

Spirit of Play

Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane

Isabel Call, Aria Curtis, and Elizabeth Wilhelm¹

2/10/2018

Gathering Together: “Moribayassa” Drumming Group

Welcome & Greeting Each Other (Isabel)

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane. It is a joy to be here together, in this service for all ages, for all genders, for people of any heritage, no matter who you love, no matter which side of the bed you got out of this morning, no matter what you had for breakfast.

This is a multigenerational service, which means it's specifically designed to offer a meaningful experience to people of all ages. Today, a fabulous group of people have collaborated and co-created a new kind of rhythm for the service, to make it extra accessible to children. We will have lots of opportunities to sing, dance, and play. You are warmly invited to join in as you are able.

Every time we gather, we hold an immensity of diversity:

we have people who love to sing,

people who want the silent meditation to last ten minutes,

people who can run around and people who can't,

people who have had a hard week and need to remember how to hope.

Some weeks, some people get more of what they were hoping for, and some weeks, we take away gifts we didn't expect.

Some weeks, the joy of worship is in knowing that the person next to you is getting exactly what they were thirsty for, even if it's not your cup of tea.

Here in this sacred space, we join together to create a nourishing liberal religious home and to champion justice, diversity, and environmental stewardship in the wider world. Or in short, to create community, find meaning, and work for justice.

I have a couple of announcements. First: you will notice that we have some beautiful drums up here. It may be get tempting to come play with them, but it's very important to let only the drummers play the drums. If you want something for your hands, there are meditation jars and pipe cleaners up here, and other fun stuff on the back table.

¹ Words spoken were written by the speaker, or part of the regular UUCS liturgy.

Second, next week is really exciting because we will have a guest speaker in the pulpit, Ariel Aaronson-Eves, who just happens to be my partner. She will be speaking about Unitarian Universalist history of black empowerment and embodied healing from racism and conflict. This will be followed, after the second service, by a listening session about how to counter hate groups, led by Dr. Joan Braune of Gonzaga's Institute of Hate Studies. It should be a great opportunity to put our values into practice.

Now, please take a moment to say hello to the people around you, especially those you don't know well.

Chalice Lighting

And now we transition from arriving here,

to being here,

with the lighting of our chalice. This symbol of Unitarian Universalism represents

our unity and solidarity,

our openness and inclusion,

our community and individual uniqueness.

May this small flame be

our offering of warmth to those who are cold and alone,

and a light to those in darkness.

May it be a flame that ignites justice in our world, and a beacon of hope to those in need.

And may it reflect at least a spark of truth wherever truth has been lost,

and cast a healthy shadow of doubt where it has been found.

Opening Reflection Langston's Magic Purple Ball (Isabel)

Invite the young and young at heart to gather round.

This is the third week in a row that I've been leading worship, and I've been focusing on economic justice, or: how does the whole world learn how to share what we have and not leave anybody out? As you can imagine, this topic can get **very heavy**. So this week, Aria suggested that we talk about play. And I thought perfect! Because the global economy would be a lot healthier, and a lot more fun, if people treated it like a game, to *play*, rather to *win*.

So, to start us off on the left foot, I brought a very special ball to show you. A magic ball. Would anyone like to come and touch it and get some magic from it?

Can you describe what you see and feel? (Purple, hard, scratches)

What do you think makes it magic?

This ball is magic because my dog Langston *believes* it's magic.

Here's how it works. When it's time to play, we ask Langston to lie down in the yard, and then we throw it to him. As it flies through the air, Langston cannot sit still. Without even trying, his legs jump up and run toward the ball. And the ball, for its part, hits the ground running...

...running away from from Langston, begging Langston to chase it. So Langston chases, and when he thinks he's got it, he opens up his mouth and tries to eat this big purple ball.

Of course, he never will, because his mouth isn't big enough. But it turns into a game because the ball always gets away from him in the end, and then he chases it some more.

And sometimes, when it starts moving fast enough, it seems like the Purple Ball is chasing *Langston*.

The ball is not in control, even though Langston thinks it is.

It's also not very delicious, even though Langston thinks it would be.

It can never be captured. The point is to enjoy the chase.

Sometimes, the ball runs and hides in the bushes,
and then Langston gets stuck in the bushes.

