

Worship transcript for August 23, 2020

Prelude (Nicole Rumeau, vocals; David Cole, guitar)

“Bridges” (Milton Nascimento)

I have crossed a thousand bridges
In my search for something real
There were great suspension bridges
Made like spider webs of steel
There were tiny wooden trestles
And there were bridges made of stone
I have always been a stranger
And I've always been alone

There's a bridge to tomorrow
There's a bridge from the past
There's a bridge made of sorrow
That I pray will not last
There's a bridge made of colors
In the sky high above
And I think that there must be
Bridges made out of love

I can see her in the distance
On the river's other shore
And her hands reach out in longing
As my own have done before
And I call across to tell her
Where I believe the bridge must lie
And I'll find it
Yes, I'll find it
If I search until I die

When the bridge is between us
We'll have nothing to fear
We will run through the sunlight
And I'll meet her halfway
There's a bridge made of colors
In the sky high above
And I'm certain that somewhere
There's a bridge made of love

Call to Worship (Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)

All that we have ever loved and all that we have ever been
Stands with us on the brink of all that we aspire to create:

A deeper peace,
A larger love
A more embracing hope
A greater generosity of spirit
A deeper joy in this life we share

– Leslie Takahashi, “On the Brink,” from “Voices from the Margins”; Jacqui James and Mark Morrison-Reed, editors.

Come, let us worship together.

Hymn 20

“Be Thou My Vision”

Be thou my vision, O God of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me God;
thou my soul’s shelter, thou my high tower,
raise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor world’s empty praise,
thou my inheritance, now and always;
thou and thou only, first in my heart,
Sov’ reign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

Pastoral Concerns, and Prayer (Rev. Louise Green)

Hello, All Souls. We gather now in our virtual circle, connected through love and technology, in this sacred space we create each week.

Let’s start with a celebration that on August 18, one hundred years ago, the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution was ratified. It read: “The right to vote... shall not be denied or abridged by the US, or by any State, on account of sex.” In this election season, let us honor the heritage of many women who fought for this right, while we remember that the right to vote has never been more urgent.

Our thoughts are with David Wiley as his mother begins long-term hospice, and continuing care for dementia. We are thinking of David, Pam, and their children Ben and Jamie as this passage unfolds for their family.

Bonnie Manwell, a Silver Soul who joined All Souls in 1962, has entered comfort and hospice care at home at Riderwood, in her home. Our thoughts are with family, including sister Betty Guyot, who was a member here for many years. Bonnie's service in the Caring Card ministry for so long was much appreciated. Her three children are with her 24 hours a day, and Bonnie can take phone calls and welcomes cards.

And finally, your names and situations into this space. A time of silence as you think of those places and people beloved to you.

[Silence]

Today we offer prayers for all those parents and guardians thinking about school for their children. For the extra stresses of this season, and all the complicated choices that must be made, we send love. We lift up the children and youth of this congregation, that they might feel beloved in this time.

Please take a deep breath, and settle in your seat, as we listen to the words of Alice Walker.

“While Love is Unfashionable”

While love
Is unfashionable
Let us live

Unfashionably.
Seeing the world
A complex ball
In small hands;
Love
Our blackest
Garment.

Let us be poor
In all but truth
And courage
Handed
Down
By the old spirits.

Let us be intimate
With ancestral
Ghosts
And music
Of
The undead.
While love

Is dangerous
Let us walk
Bareheaded
Beside
The great
River.

Let us gather
Blossoms
Under
Fire.

May it be so. Amen.

Hymn 123

“Spirit of Life” (words and music by Carolyn McDade) (sung in English and Spanish)

Fuente de amor, ven hacia mi
Y al corazon cantale tu compassion
Sopla al volar, sube en la mar
Hasta moldear la justicia de la vida
Arraigame, liberame
Fuente de amor, ven a mi, ven a mi

Spirit of life, come unto me
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice
Roots hold me close, wings set me free
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

Reading and Message (Rev. Rolenz)

“Threshold”

R.S. Thomas

I emerge from the mind's
cave into the worse darkness
outside, where things pass and
the Lord is in none of them.

I have heard the still, small voice
and it was that of the bacteria

demolishing my cosmos. I
have lingered too long on

this threshold, but where can I go?
To look back is to lose the soul
I was leading upwards towards
the light. To look forward? Ah,

what balance is needed at
the edges of such an abyss.
I am alone on the surface
of a turning planet. What

to do but, like Michelangelo's
Adam, put my hand
out into unknown space,
hoping for the reciprocating touch?

