

*Let the Essence***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on January 20, 2022**

We return to our theme of stillness this morning and I want us to focus on the hymn we just shared. Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let the stillness carry me. I have always liked this song – # 352 in the UU hymnal, – words by Carl G. Seaburg – a tribute to the potential of silence. It almost becomes a prayer/ love this prayer. Set to a Transylvanian folk tune – is absolutely in my top ten list. I love the three-part invitation in the lyrics; especially that first one, to find, hold, and then let the stillness carry me. It's a prescription for prayer and meditation. Find it, hold it, and let it do its work in us.

Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let the stillness carry me.

Seek the essence, hold the essence, let the essence carry me.

Let me flower, help me flower, watch me flower, carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit, with the spirit giving power,

I will find true harmony.

And if you're not a fan yet, consider singing this to yourself before you enter a time of prayer or meditation in your personal spiritual practice. I suspect you'll notice – as I have – its helpful welcome and invitation to the Mystery. Silence is a simple and always available avenue into a deeper contemplation of the self, the universe, the sacred. Or it can just be a breathing space, a moment to simply be in a busy world. Make room for silence in your life, find short spaces where you can be quiet – take a minute of silence before turning on the car, take a minute at your desk before beginning work, stop yourself before turning on a podcast or the tv, and simply sit for a moment. Try to stay silent for at least a minute. It's not as easy as we might imagine. It's a practice. This silence includes not checking your phone or reading a book. Just breathe and be and listen. What do you hear? What do you feel? See if the silence within is mirrored by silence outside of you. If you are disturbed by outside noise, you may have to be more intentional in seeking quiet places. Or you might appreciate the life going on around you, either way, keep to your silence and simply listen.

William Penn wrote, "True silence is the rest of the mind; it is to the spirit what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment." It's funny, when I first read the William Penn quote, I read 'the rest of the mind' not as respite or relaxation of the mind, but as what's left over—the rest of the mind that's not occupied in day to day worries. I don't think that's what he meant, but the dual meaning still resonates for me. If you're like most people, you probably have days when it feels like your life is out of control. You may be overscheduled, trying to squeeze grocery runs and healthcare appointments between work obligations and other activities. You may feel overwhelmed by the number of choices you're forced to make every day regarding different products and services, from cereals and soaps to credit cards and health-insurance policies. You may be drowning in communications – emails, voicemail messages, junk mail. I'm convinced

it's just a matter of time before there's a TV reality show that pits multitaskers against each other to see just how many balls they can keep in the air.

In the midst of such busyness, many of us secretly long for a simpler life – one that reflects a slower pace, where we are able to relax, breathe and enjoy some peace of mind. We may fantasize about getting away from it all or leaving our responsibilities behind. But rather than retreating to a cabin in the woods or moving to a mountainside monastery, the real solution is to learn how to maintain a sense of inner peace while still living and participating in our all-too-crazy world. After all, the quality of your outer life is, in many ways, a reflection of the quality of your inner life – not the status of your career, checkbook or relationship. If you want your outer world to be peaceful, calm and filled with joy, you don't need to find more time or take a vacation from life. You need to cultivate an inner state of serenity. The idea of quieting your mind in this way may feel like an impossible feat, especially with all the stimulation that exists in the world today. But you can do it, if you're patient and willing to take it one small step at a time.

Going into the silence is like taking a bath in pure, white light – it clears you, calms you and quiets you; and it helps you manage the stress of normal everyday life. It's in the silence that we have our greatest opportunity to access the power of grace. The idea of spending time in silence and stillness runs contrary to the messages we receive from the world around us. Instead, we're rewarded for our ability to multitask, and to be productive, fast and efficient. This is exactly why so many people feel spiritually restless. The more you make stillness a priority, the sooner you'll be released from the fear and anxiety that come from living in an uncertain, ever-changing world. Over time you'll come to realize that the peace and joy you seek can only be found within – in that very special place in your heart that speaks the voice of your soul. I had a friend who was overwhelmed with the planning and organizing of retreats with various participants – planning food, getting money to the right places, making sure the place was warm, clean, etc. His spiritual teacher said “Don't worry. Nothing depends on you.” I think this is a great and powerful teaching for our time, especially as we engage the theme of stillness. Often in our culture, including in our congregation we can fall into the trap of overemphasizing the power of our individuality. It is true that the world depends on us, on our personal choices, and the way we treat ourselves and each other. Our actions do have a genuine impact on everything and everyone around us. This is true. The paradox is at the same time, “nothing depends on you.”

