

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fort Myers

Order of Worship

February 2, 2025

February Theme- Inclusion

**** Please rise in body or spirit**

Gathering Music

To include *Rising of Breath* by Sharon Knight and Thorn Coyle

UUCFM Choir

Welcome *Lesley*

Call to Worship *Andrea*

I first want to acknowledge that today is, among other things a pagan celebration called Imbolc. It is the recognition of the fiery Goddess Brigid or Bridget. Bridget is a Triple Goddess with many different aspects. She is the Goddess of inspiration, helping poets and writers and bards to create. She is a Goddess of healing, often seen as the midwife and protector of children. She is also the Goddess of the Smith, having created the Sword of Justice at her forge. That was always one of the most powerful aspects of this beautiful Goddess that speaks to me. She is the Goddess of Justice and she carries her sword to enforce it. So you can probably see that I would consider her my patron Goddess, and as I align with our UU principle of Justice, serving on our Social Justice committee.

When I came across this poem by Tahlia Hunter, it reminded me of all the positive ways that we can view the world around us. It reminded me of all the wonderful positive things that we can do to make a difference, to help encourage change.

Patience visited me
And it reminded me
That good things take time to come to fruition
And grow slowly with stability

Peace visited me
And it reminded me
That I may remain calm through the storms of life
Regardless of the chaos surrounding me

Hope visited me
And it reminded me

That better times lay ahead
And it would always be there to guide and uplift me

Humility visited me
And it reminded me
That I may achieve it
Not by trying to shrink myself and make myself less
But by focusing on serving the world and uplifting those around me

Kindness visited me
And it reminded me
To be more gentle, forgiving and compassionate toward myself
And those surrounding me

Confidence visited me
And it reminded me
To not conceal or suppress my gifts and talents
In order to make others feel more comfortable
But to embrace what makes me me

Focus visited me
And it reminded me
That other people's insecurities and judgements about me
Are not my problem
And I should redirect my attention
From others back to me

Freedom visited me
And it reminded me
That no one has control over my mindset, thoughts and wellbeing
But me

And love visited me
And it reminded me
That I need not search for it in others
As it lies within me.

Patience, peace, hope, humility, kindness, confidence, freedom, and love- All of those things
that we can carry in our hearts, wrap around us, and share with those around us, as we step out
into the world.

****Chalice Lighting**

Jennifer

A chalice lit in our midst is a symbol of our liberal faith,
A faith built on the foundation of freedom, reason and tolerance
A faith sustained by acts of kindness and justice
A faith that visions a world flourishing with equality for all her people
A faith that demands the living out of goodness
A faith that requires thoughtfulness
A faith of wholeness
This tiny flame is the symbol of the spark of all this within each of us.
I had that whole stewardship thing written in hereBy Debra Faulk

****Covenant** by James Vila Blake

Love is the spirit of this congregation and service its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.

****Opening Hymn # 161 *Peace! The Perfect Word***

Stewardship Moment *Andrea*

The Stewardship Committee has asked some of the members to give Testimonials about how the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fort Myers has impacted their lives. When Len asked me to do this I'm not sure that he realized that my neuro-sparkly brain sometimes can over-share and... so...

When 2024 came along I decided I was going to make 2024 the year of Growth! I've always held a little bit of nervousness to make that first contact, a fear of rejection, but I really needed to find a congregation or circle, to make connections with people, and Spirit. I looked online, did a little bit of research, and discovered that UUCFM has a CUUPs Chapter. I chose to come to UUCFM just after New Year's. The warm welcome and intense hospitality I felt from those lovely people who are greeters at the

door was the only thing I needed, for me to know that I was Home. It didn't take long for me to feel welcomed here, to feel completely a part of this congregation. When I got asked to be president elect, seemingly moments after becoming a member, I guess I kind of knew that I was part of the congregation, LOL.

Once I became a member, I wanted to hit the ground rolling, so to speak. I found committees and forums and wonderful groups where people share, and where we try to find ways that we can make a difference in our world. I feel like I do make a difference, by being a part of a congregation that cares, not just about its individual members, but about the world around us, especially our tiny corner.

One of the things that stood out for me, when I committed to becoming a member, Was the very different approach from my previous congregation in New Hampshire. a path to membership there very much included a commitment to a pledge, a generally accepted 15 to 20% tithe of sorts. Because I had been financially challenged even then, it was incredibly embarrassing to have to seek out a way to become a member without having to make that financial commitment. It felt like I should be buying my way into an institution, that it was more than just being about the spiritual faith. When I arrived here, and sought the path to membership, I was made to feel that my presence was the only requirement, that my commitment to the mission and values of UUCFM are the only tithe.

