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The Mystic Messenger

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December's Theme is Stillness

Stillness

By Rebecca Kelley-Morgan, Director of Lifespan Religious Education

Usually this season, December is a rush of activity, gifting, cooking, planning, and taking advantage of the many different times and ways to gather. Not this December. I have always believed the many festivals during the winter were an instinctive push back at the darkness, finding consolation for the short days in celebration with each other. Not this December. The pandemic has forced a protracted pause on our accustomed rhythms of living.

A couple of months ago, I found this poem by Pablo Neruda and promptly posted it above my computer screen.

*“Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still
for once...
If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves...”*

These last 9 months have been, for many of us, a time of trying to make sense of the abrupt and continuing disruption to them. Observing my own and other’s reactions to the initial lockdown, once the shock wore off, I watched (and took part) as many careened from one activity to another, trying to make this time work in

some fashion. Keeping, as the poet Neruda writes, “our lives moving”. Reading, cleaning, exercising, baking sourdough breads, household projects, parenting, and home schooling, all on steroids. I was encouraged to keep a pandemic journal, so that a future Ken Burns has material to describe these times. I declined to accept the challenge.

There are others who found a different focus, falling into a sort of inertia, while doom scrolling through the news and pandemic statistics, perseverating upon them.

Whatever our reactions and responses, they all become exhausting. and at some point, the weight of keeping busy forces us into stillness. Stillness borne on fatigue, when the mind goes blank, when the hands grow idle. But are we ever still? Our hearts beat on, our bodies go about their business and we



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cradle and grave? Am I still while an infinitesimal bit of RNA and protein wreaks havoc on our lives? Probably not. My breath continues, my body goes about its business while I am deeply and profoundly aware of the unknown and unknowable.

It is not stillness we seek, perhaps, but a

breathe in and we breathe out.

I have any number of spiritual practices and I fall deeply into one or the other for an intense period and then move on. But whatever I am doing, whether journaling, or practicing asanas, or praying, or, or, or, or I always come back to my breath. Back to, not a rhythm – I come back to the pause, the moment when the inhale ends, before the exhale begins. That tiny moment, that pause, is the stillness that both honors my life and my being, but also honors my impermanence. One day the inhale will not be followed by an exhale, and I will be no longer. It is a poignant and profound truth that I return to, particularly this time of year, when the wheel of the seasons turns to darkness and the greyness of the landscape reaches into my soul. Am I still when the wind takes my hair and adorns it with leaves? Am I still watching the spiders weave up their art, their webs that are both

pause. A shift in awareness, a silent celebration of the air I breathe, the warmth of my skin, the subtle pulses of blood moving to and from my beating heart. A moment within liminal spaces between sunset and full dark, and within full dark to the bleaching of the sky. But always, always, I return to my breath, and that tiny pause between inhale and exhale.

There is a custom expanding through-out the medical professions in hospitals – The Pause. The Pause was introduced by the Cleveland Clinic a few years ago, to humanize the medical moment when someone dies. When a death occurs, whether sudden or not, the medical staff and family members, if they are present, stop and pause for 15-30 seconds, recognizing the profound passage from life to death. Hospitals and most health care settings are places of movement, where light and noise are a constant hum against the backdrop of urgency, of all the

things that must be done. And even more so in intensive care settings, where seconds might save lives. But that pause just might connect the many faces and hands of care to their calling, to their humanity and even to their failures.

Those seconds of stillness might save souls.

This year, we are beset by the impulse toward movement, urgency, of all the things that must be done. Doing in a new way, trying on, seeking new normal while trying to keep as much of the “usual” alive in our vocations and homes. What if we were to take the poet’s advice, and count to twelve, let ourselves keep still. Pausing that movement in our lives, so that we could just be. Settling into the pause, the stillness that connects us to our triumphs and our failures, our connections to each other, and our humanity. That pause, those precious seconds of stillness that we can gather, just might save souls.



January's Theme is Imagination



By Sam Wilson, Director of the Winchester Unitarian Society Youth Group

4 years ago, WUSYG hosted an “Imagination Ball” for this congregation: a free, all-ages event on the eve of Trump’s inauguration to “celebrate community, lift up love & diversity, and resist hate!” There was food, music, dancing, face-painting, a costume contest, and various interactive ways for people of all ages to share their hopes and dreams and focus on the positive. What fun we all had, imagining a better world! Many of us certainly knew what was in store for us over the next 4 years, to some extent, but I don’t think that any of us could have possibly predicted to what extent the “inherent worth and dignity” of human beings would be repeatedly questioned and challenged, or even how much the “democratic process” would have been routinely eroded. In other words, how much damage there would be to basic tenets of our collective theology and everything that we hold sacred as Unitarian Universalists (per, of course, our 7 hopefully-

