

Worship transcript for September 20, 2020

Prelude (members of the All Souls Choir)

“Loosen Loosen” (Aly Halpert)

Loosen, loosen, baby
You don't need to carry
The weight of the world in your muscles and bones
Let go, let go, let go

Holy breath and holy name
Will you ease, will you ease this pain?

Call to Worship (Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)

Holy breath and holy name,
We gather this day to release the weight of the world
For even a brief time – and find collective strength
In our breathing and singing and being together
Come into this hour and find a place of rest for the weary
Hope for the discouragement, wonder for the cynic, community for the lonely
Come burdened, come light, come discouraged, come hopeful
Come full, come longing, come drifting, come singing, come loving – come!

Chalice Lighting (Maria Kirk Willson)

We light this chalice for our Unitarian Universalist, spirit-growing, justice-seeking community. I
am a living member of the great family of all souls.

Hymn (members of the All Souls community)

346 “Come Sing a Song with Me”

Come, sing a song with me (3x) that I might know your mind
And I'll bring you hope when hope is hard to find
And I'll bring a song of love and a rose in the wintertime

Come, dream a dream with me (3x) that I might know your mind
And I'll bring you hope when hope is hard to find
And I'll bring a song of love and a rose in the wintertime

Come, share a rose with me (3x) that I might know your mind
And I'll bring you hope when hope is hard to find
And I'll bring a song of love and a rose in the wintertime

Welcome (Morgan Duncan)

Good morning and welcome to our live long distance worship at All Souls Church! My name is Morgan Duncan, and I am your Worship Associate this morning.

Welcome to a community where our search for spirituality and our passion for justice meet and mingle. Where our head and our heart are divided no more. Where reverence for the Earth and belief in the dignity of every person inform our ethics. Where music is an expression of our joy, prayer a sign of our faith, and acts of justice a symbol of our hope.

Welcome to a place where, when we say All Souls, we mean it, a place where ALL people—people of all races, creeds, gender, sexual & affection orientations—where ALL people are welcome at the table of love and fellowship. We extend a special welcome to our visitors and guests and all those who may be joining us for the first time.

If we were together in the building, this is where I would say “turn and greet one another” and you still can! Although you’ll be on mute, simply take a moment to behold one another in gallery view, wave, and say hello in the chat.

Announcements/Prayer (Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)

From many places of the Spirit we come together this day – weary and wide-eyed; jaded and jazzed – we bring our whole selves to this hour. In the seemingly never ending cycle of news, we must find spaces to pause, to feel, to heal. Please feel free to add your own joys and concerns in the chat; being careful to not reveal another’s private health information.

We gather as our Jewish siblings all over the world celebrate the High Holy Days, beginning with Rosh Hashana – the Jewish New Year – a chance to practice tshuvah – the turning again towards right relationship with self, with others and with God.

We turn our attention now to the movements of the Spirit found in this Beloved community, as we celebrate with Marissa and Nick Caylor that baby Rowan is now recovering well from August surgery. Sending blessings to all, including older brother Milo. They extend their gratitude to those in the Cong Care Circle who brought meals to support the family last month.

We turn to say farewell to Jeff Richardson and Jim Mahady as they prepare to move from Washington DC at the end of September. Jeff joined All Souls in 2002 and has been part of many initiatives over the years! Jeff and Jim will be much missed.

We have lost two dear ones from All Souls; this morning, we remember long-time member Bonnie Manwell, who died peacefully last Sunday in home hospice care. Bonnie was a former administrator at All Souls for twenty years, and more recently, part of the Caring Card Ministry. We send love and condolences to her children—Claire, Connie, and Johnny—as well as the wide network of family and friends who mourn her loss.

We mourn the loss of Will Hayes, who died peacefully on Friday night after a brief struggle with cancer. There will be a private green burial at Congressional cemetery later this week. Our love and support goes to his spouse Peg Barratt, their son Nick and the wider circle of family and friends. He will be deeply missed.

