

A MEDITATION ON WEAVING

(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on October 9, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

CALL TO WORSHIP: SLT # 431

O Spinner, Weaver, of our lives,

Your loom is love.

May we who are gathered here

be empowered by that love

to weave new patterns of Truth

and Justice into a web of life that is strong,

beautiful, and everlasting.

– Rev. Barbara Wells (Ten Hove)

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

If you are new or have not been here in a while, let me explain a ritual we recently added to our services here at Market Street: a Silent Joys and Sorrows. This is a time in which we can acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether those things be joyful or sad.

If you feel called to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you are invited to come forward and choose a stone from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these stones can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out these colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the darker stones can symbolize your

sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

[insert story]

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is our own **Thanksgiving Basket** program. Each year, members and friends of this church gather food and put together baskets to deliver to many families in Harrisburg, particularly in Allison Hill. Last year, I believe they made 50 such deliveries.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

A MEDITATION ON WEAVING

Reverend Michael Walker

I like to mix things up, and provide you with different types of services from time to time. Today's sermon will be mythopoeic, considering the myths of weaving, fate and destiny, and how these have affected people from various cultures. We will explore these in the form of story and poetry.

Let's define *mythopoesis*, first. It is the creative action of developing a story about life, existence, the world and society. Myths are the stories through which we make sense of a complicated world, and mythopoesis is the process in which those stories are created.

Many times, I have spoken about the value of creative pursuits as a personal spiritual practice. One such practice for me has been weaving — and this happens to be a craft that is full of mythological and folklore references. There are so many stories, especially the stories about the *Fates*. But, before I tell stories, I'd like to share with you a little bit about the physical work of weaving, so that you can imagine that, when I do get to the stories.

We first choose the yarn or thread — including decisions about the kind of fiber, how thick it will be, what color, etc. — so we can make a *warp*. The term, *warp*, refers to the threads that will be tied onto the loom **[those are the white threads in the picture on your**

OOS], while the *weft* refers to the threads that will be interwoven into the warps during the weaving process [**in the picture, the weft is the red thread, wound up inside the boat shuttle**].

Once we have created a set of warps long enough for our project, we then pull the threads through slots in a reed on the loom, and then pull the threads through the heddles, warp after warp after warp, one thread at a time. Heddles are what allows us to make different patterns in the weaving process. We then tie the yarn onto the back-beam and roll it up.

The purpose of threading the yarn through the reed is because that is the moving part of the loom that packs down our woven yarn. As we weave, we lift a set of heddles (either by pressing down on foot treadles or

lifting up on levers, depending on the type of loom).

Pressing down different treadles will raise different sets of heddles, which lift up different sets of the warp, while leaving other warps stationary, thereby creating a space between them in which we can pass the shuttle through and across. Once we pass a thread through, we pull the reed down to pack the yarn, then press a different treadle and different warps open up and we pass the shuttle through, again. This is what creates the woven cloth, as well as the patterns, pictures or motifs in the cloth.

There are many other types of looms, but the type of loom is not really the point of the sermon today. It is the practice. It can be a deeply spiritual experience, to sit at a loom, in a contemplative frame of mind, weaving the

weft back and forth and packing it down, weaving and packing – doing this over and over, again. Watching the creative process at work, as the pattern is revealed as you continue to weave, back and forth. This pattern begins to just appear in front of your eyes.

Here's a poem I wrote, called Weaving Sunlight:

*Through the window comes the light,
illuminating color and texture
from a mass of loose threads,
that when put under tension and woven,
comes this interplay of color and texture.*

*Sunlight on the loom,
mountains out the window,
I remember the ancient myth
of a goddess who weaves the sun beams,
the rays of light are her warp and weft.*

*In something akin to a trance,
the shuttle flies to the left,
and beat down,
then the shuttle flies to the right,
and beat down,
back and forth, again and again.*

*Awakening from a trance
one sees the magic of the craft,
this textile, this cloth, this patterned fabric
that has been built up, row by row,
making a picture in color and texture
illuminated by the sun through the window.*