Imagine What We Could Do if We Could Do What We Imagine!!

soon-to-be-8 principles¹). Although, thankfully, this year’s election results largely leave all of us feeling a bit less far away from our “goal of community with peace, liberty and justice for all,” we still know that our country has a long way to go toward achieving true “justice, equity and compassion” in our relations with one another. Indeed, in the past several months, this goal has felt more unattainable to me than at any other point in my life. And yet, where there are progressive religious folk such as ourselves who recommit ourselves to the work - and continue to hold out hope by imagining what could be - there is a way forward. One of the activities for participants at our

“Imagination Ball” was planting “seeds of hope” in a “Garden of Dreams.”

So, here, I offer you the wisdom from those same seeds: respect for all; be the change you wish to see; love is key; science is real; stay calm and be cool; vaccines keep loved ones healthy; you can make a difference; stay awesome; love one another; resistance, community & more love. May you continue to nurture these seeds, and may we all continue to reap the benefits.



1 - Black Lives of UU Organizing Collective Urges Adoption of 8th Principle in Unitarian Universalism:

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

February's Theme is Beloved Community

By The Rev. Heather Janules

In "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma," the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in 1957 that, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends...It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men [and all people.] This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization."

The King Center notes that the vision of "Beloved Community" was first imagined by philosopher Josiah Royce but amplified through King's public ministry. As they envision it, the Beloved Community is not the product of divine



miracle, where all suffering gives way to contentment and peace. It is, however – to our ears – something of a utopia, a world free of deprivation, violence and oppression. Such a world is made

through the challenging, human work of non-violent advocacy.

Creating the Beloved Community is not possible without individual and collective conflicts. But, despite and perhaps through conflict, bridges are built between differing minds. As I understand it, the Beloved Community is the embodiment of words (falsely) attributed to Dávid Ferenc: "We need not think alike to love alike."

"This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization." King's statement certainly rang true in his time and it rings true today. This is definitely a time when all of us would benefit from learning how to "transform oppressors into friends."

Every journey begins at a starting place. When I think of "building the Beloved Community" – as we state in our weekly affirmation – I think of something a Unitarian Universalist leader once told me from her experience in education. Every school needs, she said, "mirrors and windows." Of course, she means this in the figurative sense. Every student needs an environment where they can both see themselves and encounter opportunities to experience "the other." Affirmation of our reality and an opportunity to learn another's truth help us grow and mature.

One thing I often say when people

decide to join a Unitarian Universalist congregation is that they are joining a community that will sus-



tain them and disappoint them. They will meet "like-minded people" and people who will shatter that assumption. With so many different theological perspectives, our primary collective spiritual practice is living into our congregational covenant, of learning to stay connected even when feelings are hurt, tempers are high and values collide.

All of this is to say that I have come to understand "building the Beloved Community" as a way of living that affirms that even those who challenge us have something to offer. It means that things will not always go our way or meet our needs...and that is a good thing; someone else has been satisfied instead. It means that

Imagination Pictures: The Garden of Dreams. The Costume Contest winners: Lauri, Aidan and Rhea Clark. And, John & Maggie Russell dancing under the disco ball.

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even when we are in conflict, each person is worthy of love because we all come from, and will return to, the same compassionate source.

I do not think I will see the Beloved Community writ large in society, as Royce and King describe it, in my lifetime. And I know that building the Beloved Community is work that is never complete. But I have seen glimpses sometimes, brief moments. This brings me hope. And, as "Beloved Community" is the theme for February, so often focused on love, these moments show me what love can look like when it transcends the bonds of family and friendship.

May you, like moments of grace, see glimpses of the Beloved Community. And may we continue to strive to bring it into being.

Excerpt from Thomas Slack's Veterans Day Sermon, "The Power of Service" - November 15, 2020

John McCain wrote, "Nothing in life is more liberating than to fight for a cause larger than yourself, something that encompasses you but is not defined by your existence alone."

All veterans of the United States military know this feeling of liberation through service, even if it may not have registered at the time of their Oath of Enlistment (or in the case of officers, their Oath of Office). Through the process of basic training the individual is broken down and rebuilt in the image of their respective branch: a soldier, a marine, a seaman, a guardsman, or an airman. Each branch instills in its members their core values and each

branch's core values are slightly different. However, they all speak to the concepts of honor, duty, devotion, and service somewhere in their lists. Service is what brings us here today. Veterans Day is a time when we express our gratitude to all members of the United States military

who served this great country that we all love. It's important to note that Veterans Day is especially a time to honor and show appreciation to those veterans who are still living. Memorial Day (the last Monday in May) is the holiday dedicated to paying respect to those who have fallen in service to this country. This morning, I intend to talk about the importance of honoring the service and sacrifice of veterans, and how by emulating their devotion to service and duty we can all create better communities and strengthen our country as we transition from the chaotic period we've recently endured.