For those of you who joined us last Sunday, you saw me offering the sermon from the historic pulpit at All Souls. I have to tell you, it was exhilarating standing there, imagining all of you in those pews, speaking in that acoustically resonant space and anticipating all the sermons I look forward to delivering from that place. I appreciate the fact that your pulpit holds a place in the history of not only All Souls, but in the community. You want and expect your ministers' sermons to speak not only to you but to a broader audience, to address the great issues of our time and place in history. I want to assure you that I will be doing my best to preach sermons like that – but today, I'm speaking from my home study.

Some of you may have read that after taping our service in the Sanctuary last Sunday – after going through extremely detailed and well-developed plans for keeping us all safe and at a distance, we discovered that one person in attendance tested positive for COVID. The test had been taken days prior due to travel plans. This individual had no symptoms, and still has no symptoms, had been extremely cautious about their social interactions and had no reason to believe that they would receive a positive test. So we will keep talking, week to week, about whether I should do sermons from home or sermons from the sanctuary, as our best wisdom and advice suggests. Next Sunday, we plan to record from the sanctuary again, but with only one person and a film crew, in the room at the same time.

By my estimation, we did everything right last week– everything we could possibly think of and then some. If there is fault to be found, it is perhaps that this turn of events caught me by surprise, five months into the pandemic. Haven't we had plenty of reason to expect that the COVID virus is bigger and badder than we first believed possible? And now we have a choice to make. We can be in denial or avoidance about its reality, as so many were. early in this crisis We can call it a hoax, like one person I do business with told me! We can set a new magical thinking deadline and tell ourselves the virus will go away in November, after the election. Or we can

engage in a spiritual practice of resiliency, so that we can act quickly and nimbly to address what these times demands.

This Sunday, I wanted to pick up on some of the themes I was talking about last Sunday – reflecting on what it means for All Souls as a community -and for us as individuals – to be together while apart and how to remain resilient, adaptable and to prepare as best we can for this still underdetermined New Normal.

Five months into this global pandemic, we are starting to realize that the virus has caused everything to change and that change is going to continue. Despite the stories we read about pandemics in history and the smaller pandemics we have seen in our lifetimes, we have never been in a place quite like this before. We've never all had to do anything like this together before. It feels strange. It make us feel disconnected from what we knew as life before Covid. Our routines, our familiar patterns and rituals which anchor us, even the rhythms of our own bodies, all of it can feel unfamiliar, strange.

It reminds me of the one time I went sky-diving. I remember falling out of the plane and feeling the exhilaration of my body in free-fall. I was so caught up in the moment, I almost neglected to open my chute. You'd think the free fall would be the terrifying part of the sky dive, but actually it was when the chute opened , yanked me up in the air and calmly began to float down to Earth. While in free fall, there was not time to reflect on anything but to feel the giddiness of the moment. But as I floated back to earth, I remember distinctly thinking to myself "I have never felt my body in space like this before." After the initial free fall of March when everything shut down and the markets dropped, we had a parachute experience of government action and wise advice from scientists that pulled us up and left us floating in this new space. We have never felt our bodies in space like this before. And we're coming to the realization that we don't know fur sure where the ground might be and how long we'll be floating downwards. And ominously, if we look up, there are a few of those cords holding the parachute that don't look like they are holding up very well.

Here's the truth as I see it however. We – we the people of this country and we the church- have been changed by the pandemic but we have needed to change for a very long time. This is the latest iteration of a reality that has been happening in our lives and in Unitarian Universalism for a very long time. Let me tell you what I mean.

Two hundred years ago when All Souls was founded, there was a great need for a liberal religious presence in Washington DC. As noted in your history, "There was unconcealed opposition to liberal religious views in the Washington community. "The church was said to have been built out of motives of ostentation. He who taught therein was accused as a bold Sadducee whose pestiferous doctrines breathed death unto the soul." [1] Up until the 20th century, our message of the unity of God, the reconciliation of All Souls, of Universal Salvation were cutting edge theology. Unitarian and Universalism both promoted a gospel of progressive values from its beginnings and have been viewed with suspicion at best and derision at worst. Our positive, life affirming, salvific message has served as wisely and well throughout our history. We've been proud to consider ourselves on the cutting edge of progressive faith, with a non-creedal commitment to embracing diverse theological beliefs all gathering under a common

roof in worship. And we've been proud of our work on progressive causes, women's rights, the rights of the disabled, LGBTQAI rights, Black, Indigenous and the rights of people of color, the poor and underserved, the immigrants and undocumented. All of this is good – it's who we've been and who we are.

