

Grant Me Serenity...

(Version 1a)

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

Presented on November 13, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Each week, we come here, to gather, together...

We light a flame, the spirit of our fellowship,

To mark this time as special, this space as sacred.

We are here for the each other, our community.

You are not here for me, alone;

I am not here for any of you, alone.

We are all here, for all of us, together.

For this, the spirit that is our fellowship,

And for this community that feeds our souls,

We light our Flaming Chalice today.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

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

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

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 _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

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

READING: *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (Maya Angelou)¹

Shadows on the wall

Noises down the hall

Life doesn't frighten me at all

Bad dog barking loud

Big ghosts in a cloud

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Mean old Mother Goose

Lions on the loose

They don't frighten me at all

Dragons breathing flame

On my counterpane

That doesn't frighten me at all.

I go boo

Make them shoo

I make fun

Way they run

I won't cry

So they fly

I just smile

They go wild

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Tough guys in a fight

All alone at night

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Panthers in the park

Strangers in the dark

No, they don't frighten me at all.

That new classroom where

Boys all pull my hair

(kissy little girls

With their hair in curls)

They don't frighten me at all.

¹ Angelou, Maya. *Poems* (NY: Bantam, 1997), pp. 158-159.

*Don't show me frogs and snakes
And listen for my scream.
If I'm afraid at all
It's only in my dreams.*

*I've got a magic charm
That I keep up my sleeve,
I can walk the ocean floor
And never have to breathe.*

*Life doesn't frighten me at all
Not at all
Not at all.
Life doesn't frighten me at all.*

Grant Me Serenity...

Reverend Michael Walker

Perhaps you have heard the Serenity Prayer. We will explore the long-form in a bit, but for now, here is a well known, short-form of the prayer:²

God grant me the serenity to accept the things

I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can,

and the Wisdom to know the difference.

When I first planned to preach on this, I had just a general idea of how I would speak about this prayer.

And then, as is so often the case, life happened when we

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer

weren't looking...

This week began as one of palpable relief that the presidential election was coming to an end, victory was in sight, and many of us had a sense of satisfaction that common sense and humane treatment of each other would prevail. Many of us went to the polls thinking that we would elect a person who shared our values of treating other people in humane and dignified ways. The party was short-lived, and we found ourselves humbled by a reality that I, for one, never believed could happen. It seems to me that many people are now experiencing deep and painful humiliation, because a person who gave voice to much of what is wrong with our society actually won. Beautiful, peaceful people who became targets of vitriol during the campaign wonder if this is still their

country. Those who tried to approach the election with a sense of humor, making light of the ridiculousness of it all, are no longer laughing. Many people huddled in their homes the day after, in shock.

Our UU theology is a comfort to me today, and I hope it will be for you, too. In our Universalist teaching about the preeminence of love, we base that love – a shared, common love – on the *ground of our being*. Some might call the *ground of our being* by the title of *God*, others would point to the earth, or to each other – all of which I believe is correct. The Latin word for ground and earth is *humus*. From *humus* comes *humanity* – you may recall old stories about people fashioned from clay. We even sometimes say we have feet of clay, when

we humbly admit our own limitations. So, I reference our shared humanity to describe the ground of our being. From *humus* also comes *humility*, as we seek to act *humanely* in how we treat others; from this also comes the word *humiliation*, which happens when we fall short in our shared humanity, when someone treats others in ways that are not humane.

This concept of *humus*, the ground of our being, is a bond all people share, which again brings me to our UU theology. We often say that life is an interdependent web; *humus* connects humanity, influences our humility, and is absent in our humiliation.

The ground of our being, the interdependent web, reminds me of a lesson that I try to repeat with some regularity – *we are not alone*. Even if we feel we are,

even when we feel lost or overwhelmed by a sense of despair, it is usually possible for each of us to find others in our lives who are willing to provide us with moral support. Sometimes, all we need to do is reach out to someone. ***We are not alone.***

There is yet another lesson here. I've shared this before, but I'm going to share it again... Commenting on adversities in life, the gnostic scholar and unofficial universalist, Stephan Hoeller wrote,³

A pearl is a beautiful thing that is produced by an injured life. It is the tear [that results] from the injury of the oyster. The treasure of our being in this

³ Found on numerous quotation websites; the original source is not known at this time.

world is also produced by an injured life. If we had not been wounded, if we had not been injured, then we will not produce the pearl.

This is a major lesson of life, that our experiences shape the form of the person we are each to become. And no matter how old one may be, we are perpetually in a process of becoming who will be. And throughout that process, we are not alone, and we will learn and grow from the challenges we face. It does not matter what shape or form these challenges take, and it does not matter whether they are personal or something shared with others.