He follows the ball deeper and deeper into the tangle,
not realizing he has the power to pull it out and start playing again.

Then he gets bored and abandons it in the bushes.

Why do you think the ball hides in the bushes?

(Because our yard slopes down toward the bushes.)

Here's something I've learned from Langston and his purple ball. The game is more fun with a referee who reminds Langston to avoid the bushes.

Do you know what a referee is?

Do you know who Langston's referee is? (Me!)

But it's ok if there's a slope; it just takes Langston more skill to go catch the ball before it ends up in the bushes or hits my shins.

Here's something else I've learned: it hurts when the purple ball hits my shins! This is one of the hazards of being a referee.

But there are many joys of being a referee. (Do you have any guesses about what's fun about being a referee?)

For me, I can't run or kick that well, but when I watch Langston run around with the ball, and it's almost as good as playing myself.

And I love Langston's joy, his funny growls and songs when he's going after the ball, and the way he collapses into a happy exhausted puddle when he comes in from playing.

Having a dog in my life has taught me many things, and Langston is a really good teacher. When I was first planning this worship service, I took a break and went outside to play with him. I had been thinking about economic justice and feeling really heavy. But you can't stay heavy when you're playing with Langston and the magic purple ball! I wondered: what if people could learn to play with the economy the way that Langston plays with the purple ball? What if we brought a spirit of play? Even when the economy seems smarter or faster than us, outside our control, how can we still find ways to delight in the chase? What kinds of referees do we want to elect, to help us keep it fun and fair?

So today, I invite you to take a break, and delight in being together. There will be some opportunities to play games, and dance, and sing, starting right now!

Singing Together: #1008 "When Our Heart is in a Holy Place"

Opposite Day sacred space

Each time we gather together on Sunday mornings, we gather together in holy, or sacred, space.

We come together as a covenantal community, with the understanding that we will support and care for each other.

That we will search for truth and understanding.

And, that we will honor each other with compassion and respect.

Sometimes, that feels really easy to do, because we're all sitting or singing together, at the same time.

Today, you might find it a little more challenging because on this Sunday, we are going to be moving in lots of different ways, and not all at the same time.

For some of us, that will mean that there might be more background noise than we are used to.

For some of us, that will mean that we need to be more careful than we are used to about how fast and big our body moves.

For all of us, that means that we need to listen carefully to one another, and to think about how what we do affects our friends around us.

This morning it is also extra important that we treat not only our friends and neighbors with respect, but also our space.

You all are going to be invited up here to move around and play,
But! A couple minutes ago Isabel mentioned some things up here that are very special to the people they belong to and are *not* for play. Do you remember what she said?

Yes, the drums. We are lucky to have such wonderful music with us this morning, and we need to respect our friends, the musicians, and their instruments by using only our eyes to look at the drums.

So! In just a second, Isabel is going to lead us in a really fun game. But before she does that, let's, real quick, make a promise together.

You can turn to a neighbor or say this to the whole room. Please repeat after me:

I promise,

to treat you with love and respect...

to give you space to be playful,

and to make sure

that when I play,

it won't hurt you.

Opposite Day

Invite the young and young at heart into the circle.

- Collect volunteers, no more than the number of dots
- Everybody, find a dot and put your body on it. Those of you in the back may not raise that we have a bunch of dots on the floor up here.
- For extra fun, cover it completely with your body. What do I mean by covering it completely? Well, nobody would be able to see any of the dot. That includes everybody sitting here; everybody watching us online on that camera, that camera, and that camera; me, Aria, and Elizabeth, and ask of you movers. Make sense?
- Dot: put your body on a dot.
 - No dot: don't touch a dot at all!
- I'm going to tell you some other opposites
 - arms up / arms out (for a few seconds)
 - stop / go
 - forward / backward
 - dot / no dot
 - Stop!
- Everybody who is sitting in chairs, either here in the sanctuary or watching at home:
 - Just sitting doesn't mean you're not playing!
 - Have you heard of mirror neurons? These are the cells in our brain that fire when we see something going on. Mirror neurons make it possible to feel what's going on outside our bodies inside our own bodies. That's why when I see Langston playing, I feel playful. So, when I do this (shape), what do you feel? What do you feel now?
 - So, people sitting in chairs and watching the movers, use your mirror neurons! When you hear me give an instruction, follow it in your mind. You can also do it in your body, a modified version. Can you show me your modified version of:
 - arms up / arms out
 - go / stop
 - forward / backward
- Okay, let's play:
 - stop / go
 - arms up / arms out
 - forward / backward
 - dot / no dot
 - Stop!
- Now, do the opposite of what I tell you. So when I say
 - stop, you should go!
 - arms up, put your arms out
 - dot, avoid the dots
 - Got it?
- What was that like? Wait, I don't want you to tell me your answer in words. Instead, make a face explaining: what was it like to do the opposite of what you were told to do? (Ask kids, mirror back.)