I may not have a lot of financial resources to share, but I absolutely wanted to make a pledge to commit to the most I thought I could manage. I want to help keep the lights on here, to keep us in our home to, preserve what all of you have already built here, that I am now able to share with you. Most importantly I want to make a difference in the world by helping my congregation help others. And UUCFM doesn't just pass the plate, we get involved, we try to connect somehow with those that we assist.

Stones of Intention

Final Stone *Andrea*

Centering

Lesley Peterson

“The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.”

These words are by J.R.R. Tolkien in the first book of his trilogy entitled *The Fellowship of the Ring*. There are times in life when life is uncertain, instilling in us a sense of peril, reflecting both the fragility and the shadows that accompany existence. Danger, conflict, and uncertainty shape the human journey, weaving a tapestry wherein despair and hope are constant threads. J.R.R. Tolkien captures this duality with profound wisdom, acknowledging the coexistence of sorrow and the enduring possibility of renewal.

Despair often rises when adversity feels insurmountable. It whispers of futility, urging surrender in the face of overwhelming odds. In Tolkien’s world, as in our own, despair tempts us to abandon the fight, to see gloom as all-encompassing. Yet it is precisely within such moments that hope finds its voice.

Hope, though fragile, burns with quiet tenacity. It does not deny the existence of hardship or the weight of despair, but it offers a vision beyond them. It reminds us that light persists, even when unseen. For every shadow, there is a flicker of courage, a spark of resilience, and the promise of a brighter dawn.

The balance of despair and hope defines the human condition. It is through navigating life’s trials that we learn to cherish hope—not as a guarantee, but as a gift that transforms struggles into meaning and endurance into triumph.

I invite you to take a moment to sit with these feelings. Close your eyes if you wish, relax your body. Breathe in and breathe out, and as you do so, look inward to discover what flicker of light inside you inspires feelings of hope, even in these uncertain times.

(After about a minute, ring chime/bell or such and invite people back).

Sermon

I know that right now, there are a great number of people here who are highly disturbed by the political situation, the actions that are being taken, the ways in which our democracy is threatened. and those are good things to be concerned about.

In our demands to preserve our democracy, we must Remember that great changes in history took much time and much work.

Did you know that the Women's Suffragette movement began in 1848, in Seneca Falls New York, at the first Women's Rights Convention? It took a battle, with women incarcerated and beaten for marching for their rights, that went until August 26, 1920, when the 19th amendment was ratified, allowing women full voting rights.

In 1863 president Lincoln issued the emancipation proclamation. In 1868 the 14th amendment was ratified requiring equal protection under the law to all persons. The 15th amendment in 1870 banned racial discrimination in voting. However, Jim Crow segregation laws were passed in many states following that. Much violence, discrimination and failed protections followed. It wasn't until 1964 that the civil rights act, declaring racial discrimination to be illegal was actually passed. Yes, we still see much discrimination that still exists in this country, but it has been moving forward.

At least 80 years for women to gain the vote, and a century for civil rights to be the law. Things well worth fighting for, and it took TIME! None of those things happened without a great deal of pushback from those who were in power. The power base will always fight to maintain power, which is why we continually go through cycles of feeling that we're moving forward and beyond, and then returning to a place we feel is backward. Any human or social oriented changes will always require a great deal of fighting from those who wished to see change. That fighting can take many forms.

German nationalism began to grow as early as 1882. When hyper inflation had hit Germany in 1921, it only took until 1923, for the far right Nazi party to gain strength. 1931 unemployment rates had soared, and in 1932 the Nazi party became the largest party in Germany.

Yet, there were still people who resisted and acted out against the Nazi regime. Noncompliance, such as skipping work or not following the rules, Protests and open demonstrations, Rescue of people who were being persecuted, like hiding the Jews, even armed resistance and sabotage were used.

What I take from this is that in times of perceived inflation and unemployment rates soaring, regardless of whether the data agrees, people will move to the far right, and we are seeing that across Europe right now as well as the US. We all see rising prices every time we go to the grocery stores, and people who see these prices consistently, and blame the current administrations, will tend to feel the need to philosophically move to the right in order to seemingly correct the trend. Often we see a resurgence of Fascism. But even during those

times, there will still be people who feel that they must protect those who are being marginalized and persecuted.

The reason I'm bring up these things from history, is for us to attempt to understand what happened, and why so many people felt the need to support someone that we feel is inappropriate for the office. Why suddenly we are faced with all branches of our government in control of those who are leaning towards the far right ideologies and fascism. I want us to understand that creating great dramatic change, doesn't happen overnight. I want us to understand that there are reasons why people made the choices they made. Some people, that I believe are truly good people in their hearts, felt that there were points that Democrats were supporting, that went against Their Values. They saw propaganda, and felt that even the small percentage, the one or two examples of, were enough reason to support someone who agreed with Their Own Values. I want us to see those people who made those choices as fellow human beings. And I want us to approach ALL of our fellow human beings with the same LOVE that is at the Center of OUR UU values.

