CALL TO WORSHIP (De Stewart)
Nine months ago a tall, well-dressed stranger appeared before us, backpack slung over his shoulder, a visual reminder that he was a traveler. “I am here for a short time and then I must leave”, he announced. I resisted the urge to tweet my immediate thoughts, “OMG, he’s Nanny McPhee”. For those unfamiliar with the story of Nanny McPhee, seven broken-hearted children who had lost their gift for kindness were visited upon by a stranger. Her name was Nanny McPhee. She too was a transient as she told her new charges, “When you need me, but do not want me, then I must stay. When you want me, but no longer need me, then I must go.” She had five lessons for the children. Lesson #1 Stop fighting. Lesson #2: To share. Lesson #3: To work together. Lesson #4: To be brave. And lesson #5: To have faith. Our traveler to UUCV has taught us those same lessons with three simple words -- love one another.

Under Reverend Greg’s guidance we’ve learned to fight less and communicate more; we’ve shared our hopes and dreams; we’ve worked together to craft a covenant to guide us in our future relations; we’ve been brave enough to envision a loving, vibrant future for our beloved community; and finally we’ve had the faith to call a new settled minister, Reverend Kathryn Bert, to our congregation. As a new worship associate Reverend Greg loved me for who I was. For every Call To Worship I wrote he encouraged me to write it again reaching deeper to discover my own personal truth. I think most here would affirm we still want Reverend Greg, but we no longer need him. A transient showed us permanence -- the one thing we’ve always had -- that is the love we form in our hearts for one another.

Welcome to Reverend Greg’s last sermon at UUCV as he speaks about that which is transient and that which is permanent.

CHALICE LIGHTING
All that we have ever loved
And all that we have ever been
Stands with us on the brink
Of all that we aspire to create:
A deeper peace,
A larger love,
A more embracing hope,
A deeper joy in this life we share.
- Leslie Takahashi

STORY FOR ALL AGES - Rev. Greg (“Evolution” adapted from Langston Smith)

When you were a tadpole / and I was a fish
In the Paleozoic time,
And side by side / on the ebbing tide
Sprawled through the ooze and slime,
We met and mingled / again and anew
Through the depths of the Cambrian fen,
My heart was rife / with the glory of life,
For I loved you even then.

Mindless we lived / and mindless we loved
And mindless at last we died;
And deep in the rift / of that great cosmic drift
We struggled side by side.
The world turned on / in the lathe of time,
Evolution marched on in strain
Till Life caught breath / from the womb of death
And crept into light again.

We were amphibians / scaled and tailed,
having crawled from the swirling surf
We coiled at ease / 'neath the flowering trees
Or trailed through the mud and the turf.
Croaking and blind / with our three-clawed feet,
Speaking a language so dumb,
With nary a spark / in that mysterious dark
To hint at the life to come.

Yet happy we lived / and happy we loved,
And happy we died once more;
Our forms were rolled / in the clinging mold
On the future’s lapping shore.
Such beautiful years / such salty tears
When our hearts clung each to each;
When life was so filled / and our senses so thrilled
In the first faint dawn of speech.

Thus life by life / and love by love
We passed through cycles so strange,
And breath by breath / and death by death
We followed the course of change.
Till there came a time / in the law of life
When out of the nurturing sod
The shadows broke / and the soul awoke
In a strange, dim dream of God.

And that was more / than a million years hence
In a time that nobody knows;
Yet with you tonight / under this enchanted light
We sit at Delmonico’s.
Your eyes are wide / as that incoming tide,
The specials are far from set
Your years are few, your life is new,
Your soul untried, and yet –

Faint memories stay / of that ancient clay
where each fallen nation’s flags;
Were left like bones / amidst the stones
To mix with a shoreline’s crags;
Our love is bold / though our lives grow old,
and though death is a permanent stain
Should it come today, what prophet can say
Our love shall not live again?

So as we linger / at luncheon here
Over many a dainty dish,
Let us drink anew / to the time when you
Were a tadpole and I was a fish.
For to recall the past / in a way that shall last
In moments of great love and strife
There is a new way / to stop and to pray
Saying, it is all for the Glory of Life.

REFLECTION  Rev. Greg
In 1859, Unitarian, Charles Darwin, published his theory of evolution. He, basically, described
the sequential pattern shared by all species in the universe. That pattern is birth – conversation –
death – repeat.

The conversation that happens in-between birth and death is a conversation with life – with
what’s around us. Occasionally, that conversation will invite forth a specific change – a
fundamental variation on a genetic level – such that an adaptive advantage is gained allowing
us – and our progeny – to thrive more fully.

