"The soul would have no rainbow had the eyes no tears. Tears of joy are like the summer raindrops pierced by sunbeams." So said the 19th century Universalist minister Hosea Ballou.

And famous author Anonymous said, "Tears are words the heart can't express."

This morning I'm not going to yank your emotional chain with tear-jerking stories, just to make a point. Besides if I did, I'd fall victim too. However, IF I should tear up (or maybe WHEN?), take that moment to be a curious self-observer... when someone weeps in front of you do you suddenly feel emotional too? Do you feel yourself opening up or shutting down?

Don’t feel bad if you're a closet weeper or total stoic. I know that you too can be as deeply moved and touched as the drippiest among us. Your tear ducts are just less reactive. Or maybe you have larger tear ducts, which can hold more water before they overflow. Men actually have that anatomical feature, which makes them significantly less drippy than women.

Ever since I offered to speak about crying I've been wondering if I was nuts to expose myself like this! But I’m not the only big weeper in the congregation. Not naming names, but you know who you are...I probably interviewed you for this talk. As union steward of Weepers Local 101, I’ll do my best to represent the value of our position - perhaps we can even recruit new members.

After I give you the condensed version of my own teary history, I’ll share what I learned from interviewing 18 fellow weepers, and then we’ll talk about why evolution and psychology suggest that our weepiness deserves to be embraced.

I was a happy introverted child from a loving family. I spent a lot of time reading, daydreaming and making paper dolls with my sisters. Nothing to cry about. But the summer I turned nine, my parents decided I needed a dose of team sports and extroversion. So they packed me off to Camp Wyonegonic in the Maine woods. For EIGHT WEEKS. That’s where I gave my tear ducts their first real workout. I hated everything about camp life and I was excruciatingly homesick. I cried every single day – the ugly snivelly nose-dripping red-eyed self-pitying kind of crying. Every morning I would wake up on my saggy iron cot and vow: “TODAY I will NOT cry.”

Just like every time I get up here I vow, “I will NOT weep THIS time.” But the faucets of my eyes have a will of their own.

By college my weeping was still in the unattractive self-pity vein, but now it had dramatic focus: on the recent loss of, or absence of a boyfriend.

Thankfully by my early 20s I left the wallowing behind and didn’t take up my current weeping style – the kind of weeping we’re talking about today - till my first child was born. The tears were no longer about me, they were about the miracle of new life, gratitude for a baby’s perfection, and the over-whelming love I felt – she just blew my heart wide open.

At this point I can hardly count all that makes me weep - I weep because I’m inspired by the efforts of others, by words that cut to a truth within me, by kindness and compassion, by love for my kids and my friends— by so many things! Sometimes a single word can pull a string that sets me off, much to my own surprise and the confusion of any observers. And I am powerless to control the tears. They blindside me every time, and honestly I hate it. It’s one thing when I’m sitting out there and can squinch down in my seat, but when I’m speaking in front of you and I accidentally step on the tip of an emotional landmine my throat constricts, my voice rises to a squeak and then tears roll ...

People look at me with such concern... is she OK? Unfortunately that’s what happens when I speak about things that matter to me, so I’m stuck.

Over the years, other weep-prone speakers have shared their strategies with me. “Take deep
breaths.” “Imagine the people in the audience are buck naked...” Nope.

The best I can do is plunk down a roll of toilet paper next to me to let you know I really don’t take myself that seriously.

So what about those 18 other weepers I interviewed? My sample included almost as many men as women, young and old, several from this congregation... my sister, and all three of my kids... which made me wonder whether eye leakage was genetic or merely contagious. I also posted a request for volunteers on Facebook and was astonished when six people I knew only slightly said they really wanted to talk about this.

Most of my interviews were over the phone. The most amazing thing about every conversation was how deep it went, and how quickly we got there, even with those casual Facebook friends. That’s what happens when you’re talking about what touches your heart – it’s intimate and sweet. The other thing that happened is the person would be telling me about a particular time they were moved to tears and there would suddenly be silence at the other end of the line...

“Hello, hello?” I’d say. “Are you there?”

“Uh, sorry... I got choked up all over again, just like it was yesterday.”

Often, I’d find myself weeping along with them, even when I’d had no similar experience. But I caught their emotion over the phone line.

Most weepers have been that way since childhood. One was known by her chums as “Waterworks” or “High Tide”. Since then, like many others, she has managed to come to terms with her leaky eyeballs, and even rejoice in them.

One woman told me that she actually felt BAD if someone she was with was crying and she didn’t get teary too, because she feels it shows how much she cares, that she understands and empathizes. Another woman said that there were times she actually resuscitated fond memories or sought out a poignant movie so she could get a good cry going.

Two of the men I spoke with said that they didn’t allow themselves to cry until well into adulthood. For both, early home life was so treacherous that they couldn’t afford to show feelings that would mark them as vulnerable. As adults they felt relieved to allow themselves to be moved to tears and thus be able to feel fully human.

Two other men said they were raised to “be strong; act like a man”, which specifically meant, DO NOT CRY. They grew up afraid that they were weak, because it seemed they had so little control over their emotions.

My interviewees helped me construct an extensive list of situations that set off their tear ducts. Some situations were unique to only a couple of people, others opened the valves for almost everyone....