While I cannot speak for the other branches, in the Air Force we had the core values of "Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do." From the day I learned them they were instrumental in helping me to find the purpose of my life; to serve my fellow human beings in the best way possible. Many other veterans have a similar reaction. They either continue on as "lifers" in the military or separate and pursue lives dedicated to serving other people or causes that make a difference in this world. Veterans are our police officers, our firefighters, and first responders. They are nurses, doctors, and dentists. They are teachers, politi-

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Beloved Community Pictures: "Group Hug" Photo by [Vonecia Carswell](#) on [Unsplash](#), "MLK Jr. Monument" Photo by WUS Member Sean Crowley, "Community Heart" Photo by [Tim Marshall](#) on [Unsplash](#)

African American Classical Music

By John Kramer, Music Director

A version of this article appeared as the reflection during the service on October 25, 2020.

I know I am in good company when I express a heightened sense of urgency when it comes to matters of racism in this country. Events of this summer seemed to have tipped the scale, altered the conversation, and there is new hope for a true anti-racist reality. We are deeply listening, perhaps in a new way. And I am finding new stories and histories being told about how white supremacy has affected African Americans; much of this history seems to be things I wish I had learned before. And I know many institutions, here at WUS and the school I teach at, Berklee College of Music, are looking at ways to address these histories and chart a path to healing. History is so important because it shapes our present.

And there are histories of music that have been overlooked and forgotten by the White majority. Beautiful music that speaks to the human condition and music that can both calm and terrify us. Over the last few years I have been exploring, and in turn have been richly fed by, the music created by Black classical composers from the early 20th century.

My guess is that most people reading this, when prompted to think about African American music, would think of jazz, hip-hop, rap, gospel, and a few other gen-



res of music before thinking of classical music. We are all culturally conditioned to think of classical music as white European music. We have even witnessed recent calls to “cancel” Beethoven.

And yet there are many amazing Black musicians who have and currently work in the Classical music tradition, the tradition of through composed art music. This is a music whose story has not been told, and that story tells us a lot about our current situation. This is also a personal story for me, as I find myself astonished that I am only now learning so much of this glorious music. This tells me quite a few things both about what I’ve

been taught and also what I’ve been willing to explore and learn on my own.

Thanks to the support of this congregation, I have been pleased to be a member of the Association of Unitarian Universalist Music Ministries. Your support, in the form of my professional development, has allowed me to attend their annual conference, usually held in the summertime. I have found these conferences to be rich experiences, both in content and for the relationships with my fellow UU colleagues. A few summers ago, this organization asked us to deeply consider what music we were programming; urged us to

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“decenter whiteness” in our music programs. Two summers ago the conference featured only works composed by people of color. It has been a remarkable journey.

I have been serving churches for over 25 years now and in nearly all that time I have enjoyed programming Spirituals. We did a service here about 10 years ago that was dedicated to the Spirituals. This is the music that was created by enslaved Africans in the United States and then carefully crafted into works of art by composers such as Harry T. Burliegh, Willam Dawson, and many others. It is a living testimony to the power of the human spirit to rise above oppression and hardship.

It is also a “check the box” kind of musical programming that White people - including myself- have been doing for a long time. And this is not to say that it is inappropriate for white choirs to sing this music or that we shouldn’t - we should, because it is of its power and history. And also because Black creators have encouraged its performance. But; we shouldn’t stop there - telling ourselves that we are programming works by African Americans because we sing Spirituals - and not exploring the full spectrum of musical creation. I will confess here that I have also felt that because I play jazz and ragtime, I have explored the African American tradition fully. There is so much that I have missed!

And this is a lesson for me. When I

heard the call to decenter whiteness in our music program, I began afresh looking for musical sources. I found that many of the composers and arrangers of the Spirituals were also fantastic pianists and wrote amazing works for the piano - why had I never thought to look before. You have heard many selections in our services from piano suites by artists such as Harry T. Burliegh and Nathaniel Dett. My search has coincided with a growing national movement to rediscover these “lost” artists - although there are many who have cherished their music the entire time - and that led me to discover composers such as Florence Price or her student Margaret Bonds whose work *The Ballad of the Brown King* we performed last December.

Music exists in a culture and significant forces determine its success. If the culture supports the music and the artist, it can succeed to some part regardless of the degree of its artistic worth. This is how much of contemporary music works - it is propagated by an entire industry and certain elites make decisions about who will be a star and what will be a hit. If the culture does not support the artist, no matter how strong the quality, it will be very difficult for the artist to thrive.