What I think this teaching means is that we can accept the numerous forces at work in any given moment, some of them known, most of them not. We can accept that we are ultimately part of an interplay of meetings that though we can participate in fully, do not have control over. With this perspective then, we can loosen up a bit, and appreciate our circumstances and our life more fully. We can literally allow and even welcome life's surprises and mysteries rather than be continually threatened and anxious about them.

Stillness, I think, allows us to live into both perspectives simultaneously: We are responsible toward the world (including ourselves), and nothing depends on us. Much of the stress during this time is that for most of us there are circumstances we don't like. We'd prefer understandably to not be in the midst of a pandemic, and we'd prefer understandably to return to the way of life that buoyed us and offered joy. Can we find joy and offer encouragement within the circumstances we find ourselves in? Absolutely.

Stillness gives us a reset: an opportunity to see and experience our life differently. We may not like the circumstances (and this is valid), but we can still cultivate joy and offer encouragement through others without feeling that everything depends on or needs to be fixed by us. The truth is that the circumstances we're in can't be fixed by a single individual. There are numerous decisions and choices that have led us to where we are, and it will take numerous decisions and choices to offer us a different lived experience. We can play our part in the path of health and well being for all, and yet it is not completely up to us. How do we live into these seemingly paradoxical truths with integrity, and yes, joy? That is our question. I think the answer will come from us as a community, seeking ways we can respond to each other with tenderness, and even cheer that we are alive together during this time. Let us explore how conscious stillness can be an act of kindness for ourselves, rather than an interruption from our daily lives. Let us explore how to bring stillness into our lives with our family, friends, and with ourselves as we care for our lives.

Stillness, taking a pause to reorient our usual ways of thinking and living our lives, is of utmost importance. I think it is at the heart of real transformation: living our lives as they are with appreciation, joy, and wise purpose. Exploring stillness can teach us as a community, as we reorient ourselves toward ways we can care for ourselves and each other. Another way of phrasing “nothing depends on you,” is “everything and everyone is supporting you.” Let us explore this, and test this out, through our practice of stillness. Attaining a state of inner stillness does not come easy for most of us. We're thinkers and planners, by and large, and we like to get things done. So, taking the time to still our hearts and minds can seem like a complete waste of time. And yet, how often do we ask ourselves questions, such as:

“Why am I always so anxious all the time?”

“Why is it such a struggle to stay asleep at night?”

“Why am I having such a hard time concentrating?”

There can, of course, be underlying medical conditions that can contribute to these states of being. For many of us, however, we suffer these conditions because we're stuck in our heads and have lost our emotional and spiritual balance. Stillness can restore our equilibrium. Like the great Salish Sea that hugs the land here, we will all experience unpredictable storms, turbulence and currents. But what I'd like to suggest is that underneath it all – way down deep – there is a quiet calmness that offers peace and protection to all who seek shelter there.

It is my hope that we go there together. Let us close our eyes, embrace the silence, and listen for that which is beyond words. Emerson called this place “The Wise Silence.” Others call it your True Self or the Music of God. Whatever name you choose to call it, may you greet it and receive its gifts. The hymn “Find a Stillness (#352 in Singing the Living Tradition) promises that if we seek and let the stillness carry us, we will find true harmony. We are invited to seek out stillness so that we can gather energy, gain new clarity, and be called back to our humanity.

May it be so.

Opening:

We gather together this morning as best we can to restore in one another's company a sense that we are anchored in hope during a season of cold and more solitude than we may be used to or comfortable with. Together, we remember and proclaim that are more when we are gathered: wiser, more resilient and more able.

Benediction: words adapted from those by Scott Tayler

When the winds of your daring days begin to swirl,

May you find your breath.

May you remember that still point inside

That is always waiting to welcome you back home.

And from that place of sacred peace,

May you be an anchor of calm

For those who need it as much as you.

Go in peace

Go in love

Blessed be.