Our caring extends its wider embrace to the world in which we live. We have now lost 200,000 lives due to the corona virus; and the count is still rising. In our hearts, we toll the bell for these lives lost to us.

On Friday, we heard the news that Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died surrounded by her family, and held in care by thousands whose lives have been made better for her tireless work for justice and equality. Words can hardly convey the depth of our gratitude for her life and her legacy. We pray that her last wish to be honored; that another Supreme Court justice is not selected until after this year's Presidential election is determined.

Join with me now, in a spirit of meditation, reflection or prayer – as is your practice:

Spirit of life – we gather together first – and always – in the Spirit of gratitude. We pause to give thanks for this breath, this moment, this hour, this day, for this gathered community, made real by our presence together this morning;

The poet reminds us that joy and woe are indeed woven fine. Spirit of life, weave together all of our woes and our joys; knowing that our gifts and our wounds are welcome here; that our lives are enriched by the telling and hearing of our stories; and that together we find the strength to not only survive – but thrive in these challenging times.

In this spirit of shared solidarity we pause – we breathe – we create space together – we pray – and we add our own joys and sorrows in the chat.

Amen.

Hymn 123 (All Souls Virtual Choir)

“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 (Rev. Rolenz)

“Book of Hours” (Rainer Maria Rilke)

I am, you anxious one.

Don't you sense me, ready to break
into being at your touch?
My murmurings surround you like shadowy wings.
Can't you see me standing before you
cloaked in stillness?
Hasn't my longing ripened in you
from the beginning
as fruit ripens on a branch?

I am the dream you are dreaming.
When you want to awaken, I am that wanting.
I grow strong in the beauty you behold.
And with the silence of stars I enfold
your cities made by time.

Sermon (Rev. Louise Green)

“Forget Your Perfect Offering”

Good morning, I'm Louise Green, your Minister of Congregational Care. Glad to be with you today, or whenever you watch this service.

What a time we are in! A few words evoke the great grief around us: COVID shutdown. Fires in the West. Flooding in the East. Election anxiety. Economic insecurity. RBG, rest in blessing. This September, with its wild plunge into the Niagara of online schedules, has already been kind of exhausting. I'm hearing that a lot as a minister, and I feel it myself. After six long months of pandemic living, we lean into the start of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. We are on the verge of the autumn equinox. I've already given up on the perfect offering for fall. I'm seeking something more human and sustainable. Something that acknowledges my flaws and still calls me to stretch, into humility and service. Something realistic, that sees our actual limitations and encourages us to let go.

Rilke's Book of Hours is his own holy wrestling at the turn of the 20th century, over 100 years ago. He observed the damage already showing in human separation, in our tendency to distance from our inherent connectedness. His poem pairs human fragility with eternal strength: I am, you anxious one. We might hear those murmurings of shadowy wings Rilke describes, or sense that Presence cloaked in stillness. There is a dream of wholeness we are dreaming together, a deep

yearning to awaken to a future with more coherence and purpose. A national story with more justice and wholeness. Rilke writes as that Presence speaking to us: I grow strong in the beauty you behold. And with the silence of stars, I enfold your cities made by time. Our cities made by time are in some trouble these days. And yet, the destabilization of life we lament may be the very means by which we notice the beauty we have missed. The silence of the stars moves us towards timelessness, beyond all striving around what we have built, and the legacy of what we have destroyed.

When things fall apart, we learn the limits of our usual operating system: a narrative of perfection which maintains the illusion of control. This often happens at the personal level. You receive that unexpected and serious health news, perhaps even life-threatening. Or the birth of a baby blows apart your sleep cycle and your schedule. Perhaps caring for a parent with Alzheimer's unravels the relationship you thought you knew. Or you realize that your marriage needs to end, and this erases the once assumed pathway forward. Challenging events create an intense shaking, the coming apart of a life story, bringing down the walls of the human house you constructed. There is a similar shaking happening now at collective scale, as our national house, our global home, gets rattled in multiple ways.