Throughout the world, in Africa and Asia, Europe, and North and South America, there are myths, folktales and legends about the origins of weaving and the importance of it in people's lives. The first and most

basic thing about weaving is that it is necessary to make fabric, from which we make clothing, so that we're able to protect ourselves from the elements. In some of those stories, especially in the Greco-Roman and Norse mythologies, there were the three demi-goddesses who controlled the fates of a person's life, with the acts of spinning and cutting the thread and weaving the tapestry of that person's life. We know them in Greco-Roman mythology as the *Fates*, and in Norse mythology as the *Norns*. Their stories are so similar, that one can't help but believing that there was some sort of cultural transmission.

In the stories of several of Native American tribes, there is the figure of Spider Woman, also called Spider Grandmother. Spider Woman – no, she's not a superhero

– is a person of wisdom. Not only did she teach her people how to weave textiles, creating intricate and beautiful patterns such as one might see in a Navajo rug, but she is also known in the stories as being a fount of wisdom. When a person of the tribe was to go off on some adventure or quest, it was to Spider Woman that they would go and seek advice. If you are familiar with Joseph Campbell's concept of the Hero's Journey, usually there is a wise figure in the story, who advises the hero — and in many southwestern, Native American tales, that wise person is Spider Woman.

Weaving is an act of creation and I want to share a mythopoeic story to illustrate this:

Far back, at the beginning of time, way back when Grandfather and Grandmother were young, they decided that they were tired of wandering the cosmos and wanted to settle down. They wanted to create a place where they could live, a place that would become our world. And so, Grandfather went puttering around in his shop, as he is wont to do — carving rocks and molding the structures of the world, and creating continents and islands.

Grandfather set out these things that he made, creating the outlines of the world, while Grandmother was looking at this and thinking that it was all rather utilitarian, but not very pretty.

And so, she sat at her loom and she thought, what shall I weave today? She wove a landscape, a beautiful picture of hills and mountains, forests and streams and

lakes. When she completed this work she took it off the loom and went out to one of the continents that Grandfather had made and she laid it out. They both looked at it, and loved what they saw, and decided that they made a very good team.

Grandfather continued to putter around in his shop and make the things that he made to create the structure of the world. And Grandmother went back to her loom and thought about ways to put beauty onto that structure. She thought to herself, what should I make next? She realized that there was a great emptiness around the continent that Grandfather had made, and so Grandmother sat at her loom as she set about weaving the ocean. With blues and greens and grays and whites, threads going back and forth across the loom, she wove

an ocean. And throughout this, she also wove beautiful animals: the whale and the octopus, the seal and the walrus, and so many fishes – millions of different kinds.

And when she was done, Grandmother took this weaving of the ocean off her loom and she went out to where Grandfather had just placed another continent, a little way from the first one, and she laid the ocean down between them. Grandmother and Grandfather sat back on their porch, in their rocking chairs, and looked at this world that was beginning to appear before them and they thought, they made a very good team. Grandfather went back into his shop, puttering around, thinking about what he might make next. Grandmother, of course, went back to her loom. She thought of all of this beauty in the world they were creating, but realized that her future

children might fall off the world and float away into the cosmos. How can I fix that, she thought?

Grandmother decided to create a sky above, so that no one would fall off the world. And so she began to weave in light blues and some whites, with some gray clouds. As she worked, she created what was to be her biggest creation, yet: the sky. And in her sky, she put all manner of different birds, and a rainstorm over here, and she put the sun over there on her weaving, and a moon over there... And she kept weaving and weaving and weaving. And when she was done, she took her sky off the loom. It was so big that she needed Grandfather to help her carry it out to the world. Together, they threw it over the top of the world, holding it up with poles.

Grandmother and Grandfather looked around and

decided that they had, indeed, created a beautiful world. It had become a place that they would want to live, where their children would grow up, and have their own children, making them the Grandparents, as we know them today. So it was that Grandfather, the Builder, created the structure, and Grandmother, the Weaver, created the beauty, of which we need both in our world.