The pattern – birth, change, death, repeat – continues ad infinitum. It is unchanging.
Permanent.

Along that evolutionary continuum, we can freeze frame and identify a particular expression or
trait and follow it through generations and identify how it changes over time. Traits and
expressions change. They are transient.

You are, no doubt, familiar with a picture of that evolutionary continuum.

About 20 years prior to Darwin, another Unitarian, Theodore Parker, published a similar idea. It
was a sermon that talked about social (rather than genetic) evolution. “The Transient and the
Permanent of Christianity” was so revelational, it is still required reading for UU seminarians
today.

Parker said that what Jesus taught – that Love in all its forms (forgiveness, kindness, care for
those in need) – is timeless and eternal. But that Christianity – as it can often appear
(capricious, judgmental, self-righteous) – is a transient form and mutated expression of that
Love.

What’s important to explore is the question of how something that is supposed to be
evolutionary falls into patterns of stuckness… taking things that are transient and insisting on
them being permanent. And when we’re stuck, how do we get unstuck? When we’re free – resilient, creative, transformative – how do we remain free? And how do we extend our freedom to what’s stuck around us?

SERMON
A favorite poem of mine captures this notion of evolution – and what happens when we find ourselves stuck.

It is from the Sufi poet, Rumi. He writes:

“You have lost your camel, my friend. And everywhere people are giving you advice. You don’t know where your camel is, but you’re pretty sure these casual directions are wrong.”

12 months ago, I was approached about coming here to see if I could help explore ways beyond stuckness. A way to tap into this community’s great evolutionary potential. I arrived 10 months ago with a promise: to love you… by holding up a mirror which, I hoped, would reveal both your inherent goodness and energetic potential – which is permanent; and also some of the ways that potential sometimes gets channeled into unproductive habits.

Before this week, I’d never heard of Nanny McPhee. But it seems I’ve taken a page from her book. Like her, I came ‘pre-fired,’ promising to love you – not necessarily as you wanted, but in ways it appeared, to me, you needed. Then moving on as you found ways to better meet your needs.

I have been packing these past couple weeks as I do after each contract. “Yes,” is the answer to all your questions: “Isn’t it hard to move so often?” “Wouldn’t it be easier to stay in one place?” “Aren’t you a little crazy?” But adopting the spiritual practice of picking up and considering every element of your life – and whether it is helping you or holding you back – is also an amazing gift.

In my my sermon last month, I shared with you how I lived through a fire and how it took from me everything I owned. But it’s important to say it did leave one thing: the wisdom of ‘impermanence,’ which has helped me face some of my biggest fears and be more present – and more honest – with who I really am and what is really before me.

I would be lying if I told you I did not grieve or feel anxious at the thought of leaving you. You have welcomed me. Taught me. Loved me. Challenged me and given me purpose. And when I look at what is ahead, I feel the pull to what is comforting and familiar to what is unknown.

Priest and poet, John O’Donohue knows what it is like to be afraid of the next thing – afraid, even, of our own becoming. In his book, Anam Cara, he suggests that if you could talk to a baby still in the womb, and if you could tell the baby that it’s unity with its mother – with whom its own pulse of life has become interlaced and synchronized – was about to be separated; and that the way it has been surrounded and protected and carried and warmed and fed – ALL THAT – was about to end… and in a moment it would be pushed out and expelled through a
very narrow passage to arrive in an incredibly open and bright place, and that the cord that tethered it – and provided an existential connection – would be cut and it was going to be on its own forever after that... If you explained all this, I think the baby would conclude that it was about to die. Because for the baby in the womb, ‘being born’ sounds so much like death. But, he argued, unless we turn to embrace our own becoming with the sense awe or wonder required, we will never understand the exciting privilege of being part of this great evolutionary arc of life.

This past year you have heard many of my adventures as a young boy. Some happy, some sad. But in case it didn’t come through from those stories, let me say it more plainly here: I grew up scared. I grew up feeling overwhelmed and outmatched before almost every challenge I encountered. So, I often approached each moment of any consequence feeling wary. And skeptical. I honed my ego and my judgment thinking it would protect me.

It wasn’t until later in life that I’d adapted this strategy from a mother who had lived her whole life scared. A mother who’d also felt overwhelmed and outmatched by her lot in life. Who practiced and perfected a wariness, a skepticism and a judgmental stance – under the guise of a brash – very Unitarian – personality.