When Mozart was born in Salzburg in 1756, there was a very well established musical culture in Europe and Mozart’s father, being a musician himself, knew how to

raise his prodigy. Mozart was raised to be a phenomenon and rewarded both by his family and by the cultural elite who supported his artistry. Everything was done to create a musical genius. As an aside, it is important to note that Wolfgang’s sister was also a very capable musician and she wasn’t encouraged to genius, but that is a topic for another reflection. Mozart’s genius has been propagated through history so that he is still a household name and a standard bearer for music in general.

Florence Price, born in 1887 in Arkansas, was also a musical prodigy, playing her first piano performance at the age of 4 and had music published when she was 11. And Price was prolific - four symphonies, countless piano pieces, songs, chamber music. However, the culture of the United States was much less welcoming and nurturing of her talent. She did have some success, in 1933 the Chicago Symphony premiered her *Symphony in e minor* making her the first African American woman to have a work played by a major U.S. orchestra. And yet though she went to school here in Boston at the New England Conservatory, the Boston Symphony Orchestra only just programmed her music for the first time in 2018. In 1943 she wrote to the then music director, Serge Koussevitzky - heralded as a champion of new music, and asked that her work be considered for performance. In this letter she

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acknowledges the twin handicap of being a woman and being Black in America. William Grant Still, the Dean of African American composers goes on to say: "It is unfortunate for a man of color who is ambitious to live in America."

It is beyond the scope of this reflection to chart the entire history that kept this music from thriving. But I do want to point out that the musical establishment didn't discriminate against Black classical musicians alone - Jazz did not gain recognition as a serious art form in the U.S. until it was widely heralded in Europe.

So this summer I took a dive into the piano repertoire of African American composers and was very pleased to present this music to you in a performance on Saturday, November 14th. I have been deeply moved and inspired by these works by Florence Price, Nathaniel Dett, William Grant Still and Margaret Bonds. And this is the thing... Koussevitzky and others may have had good reasons for not programming this music, they may be justly accused of propagating white supremacy, however we all lose by not knowing this music better. I do not think it hyperbole to call it a national tragedy.

There has been of late, some consternation expressed about re-writing history. My recent evidence suggests that in doing so, we are only going to make our collective story stronger and more beautiful. I am still astonished and saddened to think that my teachers never assigned any of this music to me; but also astonished and saddened that I did not look for it myself. However, it is never too late to start, and I am very thankful for that little nudge from the UU musicians and also the culture of this congregation that has been curious along with me.

African American Classical Music Picture: Robert Nathaniel Dett (top left), Florence Price (top right), William Grant Still (bottom left), Margaret Bonds (bottom right)

Stillness Pictures: "Icelandic Stillness" Photo by Rebecca Kelley-Morgan (on p. 1), "Breathing" Photo by [Eli DeFaria](#) on [Unsplash](#) and "Sunshine Stillness" Photo by [Melissa Askew](#) on [Unsplash](#) (on p. 2)





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cians, and faith leaders. Veterans are our neighbors, colleagues, family, and friends.

I am reminded of last year's Veterans Day service here at Winchester Unitarian Society, where Pete Rogers, a Vietnam veteran and educator committed to helping people understand the struggles of veterans, asked us all to raise our hands if we were veterans, were related to veterans, friends with veterans, or generally knew a veteran. Having been seated in the back of the Sanctuary, it was a truly moving moment as a wave of emotion engulfed me while watching the growing wave of your hands held high in honor of the veterans you all know and love. It is important to remember these honorable servants, especially on Veterans Day, because they have given so much of their time and energy in all efforts made through selfless service to us as U.S. citizens...

...Today, I serve this great community at the Winchester Unitarian Society, which is full of so many hardworking and generous people who are committed to improving all kinds of aspects of the local and national communities. It is kind of funny, because I need to mention how it is important to observe and imitate the devotion to service exhibited by veterans, but I find myself admiring so many of you for all of the work you do in service to your fellow human beings. I am not going to name drop, because there are a lot of you and I would practically be reading the member directory. However, I would just like to say that I see the efforts you make regarding social and environmental justice, in raising well-educated and socially active youths. Your dedication to serving and making a difference is admirable and I'm sure the UUs at Winchester Unitarian Society and my fellow veterans can learn a lot from each other and our shared appreciation for service.

Colin Powell said "Indeed, we're the strongest when the face of America isn't only a soldier carrying a gun but also a diplomat negotiating peace, a Peace Corps volunteer bringing clean water to a village, or a relief worker stepping off a cargo plane as floodwaters rise."

May peace and blessings find their way into the hearts and minds of all veterans. May we as Americans find our way out of the chaos and into a more stable future through our service.

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