- Everybody sitting, what was it like to watch the game up here? Tell us with your faces.
 - Oooh! Ok, now turn to your neighbor, and show them with your face: what was it like to do the opposite of what you were told to do?
- Could I get some volunteers to come up here and show us what the game was like, with your faces? (Isabel stands in middle.) What was it like to do the opposite of what you were told to do?

Offertory (Isabel and lay leader)

(Lay leader stands on end.)

Lay leader: Now is the time for the offertory. This is the time in our service when we pass the basket around and everybody has the opportunity to put in some love, some best wishes for the church, and some money if you have it. Now would be a good time to dig in your pockets to find some love and wishes and money.

Isabel: This week, we're going to pass something else with the basket. We're going to pass funny faces, too!

Lay leader: We're going to practice up here. So I have the basket, and I have a funny face, and I'm going pass both the basket and a funny face. And when you take the basket, take the funny face, too. Let's try.

Isabel: If a funny face does not get passed to you, feel free to start a new one.

Isabel: [Youth] is going to help some of you pass the basket and the funny face when it is going from row to row.

Isabel: If you're sitting on the end of a row in the middle, [Youth] will take your funny face and pass it to the person behind you. Where are you [Youth]?

Lay leader: Wonderful. Will the grown-up ushers please come forward?

Meditation in Words, Music, & Silence

Aria: The Spirit of Life and Love moves through me in ways that feel often mysterious.

Sometimes I feel the it move through me when I am surrounded by friends and we are laughing together.

Elizabeth: Sometimes I feel the Spirit of Life and Love move through me when I hear the sound of raindrops on the metal roof of a cabin in the woods.

Aria: Sometimes I feel the Spirit of Life and Love move through me when I am playing the piano.

Elizabeth: Sometimes I feel the Spirit of Life and Love move through me when I pay attention to the air moving in and out of my lungs.

Aria: I have felt the Spirit move through me when I hike up the Skyline Divide trail and see the Cascades surrounding me.

Elizabeth: I have felt the Spirit move within me, in the darkness, and in the light.

Aria: Sometimes I feel the Spirit move through me when I hear the words of prophetic voices, spoken aloud: Gloria Steinem, Victoria Barrett, Lindsey West, Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin, Bryan Stevenson, Phoebe Robinson, Hannah Hart.

Elizabeth: Sometimes I feel the Spirit of Life and Love move through me as I watch the trees, who are rooted in this earth, dance.

Aria: I have felt the Spirit move through me, swimming and submerged in ocean.

Elizabeth: I have felt the Spirit swirl through me when I let go of worries and expectations, when I notice what is here, now.

Aria: Sometimes I feel the Spirit when I understand something new.

Elizabeth: I have felt the Spirit of Life and Love move through me as I tune into the rhythms of the world around me.

Aria: Sometimes I feel the Spirit of Life and Love when I hear drums.

David begins drumming...

Other drummers join in and the energy builds...

Drumming stops suddenly

Aria: Sometimes I feel the Spirit of Life and Love when I dance.
Please rise in body or spirit and feel if there's a dance in you.

Drumming begins again, with high energy

Drumming energy begins to fall and slowly fades

Aria: Sometimes I feel the Spirit when I sing.
Motion to congregation to rise

Michelina plays "Meditation on Breathing" once through, then Deb and others lead the congregation in singing together.

When singing is finished..

Elizabeth: You may be seated.

Sometimes I feel the Spirit of Life and Love in the silence.

Candles of Care

Each time we gather as a congregation, there are those who are with us in our minds and hearts, and who we want to wrap in our love and care.