The story I just told was one of my own devising, with some resonance with Native American stories, but it took its initial inspiration from an ancient Egyptian myth about the goddess Neith, whose job it was to re-weave the world, everyday. That must be exhausting! In the Egyptian story, when Ra the sun disappears into the darkness of the night, it was believed that the world

ceased to be, until the sun rose again. And then, a new world had to be re-woven by Neith.

There is something profound to be discovered in all of these disparate mythologies of cultures from around the world. Weaving as a spiritual practice inspires a contemplative state that allows a person to look at their world and their life in ways that they might not look at it – else wise – in the busyness of their lives. As well, the creation of a woven item, appearing almost as if by magic, on a loom in front of a weaver — it is easy to see how creation myths can arise from this act of artistic creation. In some cultures, the world is sung into existence, or it is painted, or other arts – the point being that there is something powerful in the act of creation, so it is no wonder that the arts become the metaphor for the

creation of the world. A common thread, if you will, in all these stories is the idea that, of course, one can weave the world into existence, the fabric of being. That phrase is even still used in language today — the *fabric of being*, or the *fabric of reality*, being that which we can see with our own eyes.

We also often talk about our lives as tapestries, in which a particular aspect of our life is a thread woven through the tapestry. At some point, this aspect of our life – the thread of that aspect of our life – may be broken, and that will be the end of that part of the tapestry. That is how it was with the *Norns* in the mythology of northern Europe.

So, now, I am imagining what the tapestry of my

life may look like, if I were to sit and weave it. I'm going to explore that for a moment, and I will invite you to contemplate now or later, what the tapestry of your life might look like, were you to sit down and weave it.

I see forming before me the first few rows of weaving, after my birth, in the early days of my life. My teenage parents marrying and divorcing, my fathers, both of them, being in the Navy, and my mother remarrying to my second father. The thread of my relationship with the first father breaks, but that thread will re-enter the tapestry, again, later. The tapestry continues to weave itself before my eyes, as in my childhood we move from place to place to place, being a Navy brat and living hither and yon, and going to so many different schools. I see now that this tapestry becomes very green, as we

moved to the mountains, after Dad got out of the Navy. I had become enamored of the natural world and explored Pagan spirituality as a teenager. And then, I see blues begin to form as I move from the mountains to the ocean, when I moved out on my own to go to college. Here the thread from my first father reappears in the tapestry, as we get to know each other again. Now, I see the white of a flag with a red cross on it, symbolizing my work in the nursing field. I see this flag, woven, superimposed on top of that pale, baby-puke green color that is so common on hospital walls.

This section of the tapestry continues to be woven for many years of my life, until it begins to turn into a haze gray as a picture of the Navy emerges. I have followed in the footsteps of both of my fathers. This

section of the tapestry continues for eight years. And then, I see in the weaving before me, that I've gone to seminary, and then I see I've served that retreat center, and then that church, and now this church — and now I wonder what will come next. This tapestry is still being woven.

I see before me, now, what is called the *fell line*. The fell — the edge of the tapestry where you do not know what comes next. It is what has yet to be woven. This is the **growing edge**. Have you ever heard that phrase before, the *growing edge*? We used to use it in seminary a lot, and now I apply it to weaving. I'm not so sure that weaving isn't where the phrase came from in the first place. The growing edge is that part of ourselves, our personalities and our lives, in which we

have room to grow — in which there is more to come, a future of possibility. We don't quite know, just yet, what that will look like. And so, we must keep on weaving...

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Warp and weft of life,

so many fibers interwoven into a tapestry

of many colors and experiences, the

trials and triumphs with which we are faced.

At the fell line of the weaving,

we cannot see what comes next,

the future of our life's tapestry

is a mystery yet to be revealed.

Let us go out into our daily lives,

knowing life's tapestry is tightly woven,

continually being created by our actions,

creating a multi-hued picture of beauty.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!