It was the fire that burned through my life that taught me one of my most valuable lessons: that if you can burn through the layers of stuff we use to try to protect ourselves with, there IS something underneath – something that truly grounds us and tethers us to all existence. The Buddhists know this pursuit as embracing emptiness. It’s a process of discovering that layers of stuff don’t offer reassurance or the solace and comfort we needed. Most of the time, they actually get in the way. Sometimes it’s important to trust the fire – rather than our avoidance of it – to sweep through and remove the underbrush that limits our vision, dampens our imagination and keeps us from knowing the energy that new growth provides.

I was nearly 50 when that fire swept through my life. That lesson of losing everything – not the handbook of interim ministry – is what told me I was ‘pre-fired.’

No fire ever burned through my mother’s life – for which I’m sure she was thankful. But neither did she ever receive the gift of having something sweep through and clean out her lifetime of assumptions and habits. And so she maintained a very practiced, very fearful, white-knuckled grip on what she thought she needed to feel connected. She lived her life a little like Granny Clampet in a rocking chair on her porch with a shot gun laid across her lap vigilantly protecting what was precious to her. She set up a firewall of the familiar and did not open easily to new ideas – especially if they asked her to let go. She did not let go of what she loved. But neither was she able to let go of her hurt and pain.

Her strategy rarely allowed her to tap into the umbilical cord of permanent connection she wanted. She settled for the transient connection of apron strings. Not as strong. So they were strained and often seemed like they would snap.

I remember how she would raise her voice at home when she really wanted to connect. Or, if we were in public – like a quiet restaurant – she would use the famous screaming whisper: ‘You are still my son – I brought you into this world and if you don’t straighten up, I will take you out.’
Later on, she would put exclamation points on the notes she left on the refrigerator. Then, later, ALL CAPS in her emails. “CALL ME!!!”

I still have many of those notes. They are saved in a file on my computer labeled ‘Apron Strings’. I keep them to remind me of her. But also to remind me of the many years we’d both spent trying to make umbilical cords from apron strings. Find permanence out of transience.

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Human beings are evolutionary creatures. But unlike genetic evolution that happens randomly, social evolution has to be chosen. We have to recognize and let go of what’s not working for us. Build bigger ideas out of the energy we channeled into small thinking. Forge common purpose from personal pettiness. Take old hurt and establish new hope. Whether we are talking about a person, a program or a planet, it is the work of transformation – shifting away from fear, beyond violence, out of ego to understanding and enlightenment.

One of the things that has saved me from the despair of living in an apron string world – is a particular evolutionary theory. It’s been used in a variety of attempts to develop a universal field theory. It comes from ideas inherent in string theory and chaos theory. But, at its heart, are mathematical equations which, if put into words, would say this: You can tell whether a system is successfully evolving by measuring complexity. Complete entropy reveals no complexity. Evolution is the process of building greater and greater organizational, cooperative and functional complexity. Successful evolution requires two things from every aspect of the system: differentiation and integration. Both are needed. For, if a system achieves differentiation but not integration, the system becomes rigid. If it achieves integration but not differentiation, the system becomes chaotic. Either way, the system is stuck.

Stuckness is measured by rigidity and chaos. Complexity is measured by communication, creativity, adaptivity, resilience.

If all this evolutionary theory is lost on you, here it is in everyday language: The world needs to take the energy from six billion apron strings and forge one universal umbilical cord. We need to stop the constant sending of violent messages in ALL CAPS back and forth or we will blow ourselves up. Evolution and annihilation are in a race against time. And you are part of discovering and revealing a solution. It’s that simple. And that complex.

It turns out Nanny McPhee was right. We need to stop fighting, share what we have, work together, be brave, have faith. That’s how we come together to raise the simplicity of our solutions to a place where they extend beyond the complexity of our problems.

Unitarian and Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. said this about such a task:

“I do not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.”

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We are coming to the end of our time together. But sometimes, it is right at the end of our time that things become clearest.
Some of you know that I lost both of my parents in the last couple years. Each of them – in the last few months of their lives arrived upon a particular clarity. They began to realize, like me, that they were ‘pre-fired’. And so there was no longer interest in being careful or protecting their ego or self-interests. They both found ways to have more fearless conversations, let go of transient apron string assurances and connect into umbilical cord connections – the kind strong enough and true enough to extend beyond time, beyond distance. Even beyond death. In the end, they both essentially said the same things right before they left. They said:

- We love you
- We’re sorry for times where we let fear, or ego or a wish to control things get in the way of trusting our connection to you or your connection with the world.
- Thank you for your unique character, your richness, your growing complexity… The chance to be part of your evolutionary arc has shown us joy and given us hope.
- No matter where you go or what you do, in our heart, you will always be beloved.

