Our heart is in a holy place when we feel the power of each other’s faith. I read lots of Emerson as a high school youth, and found power in his faith. “Pray without Ceasing” was the title of the first sermon Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote. I like the title, even if I’m not really going to talk about his sermon this morning. I don’t know that he even delivered this first sermon, but he wrote it. Every secret wish and every desire, said Emerson, is a prayer. (p. 69, Richardson)

I have come to understand prayer as the cultivating of awareness and intention. It’s all a matter of what you’re listening for, says our friend in the children’s story this morning. Prayer helps us name what it is we wish to listen for, where we are intending to put our attention. I think of prayer as focusing our thoughts. Meditation as emptying our thoughts, but prayer as intentional thinking (put into words) to focus them. It is not the form of the prayer – the words or the posture, but the awareness brought to the action. It brings with it a thankfulness and often, profound sorrow. Praying before a meal, for example, is a moment of intention. We notice the food we are about to eat in a way that so often we fail to do in our culture and in our homes. We thank the universe, or God, or the plant/animal life itself we have sacrificed. We recognize that others are not as fortunate as we – that some in the world do not have food on their tables, and most do not have food in the quantity and quality most of us in this room enjoy. The act of awareness which comes with praying connects us with ourselves, with others, with the earth, and the universe. Ultimately, it can lead us to consider what food we put into our bodies and why, and maybe, even change our habits. Something I am working on actively.

Prayer is something I have struggled with most of my life. It was not talked about openly in the Unitarian Universalist fellowships and churches I attended growing up. When I read Emerson in high school, I was fascinated by his language of prayer. We did not pray openly in my family – with the exception of a poem my dad revised into a prayer that we say to this day when the family gathers –

“There is a destiny that makes us all brothers. None goes his way alone. All that we send into the lives of others, comes back into our own.”

To this day, you come to a family gathering with my dad’s relatives, and you will be asked to hold hands and recite those words, which over the years has become “Destiny that makes us all siblings. None goes their way alone…”

They are comforting words, in my family, in part because, awkward or not, we have them in common. Kind of like the Namaste at the end of your service. Honestly, it felt awkward at first to me – I am used to saying namaste at the end of a yoga class, not a worship service, but now I’m used to it and I like it. Not exactly intuitive, but ours, tradition, and as such, meaningful. And this poem my dad revised was something everyone in the family could say – the Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Jews, and the Unitarian Universalists.

There is another kind of prayer, too, I think, which is also about awareness, but of a different sort – when I am anxious, worried, scared, prayer can serve to calm me – there are times when I am flooded by awareness of how I’m feeling, and all of it hurts. Prayer serves to calm me and remind me that this feeling, too, shall pass, or the events which precipitated my intense feelings will pass, that we have survived before, I have survived before and will survive again.
I’ve been doing a lot of praying since last year’s election. And I don’t mean to flip about it. Many of us were scared at the rise of bigotry, sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia and hatred that ushered in the man who currently holds the office of President of the US. The Women’s March, that Gretchen referenced was a worldwide prayer, in my opinion. And in some ways, I believe that prayer has been answered with the metoo movement. I mean, really, who would have expected the rash of firings and resignations that have resulted from the many brave women (and men – I’m noting a recent front page article in the NYT) who have come forward to say “enough.” This is different – this is out in the open as it has not been before – and, it will not go away this time.

If you wish to help it not go away, there is a gathering this afternoon at 5pm in Pioneer Square in Portland to call for an end to racist and misogynistic speech.

Clergy and People of Faith will gather this afternoon, on Inauguration weekend to call for justice and inclusion. In the words of Maya Angelou, "You may shoot me with your words, You may cut me with your eyes, You may kill me with your hatefulness, But still, like air, I'll rise." I’m sharing with you the words from the press release I got in my inbox:

With the blatant racism emerging from Washington D.C. and the extraordinary number of women (and men) coming forward stating #MeToo, we rise to say enough. We believe in a country that welcomes the stranger. We believe in a country that honors women to be agents of their own bodies. We rise to say that we won’t tolerate racism from our public officials, especially the president. We rise to say that the laws of our nation guarantee equal treatment for everyone.

Speakers at this event are all women from marginalized communities. Participants will be women and men from a variety of religious traditions who will state emphatically, that we won't succumb to fear and intimidation. "This is a moment where we must declare that we cannot tolerate any longer, political leaders and public officials who are openly racist, who use their power to violate others, and who are ripping families apart instead of fixing a broken system. We are not dissuaded by their attitude, instead we claim our voices to say enough", said Rev. Tara Wilkins, pastor at Bridgeport United Church of Christ and one of the event organizers. End quote.

Power structures are changing. The office of the president may be the last to fall, but fall he will. Of course, our prayer is that he not take us all down with him. But if we survive as a planet, our structures of power cannot – at least as they have been configured thus far.

Our national association of congregations, the Unitarian Universalist Association, as Gretchen suggests, is not immune. We have been grappling both with institutionalized racism in our movement, and a history of sexual misconduct. All issues of justice we have long pontificated about, while all the while not holding our own selves accountable. Those justice issues – that racism – we thought was out there – you know in those southern states, the sexual abuse in the Catholic church - it has been a hard period as we have finally turned inward and focus the call for justice on our own institutions, our own leaders and our own failures. I’m proud of our movement, as I think we have begun a transformation from which we cannot turn back.

The 2016 Berry Street Essay – a lecture series given by UU ministers to UU ministers was by Rev. Gail Seavey who told secrets and named names. She outed many of my clergy colleagues – many of them from a previous generation, but not all - for their sexual misconduct and the havoc it caused in the lives of their victims and families, as Gretchen testified this morning. But she was not the first. 2011 Deborah Pope-Lance had given a similar talk, also calling on the clergy for better boundaries and reparations. I know they weren’t the first to say
“me too” in our movement, but timing can be everything, and this time, they were heard in such a way that I don’t believe we can turn back.