But there's one thing we're not. We're not unique anymore. No one in Washington DC is going to condemn the Unitarians for their cutting edge theology any longer. Almost all liberal religions have embraced some form of what we called Universal Salvation. It's old news. Most of our liberal religious partners – both ecumenical and interfaith would echo our first principle – the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And most – these days would have their own version of the 8th Principle addressing racism and other oppressions as a religious and spiritual mandate. And we are no longer cutting edge is figuring out to do worship in a way that's different than what we've done for the past 200 years. Frankly, it's the evangelicals who have gotten way ahead of us when it comes to innovative worship. They've been experimenting with long-distance, virtual and even holographic worship services long before COVID ever hit. They've mastered the art of digital production, while we – as UU's -well, I'll speak for myself, looked somewhat skeptically at their worship model. I've quietly wondered if all the money they invested in sound systems, in cameras, in the ability to deliver digital worship and religious education was worth it – focusing too much on the content and production and not enough on people. Well, here we are – and here they are.

So for all of us who are committed and dedicated to church – all of us who are still trying to figure out how we are going to do church in a post-Covid world — what you're experiencing right now – me talking to you from home – and you talking to each other from your homes — may be the way we do church for a while. This week when we desperately wanted to bring you close to the building by continuing to record the service in the building, we quickly realized, that out of an abundance of caution, we shouldn't do that. You were used to this during the spring and summer, but let us know how it feels to go back and forth these two Sundays. We want to listen to how worship feels to you in different media, and we want to keep communicating to you about our conversations in the worship team about what next, as we continue to feel our way into church in a new way, as we continue to feel our body, the body of the church, in space in a way its never been before.

One way or another, we are going to have to create something new together this year – and the year after that, and after that – who knows? But you know, this is what we humans do. You remember last week the poem I read you that talked about the four kinds of Forever – Something, Nothing, Everything and ART. I heard an interview with the artist Dario Robleto in Krista Tippets' Public Radio show "On Being." His work has been described as a fascination with human survival and the creative response to loss. Dario has wondered out loud if the purpose of art is to finish that which never got finished? The purpose of art is to finish that which never got finished. Something that changes and becomes Nothing can turn into Everything because of Art. We are all artists because we all have innate creativity. One of the reasons we do church together is to call forth that creativity in every way possible. So the purpose of the art we are experiencing right now – this weekly this liturgy that we create, that you create, as All Souls members and staff and those of you who are tuning in for the first time – the purpose of this

artistic activity is to reveal that which is being created anew out of what is unfinished from the past.

That's was a long sentence!! Let me break to down a bit. We are in the act of creating something new. In the book of Isaiah, Israel's God, Yahweh tells a weary prophet Isaiah "Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up, do you not perceive it?"

I ask you that question, too All Souls! We – you and I – and all of you listening and watching right now – we are creating a new thing together – do you not perceive it? Well, sometimes it is hard to see when you're in the midst of it. We get used to images and patterns and habits that have been a part of our lives and imprinted upon us. For example, think about this famous painting my Michelangelo. This iconic moment was referenced in the poem "Threshold" when the poet says: I am alone on the surface of a turning planet. What to do but, like Michelangelo's Adam, put my hand out into unknown space, hoping for the reciprocating touch? I loved this painting. It haven't seen it in the Vatican, but it has shaped our cultural understanding of creativity and of God since Michelangelo conceived it.

And yet – we also know that we are doing a new thing and shaping new images and creating new stories that speak to who we are as a people now. Like this painting by Afro-Latina artist Harmonia Rosales.

Inspired by Michelangelo's great work, she takes it in a different direction. Instead of it being about the birth of Adam, Rosales calls it "The Creation of God." The painting challenges us to ask how we might dare to imagine God differently? And what humans have been excluded from seeing themselves in the image of God?" In this painting, God is a black grandmother who creates a humanity in her image. As you might imagine, when this painting, produced in 2017 went public, there was, among some factions, a great outcry. This was desecrating the memory of Michelangelo they claimed. This was cultural appropriation said another, which was, a wrong-headed understanding of cultural appropriation. Why the hue and cry about another interpretation of a beloved icon? Well, it's because these things mean something to us. Just like having in-person worship is a powerful, life-affirming, nurturing and sustaining experience for so many. And yet – behold, we are doing a new thing because we have to – and what I find exciting is in this new world, we get to be the artists of our church. We get to create together something new that includes even more people. And because of that, we will be forever changed – you and I and the worship life at All Souls. And that's not a bad thing. It's a new thing, just as Harmonia Rosales re-envisioned a new Creation Story – equally beautiful and equally compelling.

What is important here is that we dare to do things differently. Earlier this week, I spoke with a colleague who, before becoming a minister, was a sound engineer for bands and big venues. He and members of this congregation are investing in sophisticated sound and recording equipment to ensure that virtual worship and learning becomes an ongoing high quality experience available to everyone in the congregation who prefers it – even after we are able to return to in person worship.

