we have just to get through the day and some days, even that is too much. That’s one of the many reasons we need communities and robust relationships within them.

Think of the world as concentric circles, the individual in the center, and each circle a community that holds us, even when we are not aware of it. The most obvious ones are the ones closest to us. We see them and they see us. Those are the communities that can reflect resilience back to us, when we are not able to claim it for ourselves. Our families and congregations hold us up and sometimes hold us together. We weave up resilience between individual and collective, and string it together with relationships.

If the trope, “you cannot always choose your circumstances, but you can choose your response” is true for many individuals, it is also true for many communities. We can spend endless hours analysing errors, or placing blame, or we can catch up and move forward. We can support the other actors in this scene and catch ourselves when we fumble. We can rebound from internal and external pressures, if we choose to do so. Resilience isn’t *just* rebound. Resilience is not moving *on* - leaving the past and its lessons behind. Resilience is a practice art, and like acting, also a practice art, it takes time and attention to cultivate. Resilience is moving *forward*, integrating the past into the present and future.

AND, as with individuals, many communities - experiencing injury, socio-economic stresses, external oppressions and internalized oppressions - also experience trauma and cannot always choose their response to circumstances. At those times we need the resilient individuals within the community and, if appropriate, other communities to hold them up and hold them together as they find their way. We are *all* finding our way in this complex world, as individuals and as communities. We don’t have all the answers, and we’re prone to mistakes, but we can recover, pick up the dropped threads of the plot, and weave them back in along the way.



# No Longer a Stranger in Strange Lands

By Karen Hirschfeld



18 years ago next month, not long after the news networks had stopped replaying the constant, sickening loop of the planes hitting the Twin Towers, and the unsettling feeling of “our new normal” had begun to sink in, I boarded a plane for Islamabad, Pakistan.

Why there? Why then? You might ask. To me, it was obvious.... I had just finished a Master’s degree in economic development and wanted to work in the field. But, there’s this catch-22 – it’s impossible to get a job without experience, and you can’t get experience without a job.... So, what to do? You go where no one else wants to.

So, I got on that plane in the fall of 2001, and by the spring of 2002, I was working in Kabul. And thus, began a decade and a half of working overseas. In Afghanistan, I helped prepare the country for its first ever democratic election. In Darfur, I documented atrocities against women. In post-earthquake Haiti, I worked to stabilize the country’s far north. And in Myanmar, I ensured that women were involved in the peace agreement taking place between the government and the dozens of armed groups it had fought for decades.

By 2017, I was beyond exhausted. I came back to Winchester, my

hometown, to re-group, and to start a career that didn’t require me to live in the world’s most dangerous or forgotten places. I wanted the next part of my life to be totally different. I longed for calm, for community, for connection.

Given we Yankees’ reputation for warmth, I’m sure you’re shocked to hear that that was not easy to find. 2017 rolled into 2018, and I still felt lonely, unsettled, disconnected. Until one Sunday morning, when I felt drawn to the Winchester Unitarian Society and its embrace of people of all faiths or no faith in particular. Just last Sunday, I was moved by Heather’s beautiful explanation of Yom Kippur – the Jewish day of atonement. How wonderful it was for me to hear the chorus singing -in Hebrew – the songs I grew up with, and how strangely stirring to hear coming from the organ the haunting melody of Kol Nidre, the ancient song - in Aramaic – that ushers in Yom Kippur, our holiest day.

My community has since spread in ever-widening circles from WUS....

I’m volunteering with the Immigrant Justice Committee at Winchester’s Network for Social Justice, ensuring that Winchester’s town policies make *all people* feel safe and welcome, regardless of their immigration status. The Venn diagram of this Congregation and the Network has a large middle and small sides.

Along with several people from the Congregation, I’m helping a young asylum-seeking family living in the area. Remembering how I was welcomed with warmth against the literal and metaphorical New England chill, I aimed to do the same. And, now, my worlds are colliding again – in a good way – as the Winchester Unitarian Society is announcing a partnership with LexRAP, a local organization that helps refugees - including the family I’m working with - find work, community and comfort here.

After so many years as a stranger in strange lands, I am grateful to the Winchester Unitarian Society for welcoming me. Back home.

*Karen would be happy to talk to WUS members about her adventures. You can contact Karen at: [karenhirschfeld@gmail.com](mailto:karenhirschfeld@gmail.com)*

*(Continued from page 2)*

is truly lost when a family flees their country of origin. The loss of leaving their extended family, friends, community, and culture. The loss of loving and being loved. By offering support and kindness to those who have fled from danger, we offer strangers from a strange land the opportunity to “*feel love again.*” Crossing over the border is merely the physical part of entering this country. Extending hospitality to our refugee neighbors is what makes being here a home – a place where they are cared for and are safe.

In alignment with Winchester Unitarian Society’s commitment of honoring the integrity of our Nation’s promise to welcome the stranger, WUS members and friends are invited to participate in a partnership with LexRAP. Please see the weekly Highlights to learn about ongoing ways to support LexRAP refugee families. You can also contact Marianne DiBlasi by contacting the office or at [marianne@winchesteruu.org](mailto:marianne@winchesteruu.org) to learn more about LexRAP.



## The 2019-2020 Concert Series

### Jazz in the Sanctuary Friday, January 24th at 8:00 PM

Year after year this remains our most popular concert, so mark your calendar now and don't miss out!

This year we are hosting a saxophone summit with three of Boston's best young players: Lihi Haruvi, Mark Zaleski, and Mike Tucker. Don't miss this unforgettable evening.

### Windborne Friday, May 8th at 8:00 PM

Internationally acclaimed vocal ensemble Windborne is a group of vocal chameleons who specialize in close harmony singing, shifting effortlessly between drastically different styles of traditional music with the same concert. Their musical knowledge spans many continents and cultures, but they remain deeply rooted in American folk singing traditions.

*(Continued from page 1)*

I remember a story a colleague shared one Christmas Eve. She was trying as best she could to make the season special for her two young girls. Part of this effort was hanging white lights outside their house. This was not a small thing as it meant being outside in the cold, the procurement of ladders and mending light strings that would go dark if only one bulb did not work. As she went through all this work, she wondered if it was worth it. Her girls were older now anyway; have they already become jaded to the season? But they went through the yearly ritual of her daughters bundling up in their coats and closing their eyes. Their mothers plugged in the lights and guided them by hand to the front yard. My colleague turned them around to face the house and said, "Open your eyes."

When one of her daughters opened her eyes, she gasped with delight. "Oh, Mommy," she said. "It's magic!"

This story reminds me time and again that there is awe to be found in this time together. Some of this sense of wonder may come through heroic efforts. (I believe anything involving a ladder is automatically defined as "heroic.") Or it may come through just being with people we love, being open to our surroundings and paying attention to simple miracles, present and possible at all times.

My hope and prayer for each of us is that we have an "awesome" holiday season, not in the slang Yankee sense but the sense of being subtly transformed by the unfathomable beauty of life. May this be our collective gift!

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