We light a candle for Evan Armstrong who is in the hospital with severe arthritis pain.

And a candle for Torge Lorentzen, whose brother Jim Moore just entered hospice. She will be traveling to be with him next week, and celebrating their shared birthday on Tuesday.

Let us share a moment in silence, embracing others who are here in our hearts this morning. You are welcome to say their names aloud, as you are moved . . .

Those named aloud, those remembered in the silence, and all those who are suffering elsewhere in our world this hour, we hold in our community of compassion.

Singing Together: #1024 "When the Spirit Says Do"

Sermon

We've got to do when the spirit says do! Sometimes, the spirit speaks to us, tells us *to do*, and how to do it, through music. In the words of Rosemary Freeney Harding,

"In the civil rights movement in Southern communities, a vital source of support was music, particularly the sacred music of the black experience, which has long been an ~~an~~ alchemical [a] resource for struggle: a conjured strength."

A conjured strength. In other words, magic. Rosemary continues with a story of Bernice Johnson Reagon, who organized marches during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

"Raising their voices with freedom songs, in the cadence and spirit of church, Reagon and her fellow marchers could feel the songs swell into the air around them and transform the space. The songs changed the atmosphere around them, becoming an almost palpable barrier between demonstrators and police, giving marchers an internal girding that allowed them to move without fear."

Do you know what palpable means? It means you can actually sense it, with your skin. Singing creates an invisible, healthy boundary between the singers and people who would harm them.

In the words of Bernice Johnson Reagon herself,

“there is... something about the experience of traditional black congregational singing that, over time, ‘does something to the material you’re made of.... It really connects you up with the force in the universe that makes you different. It makes you capable of moving with a different kind of access.... And they can’t get to you.”

The movement for civil rights for African Americans fifty, sixty, and more years ago, and the Black Lives Matter movement now, are responses to laws and crimes that injure and kill people of color, keep them from voting, and limit their access to good schools, jobs, and homes. This struggle is my struggle, and it’s your struggle, even though some of us have pale skin. Because our society allows some people to harm other people, nobody is safe.

We may not have the musical tradition of African American churches here. And for some of us who do not have had strong bodies, or American citizenship, or the emotional capacity to face down police officers or hate groups, it is not wise to put our bodies on the streets for protests or marches. But all of us can look to others to be inspired, kind of like how we can use our mirror neurons to play with others, even when we can’t or don’t know how to move like them. But we can’t be passive. The trick is to pay attention, learn from these teachers, and be ready for the moment when the magic strength inside says do.

UU minister Victoria Safford wrote this about the early marchers for equal rights for gay and lesbian people.

“They will tell us that once you have glimpsed the world as it might be, as it ought to be, as it’s going to be (however that vision appears to you) it is impossible to live compliant and complacent anymore in the world as it is.... [She continues,] To march was dangerous. It still is. **Not to** march was dangerous -- it still is now, and more so...”

But imagining justice gives us magical power to show up together, and when we show up together, our vision becomes true. This magic helps us get beyond being compliant (that means thoughtlessly following rules, even when they’re harmful) and complacent (which means not doing anything, even when you could make the world better). Showing up together, by singing or dancing, like we practice every Sunday here, builds up power, a kind of boundary that protects us when we do the dangerous work of changing the world. And play, especially when we feel safe enough to be truly lighthearted, is essential.

If you’ve been here the past two weeks, you’ll remember that I’ve been talking about a different kind of boundary: fences that keep people away from the things that make their lives meaningful and possible. I talked about Calvinism, the belief that after we die, some people get to go through the gates of these fences into heaven, but other people are locked out, and have to be in hell forever. And I talked about our Universalist tradition, which holds that no one deserves to

go the hell. It's hell on earth that matters. It's hell on earth, injustice, that we can do something about.

Two different kinds of boundaries: one that keeps people out, with fear and greed and hate; and one that unites us in love, that welcomes all who would put down their weapons. One is worthy of worship; one is not.

And it takes a lot of practice to tell them apart.

I'd like everybody to recall the game we played earlier, Opposite Day. Remember, in your muscles, in your nervous system, in your mind: What was like to know the rules really well, and then decide to do the opposite? If you're like me, it's a feeling of being really awake and alert. Breaking rules *intentionally* is actually more work than following rules!