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It is my last sermon of my second-to-the last Sunday with you. Next week, in the service, I will take my backpack and hand back the keys, and we will be released from the promises we’ve made to each other. BUT… there is a difference between ‘pre-fired’ and ‘actually’ fired which means, today, I still have freedom of the pulpit… so I’m going to use it to say this:

UUCV, in some ways, has found its camel. Become unstuck. But in many ways still, all those tendencies are still present. I would like to share my thoughts on how to continue the work of re-channeling stuck energy into evolutionary energy.

- There is a strong tendency in most human beings – and in this community – toward binary thinking – right / wrong; good / bad; my way / the highway. Stuckness on a single agenda reveals a failure of imagination. It’s time to begin to identify and name rigidity – and rigid agendas – if creativity and cooperation are to prevail.
- There is a strong penchant in Western culture toward adopting victim identity. After nearly thirty years of using this strategy, I learned that claiming to be a victim may offer the illusion of power – of righteousness over those who’ve done me wrong – it creates a rift in the interdependent web. It’s apron string thinking. It set up the people around me – who were conditioned to respond compassionately – but left everyone stuck in a confusing triangulation of blame. I’ve had to work hard to summon the wisdom and courage to let go of my own tendencies to blame and to lovingly point out blame around me as it makes deeper love and commitment impossible.
- Related, is a reflex in human beings that tends to assert that what is most problematic and painful in the world exists in other people. Not in ourselves. And yet, we have 100% power to change ourselves and 0% power to change other people. It’s a recipe for stuckness that can only be solved through humility. The purpose of your covenant should be to encourage humility, not protect you from it.
- There is a tendency – especially among fairly privileged populations – to look out at the racism, classism, discrimination on the basis of gender or sexuality, religious beliefs, etc. – and show our concern by discussing the issues among ourselves and spending (literally) ‘ungodly’ amounts of time in analysis paralysis. Our world would be less stuck and more evolutionary if we showed our concern by simply showing up – and being of service – with humility instead of answers.
- Remember that individual liberty is not overall democracy. Real democracy carries a price – paying attention. This is YOUR church. Love it by knowing it and accepting it – not just having opinions about it.
- I know it is fashionable to distrust authority. It’s an indelible part of our heretical history as Unitarians and it is quickly becoming the unstated rallying cry as you stand up to an inept and corrupt administration in government. But the world needs to see alternatives to distrust. It needs to see examples of the beloved community where trust and cooperation – rather than cynicism and defiance – are the ideals.
- Leadership is essential to success. But it is very hard – especially in places where cat herding is an accepted norm. Be good to your leaders. Show up for them. Support them. Trust them. And you will have more of them.
- Please forgive me for my mistakes and shortcomings as a leader. I know I have a great talent for preaching that sometimes exceeds your great talent for listening. And my report writing is legendary for sometimes continuing on in words long after I’ve run out of ideas.
- I’ve made some decisions here that did not garner a 100% approval rating. Imagine that. Please know that the decisions which get 100% approval are usually made before they get to the minister’s desk.
- Don’t blame Rev. Kathryn for what I did poorly and don’t hold her up to any standards I did well. Enlarge your heart to accept her where she is and she will enlarge her heart to accept you where you are.
- If you feel yourself carrying old hurts because of me – or because of other ministers before me – do your work to let it go. Remember, the hurt and pain within you that you do not transform, you will transmit.
- Do not make your new minister prove their worth by accepting your grudges. That simply sets them up to fail and sets you up to continue in stuckness. Let go of the rigidity that keeps you from your own evolution. Make the cultivation of humility, resilience and flexibility part of your spiritual practice.

Okay… that’s all I have to say about stuckness. I entrust you to the bright future before you. But so that I can let go and move on, let me say this:
- I love you
- I’m sorry for times where I let fear, or ego or a wish to control things get in the way of trusting my connection to you or your connection with the world.
- Thank you for your unique character, your richness, your growing complexity… The chance to be part of your evolutionary arc has shown me joy and given me hope.
- No matter where you go or what you do, in my heart, you will always be beloved.

Love Rev. Kathryn. Love one another. Find your camel and enjoy the journey.

To the Glory of Life.

**GOING DEEPER**

**SLIDE 1**
- How in your life – in this church – have you identified ways to get unstuck and become more creative, adaptive and evolutionary in your thinking and actions?
- Are you able to see ways to let go of protections – including the desire to be blameless – in order to find that deeper connection you’re looking for?
- How can you imagine humility as a spiritual pathway toward greater Love?
SLIDE 2

- Remember Nanny McPhee’s five lessons
  o Stop fighting
  o Share what you have
  o Work together
  o Be brave
  o Have faith.
- Or the biggest lesson of all: Love one another.

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