The 17th century Japanese poet Mizuta Masahide put it well in his haiku: Barn's burnt down. Now I can see the moon. When we must let go of the story of perfection—the map forward, the fix-it plan—there is a hard pause with great potential. It does involve breakdown and suffering, and possibly, breakthrough. There is an opportunity to create a new narrative, based less on perfect striving, and more on receiving help and resources. You sense the limits of your individual efforts and may find a larger Presence within and without. You might discern collective power, which requires collaboration and the ability to learn from other voices.

When so much devolves externally, our interior lives become even more important. We need new internal operating systems that help us cohere amidst dissolving life. A sense of individual wholeness is a powerful way to navigate extreme turbulence. It is your strong boat in the big waves. Wisdom traditions have offered guidance on this for millennia, from East and West, and in earth-based systems that root us in interdependence with nature. We do have an urgent set of 21st century challenges, and we also have spiritual toolkits refined over centuries, like stars enfolding our cities of time. Valuable practices that bolster our spirits and widen our view.

One system I appreciate is the Yoga Sutras by Patanjali, the primary text of yoga philosophy, several thousand years old. The five ethical roots of wise living are named in the sutras: Ahimsa/non-violence, Satya/truthfulness, Asteya/non-stealing, Brahmacharya/conserving energy, and Aparigraha/non-grasping. I've been tuning in to this last quality, non-grasping, as things appear to fall apart right now. I've been pondering the seductive story of perfection, in this wreckage of human damage around us. We see more clearly the systemic exclusion by race and caste, the violence to those deemed Other, the toxic separation from our natural world, and our disrupted place as creatures in a web of life.

Through Aparigraha, we might commit to practice non-attachment. Let go of our craving for ever more material possessions. Unbind from our dependence on imperfect human relationships, and any single narrative of personal or collective history. Detach from our most cherished

beliefs, including the spiritual frameworks that can engender arrogance and create division. With Aparigraha, non-grasping, the invitation is to instead make a sincere offering, to hold life more lightly, recognizing the inherent wholeness of our true being.

In yoga philosophy, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern traditions, true being is not the one we concoct through any primary story of separation. It is not our accumulation of human identities and histories. Our true nature is beyond this place and time, woven with the unity of ancient Light. It is timeless and luminous Presence with many names, not a single story of a perfect God. In those wisdom stories, we may perceive our inherent diamond nature within. We embrace inner wholeness so that we might grasp life less desperately, letting go of the illusion of control.

In a not-so-ancient text, written by a more modern sage, Leonard Cohen, there is a verse you may know well: Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in. Cohen's powerful song, Anthem, is deep lament, and lived experience of the light which comes shining through brokenness. Cohen wrote Anthem over 10 days in 1989, the year that brought both the massacre in China's Tiananmen Square, and the fall of Germany's Berlin Wall. Here is his comment on the song: The future is no excuse for an abdication of your own personal responsibilities towards yourself and your job and your love. Ring the bells that still can ring; they're few and far between but you can find them... This is not the place where you make things perfect, neither in your marriage, nor in your work, nor anything, nor your love of God, nor your love of family or country. The thing is imperfect.

Anthem is our main sermon text today, filmed in a beautiful event in the All Souls Sanctuary, sung by our amazing choir and musicians. The video inspires me to go forward with hope, and also breaks my heart. It is painful to see the ways we can't gather right now, to hear music we must experience virtually these days. This Solidarity Sing was filmed in early 2017, when people were attuning to the impact of the 2016 election, and naming those most at risk. The very same vulnerable people who right now feel the harm of dominant power operating. Harm in white supremacy systems that don't honor wholeness, or full humanity, or the connections of our precious interdependent web of existence.

There is an urgent call right now to be the best of what we can be. Not some impossible perfect offering, just ringing the bells that still can ring. With the humility of non-grasping, Aparigraha, we might unbind from our arrogance, our personal and congregational histories that fall short of our stated ideals. Our reliance on the story of perfection, which will never serve us well in the end.