I know that this is a very huge ask, a concept that, at this moment is beyond imagining. I believe that as Unitarian Universalists we are called to our Living Faith, and to Live our Faith.

There's a reason I love our flower, that shows in simple, easy to communicate bullet points what our values and principles are.

Interdependence. That we honor the fact that we are a part of an interdependent web of all existence. We are all connected.

Equity. Every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion.

Pluralism. That we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

Transformation. We adapt to the changing world, and seek to change our world.

Generosity. We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and Hope. And we give of ourselves generously to help others.

Justice. We work toward creating a diverse cultural Beloved community, where all can feel welcome and thrive.

Now take all those values, and examine those who believed differently through the lens of our Values and Principles.. Go back within yourself and examine those "others" with LOVE at the Center of those Values! Even though we sometimes have differences of core values, of opinion in what will create the better world for all of us, even though there are those out there who believe that some of us don't belong within the walls of what is perceived as "this great country", even though we don't understand the ideals and perspectives of those people. It is, or should be, part of our Faith to include them as well. In order to include them we need to find ways in which to embrace, or at least be tolerant of, them. LOVE at the Center!

While we may feel that we are fighting for Justice, we need to remember that we cannot allow ourselves to become "just like them". We need to remember that anger and violence have no

place. That hatred of the "enemy" is not who we are . I'm not saying that it's easy to simply embrace and Love someone and suddenly the world looks better in their eyes. Treating people with love and compassion doesn't always work to change perspectives or ideas. But the only way that we can hold onto who we are is to remember that Love is at the Center of our Beliefs, of our Principles, of our Values, of our Faith.

It kind of clicked for me, watching the movie Inside Out 2 , with my GrandPrincesses. All of those feelings, even the ones that seem "negative", are necessary and important to create a whole, well rounded being. That it's only through accepting ALL of them, ALL of those parts and embracing them, that we create the life we want. And from that perspective of the movie, all of those were brought together by Joy. That if we move through all of the ups and downs with Joy and Love, we can Become.

Fascism sneaks in, it comes through In the tiny cracks that we don't realize are there, influencing and undermining, until it is too late. There are so many quotes from Martin Luther King Junior that suit this situation. "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. he who accepts evil without protesting against it Is really cooperating with it" or " In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends" and most definitely " The time is always right to do what is right" So there are ways that we can fight fascism. One way is to speak out. To not let others get away with saying something Bigoted around you. We have to remember that being uncomfortable about it isn't condemnation against that speech. Being silent is not condemnation, nor is walking away. Those things are equivalent to complacency, and complicity. I like one meme that says to not be quiet or subtle but to use the phrase " that sounds like some weird Nazi stuff". But regardless of how you handle it we also have to remember that as Dr King also said " Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only Light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only Love can do that." So, in keeping Love at the center you could say something like that and then turn around and say to them "but I can't imagine you're that kind of person, you must be better than a Nazi". We could approach it with compassion, expressing the desire to see the best in them, to see their better selves.

There are many organizations that are constantly having petition drives, to contact our legislature, to fight injustices. I get dozens of emails a day about petitions, and that is one way that we can assist in the fight to preserve our democracy. There are often marches or events that put the issues at front ,that you might be able to join in with.

Another way we can fight is through where we spend our money. Sometimes capitalism can have an effect for the positive. Companies that stripped their DEI programs under the new regime- Amazon, Meta, Mcdonald's, Walmart, Target and Ford. Even better, we can support companies who have expressed their continued commitment to their DEI programs. Costco, Apple, Pinterest, Microsoft, e.l.f. Beauty, Cisco, and surprisingly, financial giants JP Morgan Chase and Goldman Sachs. Our money can have POWER.

I believe that when situations like this new government arise, when we are not able to feel that we are affecting enough change, that when we feel frustrated and concerned and want to fight, sometimes we need to look closer to home.

We open our Community, to do all that we can to protect those who are in danger, to offer a Sacred Space to all who need comfort. To speak out about injustices That cause harm. We can find support for ourselves within our network of the UUA, and sibling Congregations around the country.

