

“To Be Here”

Rev. Lynn Harrison

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

There are many enjoyable aspects of planning a worship service.

And for me, one of the best things about this task is getting to choose the hymns.

The hymn we just sang, “Return Again,” was printed in our Order of Service today...but it’s also in the small teal hymnal...and it’s a relatively new musical addition to our UU services.

I love the fact that it’s short and simple.

And I love that we can sing it as a round (though I know that can be an acquired taste).

Most of all, I like the way it reminds us that we’re continually called to “return”—which implies that we’re often “going away” as well.

We are called, again and again, from absence...into presence.

“To be here” as human beings, means that we are repeatedly called to “return to the home of our soul”...which the song tells us is simply:

“Who you are,
Where you are,
What you are.”

Through simple presence, we are “born and reborn again.”

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As that “reborn” language of transformation may suggest, the call to be fully present, in the here and now, is central to the wisdom of many religious traditions.

We find it also in the guidance of many modern teachers who are not part of any one religious faith...

...such as Eckhart Tolle, who says that “you cannot be both unhappy and fully present in the Now.”¹

In his book “Wherever You Go, There You Are”, Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote that “mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way;

On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”²

Kabat-Zinn has been influenced deeply by the Zen Buddhist tradition...which is of course non-theistic...

But you can find the emphasis on the present moment, this radically inclusive openness, in contemplative streams of Christianity, Judaism and Islam as well.

One of my favourite descriptions of mindfulness comes from the Sufi teacher Kabir Helminski.

Sufism is the contemplative or mystical stream of Islam.

¹ www.eckharttollenow.com

² Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 4.

In this short quote, Helminski makes clear how our attention to the present moment can be healing and transformative...

And how it connects us a form of Higher Power that could be called “God,” if you wish.

Helminski writes:

“Whoever makes all cares into one care,
the care for simply being present,
will be relieved of all care by that Presence,
which is the creative power.”³

I love that, because it suggests that the source of our well-being, our transformation, even our “salvation” if you will...

Is the creative power contained in presence itself.

And that we can access it, simply by cultivating our ability to be mindfully present.

To “pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment.”⁴

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This morning, we are truly honoured to have Joseph Sagaj and Keitha Keeshig-Tobias with us.

Thank you very much Joseph for speaking to us today.

Right now, I’m aware that “to be here” in this room means to be present to the art that surrounds us.

³ Kabir Edmund Helminski, *Living Presence: A Sufi Way to Mindfulness and the Essential Self* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigree, 1992), 26.

⁴ Jon Kabat-Zinn

When the paintings were being installed, Keitha walked me through the sequence of her paintings on the back wall and to my right.

She'll explain them better than I can at the Art Reception after the service, but I can tell you that she helped me see the meaning of the flowing hair imagery which is symbolic of family, community and identity...

And how the paintings tell the powerful and painful story of loss and trauma caused by the residential school system...

As well as the potential for healing, which can lead to the Divine...as seen in the very beautiful image of peace at the end of the sequence.

Art-making is one way that human beings can be fully present in the here-and-now—even when the present moment includes grief, anger or suffering.

As well, art becomes a vehicle that brings others into presence with that grief and suffering.

Art brings us into relationship...into shared presence.

To use a phrase spoken by the human rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson at the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly last year...

Art allows us to “get proximate”—to get closer to the history of injustice that we need to understand, in order for reconciliation and healing to take place.

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“To be here” means to be fully present in this space...

In this geographic location...this city...and this time.

It means “to be here” in this body...which may at times feel uncomfortable, anxious, or unsure of ourselves.

“To be here” means to mindfully notice these things...without judgment...and to return again, fully present, to the possibility of relationship.

A possibility that is always present.

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I was recently in a yoga class, when about five minutes into our practice, a fire alarm started to ring throughout the building.

The instructor had been using a recording of calm, meditative background music...

And the sudden presence of the shrill, clanging bell, dinging...every...second...over...and over...

Didn't exactly enhance the contemplative mood.

I wondered if perhaps we would have to stop.

I thought it might be too distracting for the others...

Or—I might as well just admit it—for me.

But our teacher smiled, and acknowledged that indeed, she'd been told there might be a testing of the fire alarm system today.

Calmly, and continuing in her graceful movements, she invited us to integrate the bell into our practice.

And indeed, not unlike any ringing bell, it had the effect of waking us up and focusing our attention!

Shawn, could you ring the singing bowl, please? [Shawn rings the singing bowl.]

Unlike the Tibetan singing bowl we ring here, the fire alarm was unpleasant...