I close with the words of Micky ScottBey Jones, excerpted from Invitation to Brave Space: We exist in the real world. We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds... We call each other to more truth and love. We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow. We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know. We will not be perfect. This space will not be perfect. It will not always be what we wish it to be. But it will be our brave space together, and we will work on it, side by side. May this be so in these times. Amen.

Anthem (All Souls community; Gordon Kent, piano and vocals; Rochelle Rice and Catalina Talero, vocals; David Cole, guitar; Corey Null, bass; Ken Quam, drums; Dana Connors, Katie Hartin, Kathy Ferger, and Devree Lewis, strings)

“Anthem” (Leonard Cohen)

The birds, they sang at the break of day
“Start again” I heard them say
Don’t dwell on what has passed away
or what is yet to be
Well the wars, they will be fought again
The holy dove, she will be caught again
Bought and sold and bought again
The dove is never free

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in

(sung in Spanish) We asked for signs and signs were sent
The birth betrayed, the marriage spent
The widowhood of every government
The signs were there to see
I can’t run no more with that lawless crowd
While killers in high places say their prayers out loud
But they’ve summoned, they’ve summoned up a thundercloud
They’re gonna hear from me

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in

You can add up the parts
You won’t get the sum
You can strike up the march
There is no drum
Oh, but every heart
Every heart to love will come
But like a refugee

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in

Offering (Morgan Duncan)

I miss being in church. Don't you? I miss walking up to that historic building listening to the tolling of the bell. I miss folks greeting me at the door and the sound of the pre-service music flowing from the sanctuary. I even miss that anxious moment of climbing the stairs to the balcony to discover if anyone has beaten me to my habitual seat. I miss being with all of you in those pews being inspired by the words and music of the service. I miss it terribly.

But the pews are not the church. Nor is the sanctuary the church, nor the steps, nor the bell, nor the building. We are the church. The important parts, the parts that make us a church, we still have – the music and the words and the inspiration and the work.

It is because I value the continuing work of this church that I give when the plates pass. I hope you do, too. The plate will still pass, only today, it will be a virtual plate. On the screen and in the chat, you'll find a link to be able to give in real time. I hope that you will give as generously as you can. This morning's offering will now be collected.

Hymn (members of the All Souls Choir)

1009 "Meditation on Breathing"

When I breathe in, I breathe in peace
When I breathe out, I breathe out love

Benediction (Rev. Rolenz)

from "The Radiance Sutras" (Lorin Roche)

Breathing is the flow of the divine, where the rhythms of life turn into each other—the eternal exchange. Pour one breath into the other, outbreath into the inbreath into the outbreath. Awaken to equanimity, at peace in the play of opposites.

Go in peace, return in love. Amen.

Music (Jen Hayman, guitar and vocals)

"New Years Day" (First Aid Kit)

Well it's a new year, with it comes new hopes and new fears
Met a young man who was in tears, he asked me,
"What induces us to stay here?"
I said, "I don't know much and I'm not lying,
But I think you just have to keep on trying."
And I know I am naive, but if anything
That's what's going to save me
That's what's going to save me

Took a stroll around the neighborhood where the trees are swaying.
People passed in cars with their windows down, with a pop song playing.
A man walked by, walking back and forth the street with a drunken smile to go along.
He stopped to look at me and say, "Child, don't fear doing things wrong."
Yet I am still afraid but if anything
That's what's going to save me
That's what's going to save me

Now I've got a lot to learn and I'm starting tonight,
Got to stop looking at things like they're black and they're white.
Got to write more songs, love a little more, treat my friends better.
Got to stop worrying about everything to the letter.
And sometimes when it's too hard to go on,
It just might be you that I call upon.
But I find it hard to believe, but if anything
That's what's going to save me
That's what's going to save me
Tell me, tell me
Oh, what's going to save me?