We're moved when we watch someone struggle and feel helpless to assist, and even more so when they finally succeed. We cry when we’re present for a life milestone--a birth, a first day of kindergarten, graduation, marriage.

We're stirred when we witness other people’s emotional moments - even when they are strangers: a family at the airport welcoming their adopted baby; the high school football player whose father, just back from Iraq, surprises him at the game; a winner getting her Oscar or Olympic gold.

Experiencing and expressing gratitude makes us weep, as does witnessing or being the recipient of genuine kindness.

When we hear ourselves or another speak a deep truth OUT LOUD we hear the words as if for the first time and they connect right to the heart. The declaration of marriage vows certainly falls in this category. Even the most stoic usually needs a hanky at a wedding.

We cry when we realize we’re part of something greater than ourselves – like when we watched the Mars Rover landing. Some of us succumb to singing the national anthem at a football game, others to hearing beautiful music in a great cathedral or the choir here at UUCV.

And we weep in awe at the majesty and mystery of the universe. The Japanese even have a word for this: yūgen. 14th century monk Kamo no Chōmei, says of yūgen: “It is like an autumn evening under an expanse of silent sky. Somehow, as if for some reason that we should be able to recall, tears well uncontrollably.”
We weep as we realize that a special moment may not come again—that this life is fleeting and precious. This happens more frequently as we age and recognize more clearly our own mortality.

Finally, we’re easy easy marks for viral videos with this kind of intro: “OMG, you gotta see this! But get out your hanky!” Rescued puppies and Make-a-Wish kids living their dream do it for us every time.

I’m certain you have your own favorites...

Why oh why do we cry? Many primates can express sorrow, but only humans shed tears. What might be the evolutionary value of our tears?

As babies we cry (loudly!) to let our mothers know we’re hungry or in pain, bringing the assistance we need to survive. Similarly, an adult sobbing in grief or wailing in pain is more likely to get help from other members of the tribe. The squeaky wheel, and all that.

But what about the silent tears that signal we’ve been touched? According to Randy Cornelius, a psychologist at Vassar College, it’s possible that this kind of crying may have evolved as a quiet signal that invited our intimates in, but kept our vulnerability hidden from those farther away, who might be predators.

Evolutionary biologist Oren Hasson suggests that because tears blur our vision, we are rendered temporarily defenseless and hence send signals to a potential enemy that we are not dangerous. He notes that multiple studies across cultures show that tears function as a mechanism to help us bond with other members of our “tribe.” They can function as a signal of submission, a cry for help or sympathy, but also as a mutual display of affection, attachment and cohesion.

In his book, “Why People like to Cry,” neurologist Michael Trimble suggests that the emergence of emotional crying was connected with the dawning of self-consciousness and the development of a theory of mind, when our earliest ancestors realized that their peers also possessed self-consciousness and could feel distress. Our ancestors who were most empathic probably thrived because it helped them build strong relationships, which in turn gave them protection and support.

And some scientists believe that mirror neurons in the brain are involved. Mirror neurons in our brains light up when we observe another person’s actions, in the same place in the brain as if we were doing the action ourselves. Why wouldn’t they also fire when we see another person weeping, thus inducing empathy?

In one way or another, these scientists are saying that tears are how we show vulnerability and a need for connection. Like dogs who show submissiveness by exposing their bellies, we indicate our open hearts and invite others in with our tears, trusting we will not be harmed.

Brené Brown, a social worker and researcher whose TED talk on vulnerability is one of the most viewed ever, believes that connection is why we’re here. Connection is what gives meaning and purpose to our lives. And she believes the prerequisite for connection is vulnerability.

She defines vulnerability as emotional risk, exposure, uncertainty. To try something at which you might fail. To not know and forge ahead anyway. To be willing to ask for help. To speak up when you’re not sure how your ideas will be received. To show that you care. To be honest. To let yourself be seen.

Vulnerability is scary. To avoid it we numb ourselves — we buy stuff, overeat, drink, take drugs, and we turn to religions or political views with easy answers that promise certainty. But Brown notes that we can't selectively numb. When we numb difficult feelings, we also numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness.

She’s now researching what she calls “whole-heartedness” – a characteristic of people who are willing to be vulnerable. What she finds the whole-hearted have in common is courage — a word that comes from the Latin root COR/CORD. It means “heart” — a heart strong enough to keep going when the outcome is uncertain. Other derivations of the root CORD are AC-CORD - to agree with another heart. and CON-CORD - to connect with another heart.

Unitarian Universalism has a reputation for being a religion that is more head than heart, more intellectual than soulful. Once upon a time we were even known as “God's Frozen People”. Here at UUCV we can balance that out by practicing whole-
heartedness. Good to know that the one consistent comment I got from our congregational weepers was that they feel safe enough at UUCV to let the tears flow should they be so moved.

In this safe space, what better place to allow ourselves to show our soft bellies, our vulnerability? What better place to be honest, to not know, to ask for help? What better place to address things that matter, that touch and move us? And from here, with courage and open heart, into the wider world...

I’ll close with a quote from *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho.

*His heart whispered to him, “Beware of the places where you are brought to tears. That’s where I [your heart] am. And that’s where your treasure is.”*

So be it. And amen.

**Benediction:** May you go through the days and years ahead whole-heartedly, opening yourselves to see and be seen by one another, that you may experience our profound connection. And look for the places where you are brought to tears, because that’s where your treasure is.