And yet we found we could maintain our presence, *in its presence*.

And so, we all received a wonderful lesson in the meaning of spiritual practice.

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To be here, on this planet and at this time, means to be hearing a lot of alarm bells, a lot of the time.

Today, on Amnesty Sunday, we are reminded of the many people who are denied basic human rights...including many who are tortured, falsely accused, and unjustly imprisoned.

Although we can't "get proximate" to these prisoners to speak with them directly...through Amnesty International we have the ability to take direct action that can bring about justice.

"To be here" and to take action today means to allow ourselves to be fully present to human rights abuses taking place in every corner of the world.

I think it's safe to say, that it's difficult or indeed impossible to be present to these horrors all the time...indeed we all turn away at times...and when we do, we can be mindfully aware of our feelings of sadness or fatigue.

And yet we will be called to "return again"...to the world, as it is, in the present...

Because this is where we find "the home of our soul."

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"To be here" means to be aware and present to the needs that are immediate in our community.

Last year around this time, Reverend Shawn Newton and Danielle Webber and I traveled to Standing Rock, North Dakota, in response to a call for spiritual leaders to pray in solidarity in that place.

This year, a vigil is taking place just outside the St. Clair subway station, calling our attention to the ongoing suicide crisis among youth in Northern Indigenous communities.

A larger action and march is planned for December 19th and 20th...and after the service, you can speak to members of our Reconciliation Working Group, who will tell you how you can offer your support.

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Finally, on the front of today's Order of Service, you'll find a cosmic spin on our monthly theme.

What does it mean "to be here" on this planet...knowing that human beings have changed it so rapidly and so radically?

“To be here” in the age of climate change means to be present, at times, to profound existential questions and feelings of deep anxiety and grief.

Without denying these feelings, we might discover that mindful presence offers us a route toward peace-of-mind even in these anxious times.

By making “all our cares into one care, the care for simply being present,”⁵ perhaps we can access the creative power we need to take skillful action...

That we might discern the right actions for us to take, in this particular place and time, in relationship with those here with us now.

We may find—as we do this morning, with the Art Exhibit and Amnesty International and the Reconciliation Working Group all present simultaneously—that we’d like to be in more than one place at one time!

But of course we can only be here, in this moment.

With that awareness, and acceptance, and attention...

May we find the presence-of-mind we need for skillful choice-making and creative wisdom.

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⁵ Helminski

I've talked a lot about presence today...but before I go
I'd like to give "absence" a bit of air-time.

It's a subject we all know a thing or two about.

We know what it means to be "checked out."
To "phone it in."

To escape.
To withdraw.

To reject, in negative judgment
To push away, as we attempt to control.

As strange as it might seem, these ways of being absent are what it
means "to be here" too.

When we notice that we're running away, or pushing away, we can
look deeply and acknowledge our fear...

Before returning again, with acceptance,
to the present moment, exactly as it is.

"To be here" means to be present in our bodies and our minds...

Even when our bodies and minds are not operating in the way we
might want.

Even when we're not able to be present in the ways we aspire to
be...or perhaps in the ways that we used to be.

"To be here" in this limited and human body
means "to be here" for only a short time.

...and never "to be here" in the same way for very long.

“To be here” means accepting our limits...
Embracing change...
And ultimately accepting death when it comes.

Life is in a continuous state of change,
and to be present to that...

To be present *in* that...

Means continually letting go and reconnecting.
Turning away and turning back.

The author and psychotherapist David Richo draws from a number of spiritual traditions including Buddhism, Catholicism and Jungian psychology.

He writes, “Our identity is like a kaleidoscope.

With each turn we reset it not to a former or final state but to a new one that reflects the here-and-now positions of the pieces we have to work with.

The design is always new because the shifts are continual.

That is what makes kaleidoscopes, and us, so appealing and beautiful.”

He goes on to say that when we give each other attention, we love to see the “emerging mandala of us.”⁶

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⁶ David Richo, “*How to Be an Adult in Relationships: the Five Keys to Mindful Loving*” (Shambala, 2002), 30.

If we stay present, in the here-and-now, whatever shape it takes, we create and maintain relationships with others...with the earth...and with ourselves...

Not lasting forever...but nourishing us for now...

With love that arises naturally when attention is given.

This is our task, as we “seek to understand the meaning of our lives...

Connect in common purpose...

And serve life to build a better world” as our Congregation’s mission statement reads.

To do that, we are called “to be here”...in this place and this time and this moment.

To turn, and return, and return again.

I am grateful for your attention this morning,
And for the great gift of your presence.

Blessings to you all.