While we seek to find ways to preserve our democracy, we also have to remember that part of Social Justice is to support those who are being marginalized, who are being persecuted. One of the ways UUCFM can do that is by supporting our wonderful Community Sharing Partners. I'm reminded of a meme that came across my feed, where a professor invited a Buddhist monk to come speak to his class. the monk got up in front at the blackboard and wrote "Everyone wants to save the world, but no one wants to help mom with the dishes". He said very few of us will ever get the opportunity to run into a burning building in rescue, but we do have other opportunities to affect our world. He went on to talk about how even the smallest of our actions affects other people. The smile at the person in the grocery store may make their day and make them have a smile on their face for hours. Treating the cashier and bagger with respect and gratitude, makes them feel like important people. Helping mom with the dishes allows mom to have the freedom to do other things, hopefully things that help her self-care. We all know the statement Happy Mama, Happy family. With our community sharing partners we are able to create connections with those people who are marginalized in our society. We are able to help support organizations that support those people who need the most help. It may seem like little in the battle to preserve democracy but we aren't about to go out there and take up arms and battle our government, but what we can do is quiet resistance, with Love at the Center, by supporting those who are being persecuted. And That IS resistance. Refusing to say silent and speaking out, sometimes by simply signing multiple petitions, or donating to whichever causes those petitions are supporting, and supporting our Community Sharing Partners who are supporting others in need- ALL. Of those are ways in which we help to preserve our democracy, to preserve the country that we believe is great.

We have an amazing Social Justice Committee who is working towards creating a newsletter focused on social justice happenings, in ways that you can get involved. That committee has done great research in creating recommendations for our Community Sharing Partner program. Join the Social Justice Committee, take part in helping to find ways in which you can become active. And never forget to keep Love at the Center!

There is certainly a lot of work ahead of us over the next four years! We will need to fight to create what we believe is right. But we also need to be the refuge, the sanctuary for those people who need a place to go, to feel Welcomed. And we need to be the ones to reach out with an olive branch in Love. Regardless of where they come from or what they believe. And yes, regardless of who they voted for. Keep in mind that an olive branch Is a request for peace, to

find common ground, to have compassion for each other. It is not the acceptance of harming of other people.

Moving forward we can have Hope! Hope for our fellow persons, hope for our democracy, hope for our future. I love this quote by a mindfulness coach "Hope is not blind optimism, but a grounded belief in our ability to persevere. By focusing on what we can control and reframing challenges as opportunities, we cultivate both resilience and clarity". So when you wonder how can we have hope throughout all of this insanity, remember that it's not being simply optimistic for the future, but it is helping us to focus on what we CAN change, and how what we can change affects further out, through the ripples of our good deeds.

I felt that I wanted to address all of you, as I will be taking the role of President of this Congregation in the spring, and that I know that it will be the beginning of our fight. That we will have much work to do next year and the years to come. I wanted you to know that I will be at the center of that for all of you. I will be Here for all of you. I will be holding Sacred Space for all of you. And I will be doing the same for all of "them". I will be fighting to keep all of our shared Principles, and most importantly to me, to keep them with LOVE at the Center of all of this.

You are powerful! You are cared for! You are LOVED, and you are LOVE!

Aho, Amen, and Blessed Be!

****Hymn #1017 *We Are Building a New Way***

Offering *Gary*

Offertory/Anthem *The Storm is Crossing Over* UUCFM Choir

****Words of Gratitude**

By the work of our hands, and the work of our hearts, our love is made real. May we be grateful for all that is given, and grateful for all that is shared.

****Extinguishing the Chalice**

by Elizabeth Selle Jones

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of

community or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Closing Words

I, You, We Meditation, from First UU Church of Springfield (Missouri)

This is a little bit different than we usually do. Not a responsive, but an echo.

Place your hands over your heart. Feel that heartbeat within yourself.

Now breathe in love, and breathe out peace.

Breathe in love, breathe out peace.

Breathe in love, breathe out peace. *(repeat as you feel necessary)*

Repeat these next lines after me:

May I be happy...

May I be peaceful...

May I be Hopeful...

May I be filled with love.

Now repeat these next three lines with me, but follow along with my hand motions, and include your neighbors sitting next to you:

May You be happy (*hands forward in giving motion, then return for each*)

May you be Peaceful..

May You be Hopeful...

May You be filled with Love

And our final, to include All the World (you might want to give your neighbor room)

May We be happy (*hands outward to include all, then return for each*)

May We be peaceful...

May We be Hopeful...

May We be filled with Love

Farewell Words

Jennifer

Thank you for attending our service today. Please join us for coffee and conversation in Hobart Hall after the service. There will be an informal opportunity for our Zoom folks to chat after the service.

While it can be a challenging time for all of us, there are actions we can take. There is nothing better we can do for our environment than to tend to the earth. On Saturday, February 8th, we will be celebrating the life of Judy Burgett and her incredible service to this congregation.

Judy expressed the wish that instead of a memorial service, we “do something.” Respecting her wish we will be working on our grounds on the morning of February 8. The Scouts will join us, having said that they would be honored to participate. There is always much to do. We can weed the raised garden beds, plant seeds of butterfly-friendly plants, and pull out the Brazilian peppers. Together we can make our grounds more beautiful while honoring the memory of a cherished friend.

Bring some gardening gloves and join us next Saturday.

Go in peace.

Postlude