We're going to play another game now. *This* time I want you to follow rules. But I want you to stay in touch with that sensation of being really awake and alert. I want you to be very intentional about following the rules, but also creative within the structure of the rules. So follow the rules, but feel free to make your own choices, too. I'm going to repeat that: follow the rules, but feel free to make your own choices, too.

Allow the rules to help us create community, create a magic container for us.

Don't allow the rules to cause harm or lock people out of community.

Now for my part, I promise that I'm not going to ask you to do anything weird or mean or embarrassing. Can I get everyone to agree to follow the rules, as well as you can, in accordance with your own sense of right and wrong? If you agree, yell ok at me.

Ok!

The game

- (Arrange dots in the circle)
- Recruit 18 movers.
- Follow these instructions for this game.
 - If you are one of the movers, when you hear music, move clockwise (gesture) around the circle. Don't touch any dots.
 - When the music stops, put your body on a dot.
 - If you can't put your body on a dot, leave the circle.
- Those were the instructions for the movers. But everybody can be involved in the game. Just sitting doesn't mean you're not playing!
- (Aria removes dots and hands them to a congregation member each time the music starts again)
- (Interrupt as necessary to encourage sharing and moving in concert.)

The game musical chairs is a game of gradual exclusion. It is a version of the age-old form of oppression, called the enclosure of the commons, where the land people needed for their families is stolen, and so they have to wander around looking for something, anything, to do to survive. We played it differently, because nobody was "out." But we had to get creative about how to keep people *in*.

I would guess that no one here has done anything like this in a church sanctuary before. But play is sacred. If we can find ways to play for fun instead of fighting to win when we're at school, or in the backyard, or at church, then maybe we can find ways to share the commons in the economy. If we can learn to pay attention to the rules, and follow them very intentionally, with an eye and an ear and a heart for liberation, at church... then what might we do at our jobs? or in the grocery store? or on a crowded highway?

And if we learn to play together at church, what else might we be able to do together? I will close with another story from the UU minister Victoria Safford. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, she held an evening forum at church. It was a circle cast not to debate, discuss, or plan, as important as that work is, but to "rise to the holy occasion of hearing one another, holding one another." About twenty people came, ranging in age from fourteen to eighty-two. There was sorrow, rage, and hopelessness -- dangerous waters -- and Rev. Safford did not know what to do. Here's what happened next, in her words:

"Then, someone in the circle, with more presence of mind than I could muster in the moment, saved us all from drowning, saying: 'You know we cannot do this all at once. But every day offers everyone of us little invitations for resistance, and to make your own responses.' I wrote it down, right then, because this person is prone to neither social activism nor religious language, of any kind, but it was he who said, 'it is a sacred offering, the invitation to resistance, and every day you make your own responses.'"

Whether you are prone to marching in the streets or religious language; whether you are a singer, or a drummer, or a listener; whether play comes easily, or you would rather ponder; whether you are young or old or somewhere in between; we need you.

Please rise in body or heart, I a spirit of play, for hymn 311, Let It Be a Dance We Do

Singing Together: #311 "Let It Be a Dance"

Benediction

I'm gonna have you remain standing for this benediction.

I invite you to make your body still and close your eyes.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Take stock of how your body is feeling in this moment.

What does it feel like,
in your mind, body, spirit, heart

to have spent the morning in playful-ness together.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

What does joy feel like, in *your* body?

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Go ahead and open your eyes.

With me, let's

shake it out.

And,

after we sing our closing hymn,

Please, go forth

and play.

Shalom Havayreem

References

"The Mirror Neuron Revolution: Explaining What Makes Humans Social; Neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni discusses mirror neurons, autism and the potentially damaging effects of violent movies." *Scientific American*, no date, accessed 6 February, 2019.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-mirror-neuron-revolut/>

Rosemary Freeney Harding, "Freedom Songs," *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*. Peter Rogat Loeb, ed. New York: Basic Books, 2004, pp. 145-6.

Victoria Safford, "The Small Work in the Great Work." *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times*. Peter Rogat Loeb, ed. New York: Basic Books, 2014, pp. 224-230. (Also in 2004 book.)