This week, some have felt challenged by events that we did not foresee. Some of our brothers and sisters in society have cause to feel unsafe, disregarded or

denigrated, based on the pre-election rhetoric of the person who ultimately, and ever so unexpectedly, won the election.

Some might say that they find it difficult to honor the inherent worth and dignity of people, or a particular person, who denies the inherent worth and dignity of others. We are called, however, to be our better selves. We cannot defend the inherent worth of women, disabled, or minority peoples, by denying someone else their worth. Our common humanity calls us to each be the better person, to stand upon the ground of our being and honor the inherent worth of all, even those who do not do the same in return.

With that said, it will take some time for us to grieve. It will take some time to make new plans, to

organize and begin the social actions that are bound to come forth in response to any acts of inhumanity and oppression that we witness as a result of this election. It is acting for justice, following the injury of the body politic and society, that we will someday be able to produce a pearl. We do not have successes in life without facing up to the challenges.

Like most ministers, the pastor, theologian and activist, Reinhold Niebuhr developed various tools for facing each of those challenges that come our way. He is perhaps now most well-known in pop culture as the composer of *The Serenity Prayer*. Niebuhr created an early version of his Serenity Prayer in the 1930s, and continued to refine it over the next two decades. It was

published by what was then known as the Federal Council of Churches in a guidebook for chaplains. The first verse of the prayer was later revised by some anonymous person and was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous. The long-form as Niebuhr finally had it, with its Christian language, goes like this:⁴

*God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.*

*Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,*

⁴ http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/prose/niebuhr/serenity_prayer/

*Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.

Amen.*

Setting aside the god-talk, there is still much to be learned from this prayer. It is suggestive of ways one may choose to live one's life. Finding the grace to accept others and their actions, without judgment, can be hard to do. In the last week, national politics and civic actions in response have been anything but *serene*. And yet, there is a major transition occurring in this nation of ours, that

we cannot stop or change in ways that would make us happy. We can advocate for our policies, we can exhort the government to care for those in need, we can hold our elected leaders accountable for their words and actions, we can march for peace and equality, and yet, we cannot change the result of the election. It happened; we cannot go back in time and change that. That leaves us with a choice now, to either accept that which we cannot change and learn new ways to co-create the world we wish to live in; or, we can choose not to accept our new reality and spend the next several years sitting with our anger and despair. *Which would you choose: acceptance of reality or holding onto depression or fury?*

Once we have cycled through the various stages of

grief, and we have finally found ourselves at the point of acceptance, then it will be time to consider what things we can change. We will each, in our own times, decide whether or not we can muster the *courage* to do the work necessary to bring about those changes. The courage to change those things we can...

In our communities, as well as in our churches, we have activists and advocates seeking to uphold the inherent worth of all people, including minorities, immigrants, women, disabled and LGBTQ people, among others. We have dedicated folks across the country who are working to mitigate climate change, with the goal of preventing catastrophic events that could change the course of the future. We have those who work to hold our leaders accountable, honest, and

working on those things that would make life better in America, and hopefully also the rest of the world.

These are all a tall order, and yet these are things that we need to find the courage to do, as these are matters about which future generations depend on us. We must leave our children and grandchildren a world that is livable, a society that is just, and a culture that respects and even celebrates differences in people. In light of differences, and inflammatory rhetoric and intractable ideologies, it certainly takes courage to bridge those differences.

Following the first verse of The Serenity Prayer that many know so well, comes the lesser known verse, with this message: *live one day at a time, enjoy one*

moment at a time, accept hardship as a pathway to peace

[and] ... take this world as it is, not as I would have it.

By praying thus, Niebuhr really isn't asking God to do this for us, but rather he reminds us that it is our job.

This is part of our calling, and is a pathway through life that leads us to serenity, courage and wisdom.

In the coming weeks, months, and years, let us continue to hold each other, to support each other, to listen when we struggle to understand those things we have not the ability to change. Let us foster communities of caring. Let us declare peace and work to sustain it. Let us promote equity and compassion when working with those who may have less opportunity or power than we do, and let us ensure our elected leaders do this, too. Let those among us who have the voices to do so, protect

the dignity of those without voice. Let us find our way to a state of acceptance about those things we cannot change. Let us harvest the pearl that comes from our injuries in this life, in this society, in this nation. Finally, let us do all of these things, together.

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

Each week, we come here, to gather, together...

In bonds of fellowship,

In a covenant of caring and love,

We have gathered.

And, as you go out into the world,

Take this feeling of fellowship and caring with you,

Wherever you may go.

And then come back to us, because we need you.

This community is a place of caring

Because we make it so.

Let's gather together again next week,

And share anew in our covenant of love.

Until then...

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!