

## Sermon by Emily Richards on “Presence”

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

January 5, 2025

Hello Beloveds. It is good to be here with you. If you are new, welcome. I hope that this is a place where you find belonging. If you are returning after some time away, it is good to have you back among us. Whether this is your first visit, or your hundredth, this community is enriched by your presence, and we are glad that you are here.

We are just five days into a new year. A year that, like every year, will tell stories of grief and joy, of hardship and kinship. Already there is war, there is suffering and oppression, there is fear for the future. And yet, with each new day there is also an opportunity to tell stories of triumph over adversity, of heroics, and small acts of kindness, of a love that transcends borders and boundaries and divisions.

After the election I uninstalled the Facebook app from my phone. I stopped listening to the news. I just needed a break. I started listening to musicals in my car instead. *Wicked*, *Hamilton*, *Ride the Cyclone*, *Come From Away*. These stories felt easier than the one I was living.

It's been a long time since my years of obsessively listening to *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Mis*, having to switch the CD over when I got to act two. It's been a long time since I allowed myself to just listen to music because I love it. I think that shift happened for me at college, when all I was really listening to was music for school. Art songs and opera arias, choral pieces, classical music for theory or history classes. Instead of listening to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or David Bowie, I was listening to *La Boheme* or Bach.

And then I graduated and had children and music became songs for babies and toddlers, or maybe whatever pieces the children's chorus was working on that semester. I started listening to NPR in the car at some point, when I wasn't playing children's music. Which felt like something my dad did and I wondered, is this what aging is? Listening to the news because at some point

you stop recognizing the songs on the radio unless they're playing oldies or classic rock, which, by the way I guess now 90s music is considered classic rock.

Now that I've started listening to musicals again, snippets of lines from the ones that I've been listening to flit through my mind as I go about my day. This past week I was listening to Hamilton.

"Look around, look around, how lucky we are to be alive right now" and "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" And I wonder, what is my story? And what do I want it to be? Mary Oliver famously wrote, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" And so often we take that line out of the context of the poem it comes from, and we read it as if she is asking us what great accomplishments will we achieve? What important tasks? What awards will we win? What will we be remembered for? And yet, before that line, that oft quoted line that you find on t-shirts and posters, she wrote

"I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?"

It's a reminder that these moments too are holy. These moments of peace and rest remind us of how lucky we are to be alive. In Hamilton it's Angelica Schuyler who sings, "Look around, look around, how lucky we are to be alive right now." She sings this line in the midst of the American Revolution. In the midst of war. And a part of me doesn't feel lucky to be moving into this particular year, with so much unknown and so much fear for what lies ahead. Especially for those who are queer and trans, those who are disabled, those who are strangers, who are immigrants in this land where we declare boldly to the world to

“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

And yet when they arrive no lamp or golden door awaits them. Too often they are thrown into detention centers that are worse than prisons, worse than the conditions from which they fled. Laws are being passed to deny the bodily autonomy of women, girls and those who are transgender and non-binary. And none of us really know what else is to come. Still, UUA President Rev. Sofia Betancort reminds us that “These are heartbreaking and uncertain times, and this moment needs us – people of faith who put love at the center, work boldly to widen the circle so that all might feel that expansive love that held us for so many generations, and do it all with a commitment to communal care” What will our story be, the story of this community, this faith? How will we meet this moment, that so desperately needs us.

So maybe, we are lucky to be alive right now, in this time, where we can, at least, tell a different story to anyone and everyone who will listen.

Ursula K. Le Guin wrote that “Storytelling [and telling multiple kinds of stories] is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary... We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we do not imagine freedom. We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable.”

We can imagine what is attainable. We do. And we can shift the narrative, little by little, bending the arc towards justice and freedom, and the communal good, all centered on love. And I wonder again again, what will my story be? What will your story be?

At the end of *Wicked*, which has been on repeat in my house for the last month or so - (and for those of you who watched the movie but aren't familiar

with the Broadway musical, just know you haven't gotten there yet) the end of the second act has arguably the most famous song with the words, "Because I knew you, I have been changed for good." How has this community changed you? How do we change one another for good? And there is a play on words there because of course the phrase for good means to change something permanently. But throughout the show there is also this emphasis on that word good, and what it really means and how our perception of good and evil, or wickedness, doesn't always match the truth. And here, in this song, it means not just to be changed forever but to be changed for good. To be made better by the presence of another person in your life. To be changed by goodness.

I have often reflected that you all are a part of that which makes me better. That if I am going to be known by the company that I keep, there is no one else that I would rather be known by. Being a part of this community has changed me, for good. How has it changed you? And how are you opening yourself up to the changes that this community is offering to you?

We are a transformational people. And this moment, these times that we are living in, are going to require more from us. They are going to ask us to offer an even more radically welcoming love. To work harder and more intentionally to challenge the systems of power and oppression. This moment needs us. And we need each other in order to meet it. Stories have always held power. It is stories that stick with us. Stories that help us to better understand the world. That's why it's so important to read to our children. Why is it so important to listen to one another's stories, truly and deeply. Why religions around the world are filled with stories that illustrate their particular faith or belief system. Stories are how we make sense of this beautiful and broken world that we are all a part of.

In Tolkien's Lord of the Rings Frodo says to Gandalf, "I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened."

And Gandalf replies, "So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us." No one wants to live in a time of war and division. And yet, throughout the entirety of recorded

human history there has never been a moment in which the human race wasn't the cause of some sort of suffering. And there has also never been a moment in which brave and compassionate people haven't decided to do something good with the time that is given to them. So, the question is, what stories will we choose to make real? Will we change the world, for good?

Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri wrote, "Change the stories individuals and nations tell themselves and live by, and you change the individuals and nations." What stories have we been told about who we are, as individuals, as a people, as a nation? And what stories do we want to tell, instead? Maybe this won't be a happy new year. But this year could tell the story of more happy days, than sad days, more joy than misery, more laughter than tears.

Maybe the snippets of songs that we hear in our hearts will remind us of how lucky we are to be alive, right now. And that, because of one another we will not only be changed, but can also create change, for good. And the spirit of love will sing to us notes we can never unhear, reminding us every day, every moment, that we are beloved. And we, in turn, can sing those songs out into the world. And that can be our story. One of gratitude, and goodness, and love. Our house can be a house of peace.

I haven't put the Facebook app back on my phone, and I haven't started listening to the news again. That's not the story that I want to tell. At least, right now. I want a story where I don't wonder what else I should have done with this one wild, and precious life.