As much as people long for the closeness of our bodies being together, there are also an equal number of reasons why I've heard people appreciate online worship and social gatherings.. They're not circling the block for a parking space. They can rouse their kids from bed, sit together in front of the screen with a chalice and learn and worship together as a family. Those who struggle with health issues or who are disabled don't have to fight so hard to be safe in a church building. The introverts are loving virtual coffee hour because it's easier than a big loud group where everyone talks at once. The extroverts are figuring out ways to be with church friends that can be as satisfying as in person. We are learning how to be apart, together – in a new way.

We are going to be Apart – Together in an unfamiliar way for most of this church year that lies ahead of us. So All Souls needs to be able to speak to what we do with that apartness. There is a reminder of the power of apartness in a poem by Chinese poet Ha Jin. He wrote this: You must hold your quiet center, where you do what only you can do. If others call you a maniac or a fool, just let them wag their tongues. If some praise your perseverance, don't feel too happy about it—only solitude is a lasting friend.”

Solitude of course is different than being alone or lonely. Befriending solitude makes being apart easier. Each one of us will need to hold our own solitude – our own center if you will. We must not be thrown off our center by all that is being thrown at us. Jin continues: You must hold your distant center. Don't move even if earth and heaven quake. If others think you are insignificant, that's because you haven't held on long enough. As long as you stay put year after year, eventually you will find a world beginning to revolve around you. “

What does it mean to find a world beginning to revolve around you? Not “the world,” but “a world” . All Souls is a world-building congregation, a congregation that envisions a world. All Souls and the people of All Souls know a lot about holding on. We're doing it every day, in times of constant change and incredibly uncertainty. We don't understand all the parts of the world we are continuing to build, and that we are inviting you into during this year ahead. That's because we are in the midst of creating it, even as we live in it. We are creating it together even while apart.

Amen and may it be so.

Music (Members of the Jubilee Singers)

“Can't Give Up Now” (Mary Mary)

There will be mountains that I will have to climb,
And there will be battles that I will have to fight;
But victory or defeat, it's up to me to decide.
But how can I expect to win if I never try.

I just can't give up now.
I've come too far from where I started from.

Nobody told me the road would be easy
And I don't believe you've brought me this far to leave me.

Never said there wouldn't be trials, never said I wouldn't fail.
Never said that ev'rything would go the way I wanted it to go.
But when my back is up against the wall and I feel all hope is gone
I just lift my head up to the sky and say "Help me to be strong!"

I just can't give up now.
I've come too far from where I started from.
Nobody told me the road would be easy
And I don't believe you've brought me this far to leave me.

I know you didn't bring me out here to be lonely,
Even when I can't see clearly, I know that you are with me, so

I just can't give up now.
I've come too far from where I started from.
Nobody told me the road would be easy
And I don't believe you've brought me this far to leave me.

Hymn 126

"Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing"

Come, thou fount of ev'ry blessing,
tune our ears to sing thy grace.
Streams of mercy never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.

While the hope of life's perfection
fills our hearts with joy and love,
teach us ever to be faithful,
may we still thy goodness prove.

Come, thou fount of ev'ry vision,
lift our eyes to what may come.
See the lion and the young lamb
dwell together in thy home.

Hear the cries of war fall silent,
feel our love glow like the sun.
When we all serve one another,
then our heaven is begun.

Come, thou fount of inspiration,
turn our lives to higher ways.
Lift our gloom and desperation,
show the promise of this day.

Help us bind ourselves in union,
help our hands tell of our love.
With thine aid, O fount of justice,
earth be fair as heav'n above.

Offertory (Rev. Green)

We appreciate your gifts. We appreciate the ways you are staying connected to this congregation in strange times! And we ask that you consider making your financial gift today, to support our ministry, to support our staff, the programs you love, and the worship that we are bringing to you. Thank you for all the ways you give, and we ask that you are generous on this morning.

Benediction (Rev. Rolenz)

Music (Roy Barber)

“Beyond” (Leslie Jacobson and Roy Barber)

When do we get “Beyond”?
Beyond the rage, Beyond the tears,
Beyond the lies, Beyond the fears?

When do we get “Beyond”?
Beyond the words, Beyond the pain
Beyond the thoughts, Beyond the shame?

How long is enough?
Will it ever be Time
Time to love, Time to trust
Time to make hate a crime?

When do we get “Beyond”?
Beyond the tears too often shed?
Beyond the prayers too often said?

For Justice to flow
Like a beautiful stream
We must follow it now
Or it's gone in a dream!

When do we get “Beyond”?
When we will never tolerate
Injustice, Racism, and Hate!