I know that I told you in early December about my struggle with the morning news. The week that both Matt Lauer was fired and Al Franken was accused, I began to recognize in myself the familiar dread and soul weariness that is a repercussion of sexual abuse I survived nearly 30 years ago.

I have had to quit listening to the radio news first thing in the morning. It is important to be well-informed. However, it is not necessary to listen to the news first thing in the morning in order to be well-informed. I was feeling assaulted by the news because I had forgotten that I have a lot of control about when and what I read and listen to. So, I turn on the radio only when I am ready and intend to pay attention.

A bombardment of information about events over which our control seems so limited, is only overwhelming.

Every week innocents die, abuse occurs, poverty consumes lives, children are undernourished, our planet is dying. And, nature is full of miracles, human creativity is abundant, and our power is limitless, if we can gain the courage and skill to unleash it. We have more control than we think we do.

I know it feels like we’re losing. That all is lost, that there is no hope for humanity when people can abuse people in the way we hear in the news, but it is simply not true. Sometimes, it is easier to think that we have no control. It lets us off the hook. There’s nothing to do, so we quit trying.

When actually, the truth is harder, even than that, to bear. Everything we do matters. Everything is a prayer. People do not abuse people in the way that has been uncovered in the news, except by a brokenness that we rarely dare to admit. Therein lies the human tragedy. They, our politicians, our clergy, our leaders, are not monsters or fiends or even, unfortunately, that aberrant.

I could go on and on about world events, but let me return to prayer. Why prayer? Why pray without ceasing? Every secret wish and every desire, said Emerson, is a prayer. As a religious descendent of Emerson, I take that seriously, and if prayer helps me come into deep awareness of the world, and soothes my own response such that I can act responsibly and with integrity, then that is enough. Prayer is a way of focusing our thoughts, and by focusing our thoughts, we take action with intention, not by default or habit — we can change.

I may not be able to do too much about the hurt abusers and hurt women and the hurting system which allows abuse to occur, but I have quite a lot of control over my own ability to be cruel. I can pay attention to the hurt around me and respond carefully, thoughtfully, and with compassion. I can listen to or read the news only when I am ready to listen or read, and NOT do it when I need to pay attention to other important matters. I can soothe my own emotional response, and grapple with it, and take care of it, and tame it, in a way, so that I don’t misplace my anger and hurt others needlessly, or act precipitously.

An examined life is no picnic, Robert Fulgum said, echoing Henry David Thoreau, both good Unitarians. And they are right. It is easy to fall into the belief that there is a conspiracy against us — a conspiracy to keep us from that awareness — distracting us with detail and information, media, and meetings and activities and people. Prayer can be a way to say STOP. Slow down. Think. Feel. Understand. Be. Breathe. Then, and only then, act. Vote. Write a letter. Make conscious choices about your consumption. Make amends. Say you’re sorry and mean it. Say, “I’d like to try that again.” “I didn’t really understand what you just said.”
It seems so obvious reading the news, that people who harass other people should know how wrong their actions are. But the truth is, many of us have been in denial about the culture of abuse that surrounds us. We have quit noticing the little harrasments because it’s too painful, and thus allow abuse to continue. Don’t get me wrong, I understand the self-protective need to deny in order to survive, but I think we’re going to have to be braver than that now. We are creating those brave spaces and will need to continue to be brave.

This week I’ve been paying particular attention to the Larry Nassar story – given he was at Michigan State, near the church I served just before you. So I’ve been tracking this case for a while. He is the gymnastics doctor who is accused of sexually abusing more than 140 girls and women. It is hard to learn about, and it is important to understand how this could go on for more than 20 years. As ESPN journalist Howard Bryant points out, we continue to allow the bad guy to go to jail and leave the structure that allowed abuse intact. “Eventually they’re going to have to find impropriety with someone other than Larry Nassar because he couldn’t have done this all by himself.” End quote.

So the truth is, these people have done these bad things, and the system, of which we are a part, has allowed it to happen. Now it is left to us to understand how it can come to that, so that we can learn to make better choices in the lives we do control – our own.

“It’s all a matter of what you are listening for” – prayer helps cultivate awareness and intention.

Prayer is naming what it is we wish to listen for, where we intend to put our attention. It is not the form of prayer that matters, but the awareness it brings to the action. If we fail to notice the abuse around us, we fail to see the courage of the survivors who bravely say “enough.”

So one of my favorite prayers is the Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr – or at least the first part of the serenity prayer that has been used and recited by recovery groups around the world. It is a prayer recited by some of us whose denial of misery and pain has already been broken down – we have come to a place where we know we need help. Fortunately, or unfortunately, that is not true for others of us, whose denial has protected us from the pain of the world and whose opportunities have allowed us the illusion of safety and fairness.

So, my first prayer this morning, is for all of us (begin music underneath the ending)

You and me and the people who make up our government, citizens of the entire world, the victims and the abusers, and the survivors, and our children. I pray for us to notice, to be thankful for what good there is, and to recognize that the world is not now as we can yet make it. I pray for awareness and wholeness and the integrity to move forward.

My second comes from those words by Reinhold Niebuhr, and if you know it and wish, feel free to join me –

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.

I intend to pray without ceasing. Amen.
**Benediction**

May we go out this week, able to listen fully and name our intentions clearly. Called by the Spirit of Love and Hope, we are all called to listen to the world and hear the spirit, and calm our fears. May we answer that call, focus our thoughts, and intend our actions until we build with one another the beloved community of our dreams.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.