



Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Sunday, March 2, 2025

“Trust, Risk and the Unknown” with Rev. Mary Gear

Chalice Lighting by Rev. Julianne Lepp

We light this chalice with hope, a sturdy flame we nurture in these difficult times.

We light this chalice with the heart of compassion for a nation divided by politics and strife.

We light this chalice knowing that it will take all of us to repair this world we live in.

May we find rest, compassion and the hope that we need to nurture ourselves and each other.

May this sturdy light remind us of the people we can be, and the difference we can make in the world together.

Opening Words:

“The Longing for Something More” by Rev. Gretchen Haley

Every little thing that
breaks your heart
Is welcome here
We'll make a space for it
Give it its due time
and praise
for the wanting it represents
the longing for something more,
some healing hope that remains
not
yet

We promise no magic
no making it all better
But offer only this circle of trust
This human community
that remembers
Though imperfectly
that sings and prays
though sometimes
awkwardly
This gathering that loves,
though not yet enough
We're still practicing
After all,
still learning,
still in need of help
and partners
Still becoming
able
to receive
all this beauty and
all these gifts
we each bring
Come, let us worship together.

Story: "Small Fry" by Ruthilde Kronberg & Patricia C. McKissack

Small Fry lived in a pond at the foot of a great mountain. The dark waters made it impossible for his school of fish to see anything except the watery world in which they lived. All day Small Fry and the other fish swam in circles, round and round, each fish moving at the same time, each in the same direction.

Frog lived in the pond too. Although he was not a fish, he liked talking to any fish who would listen. Small Fry and Frog became friends.

They spent many hours together chatting about first one thing, then another. Frog did most of the talking. Small Fry listened. Frog told strange stories about wonderful creatures that flew in the air and large creatures that walked on land.

Like all the other pond fish, Small Fry believed there was nothing beyond the pond. In fact, he didn't believe in land, sky, trees, or flowers. He thought that when Frog disappeared, he was just hiding in another part of the pond.

"You don't believe a word I've been telling you," said Frog.

Small Fry blushed. "Well, not exactly. The wise fish tell us there is nothing beyond the pond."

"Nonsense," said the Frog. "And I'll prove it to you, if you're brave enough to try."

Small Fry thought for a moment. He knew the wise ones would not approve. He had been warned never to listen to any of Frog's stories. But what if there were something beyond the pond? Small Fry wanted to know. "I am brave enough to try," said the little fish.

"Good," answered Frog. "Come to the water's surface in the morning, and I will have the Great Bird of the Mountain take you for a sightseeing tour of the World Beyond the Pond." Frog croaked and then disappeared.

Small Fry could hardly sleep. Who was the Great Bird of the Mountain? Would he be a terrible monster? When the dark waters lightened, Small Fry slowly swam to the surface. He was so afraid. Suddenly he felt himself being lifted out of the water by a powerful force.

"You must be the Great Bird of the Mountain," said Small Fry.

"Yes," said the large bird. "Don't be afraid. Frog asked me to take you on a sightseeing tour of the World Beyond the Pond. We haven't much time, so let's get started."

Small Fry nested in the bird's great talons. As the bird's wings flapped back and forward, they moved higher and higher.

Small Fry could see the pond far below. It was very small. He saw Frog sitting on a lily pad in the pond. Small Fry saw trees and flowers for the first time. They were just as Frog had described them. As the Great Bird flew higher, Small Fry saw bears, bees, rabbits, mice, and squirrels. There was a world beyond the pond!

Then, too soon, it was time to go back to the pond. "Fish can't stay out of water too long," said the Great Bird. Slowly he glided toward the pond and gently released Small Fry into the water.

The little fish was so excited about his adventure he could hardly wait to tell the others in his school.

"I wouldn't do that," Frog warned.

But it was too late. Nothing could stop Small Fry. “There is a world beyond the pond,” he shouted joyfully. “There are creatures who walk on land, and creatures who fly in the air.”

All the fish laughed. “You are a silly fish telling a silly story,” said one of the fish.

“But I saw these things with my own eyes,” Small Fry argued.

“Who told you about a world beyond the pond? There is no such place,” said the oldest of the fish.

“But it is so! I saw them,” said Small Fry. “I was taken for a sightseeing tour of the World Beyond the Pond by the Great Bird of the Mountain,” he answered.

“Stop,” cried the leader of the fish school. “Enough of this!” The fish moved away from Small Fry. “You had a bad dream, or you are mad,” said the Leader Fish. “You have been listening to Frog’s stories too much. I forbid you to talk to Frog ever again. I demand that you never discuss any of this madness with the other fish. Otherwise I will be forced to ask you to leave us. Do you agree?”

“But...,” said Small Fry. “Yes,” he said at last. “I agree.”

But whenever he could, Small Fry swam to the water’s surface. He swam in circles, making them wider and wider, building speed. Then he leaped from the water as high as he could.

High in the air, he could see flowers and trees, bees and bears, rabbits, and squirrels.

He saw his friend Frog resting on his lily pad and the Great Bird of the Mountain who often came to the pond to drink. For a brief moment Small Fry could enjoy the World Beyond the Pond.

Reading 1

Both of today’s readings are from “Cultivating Trust as an Organizing Strategy: Lessons from Mycelium Mushrooms” by Adaku Utah.

Utah is the Senior Manager of Movement Building Programs at the [Building Movement Project](#), a national nonprofit organization that catalyzes social change through research, relationships, and resources. She was born in Baltimore, and raised in Festac, Nigeria, naming herself as a Igbo queer, non-binary person.

It takes courage to bring our trust forward and invite another person to meet us there. This sometimes sure, often shaky, surrender is an opportunity to discover something deeper

than the confines of our individual experience. A catalyst to grow beyond ourselves. To find the places where love can exist even when we are unsure of the destination. To embrace a kind of faith brave enough to yield a wider focus often unseen with a singular lens.

Part 1: Risk and the Unknown

The United States is a nation founded on the idea of diversity. Almost immediately after signing the Declaration of Independence in 1776, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson were given the task of designing a seal and motto for the new nation. During that time, many of the leaders were against a theistic motto, a position represented most ardently by Jefferson.

After some debate and deliberation, the motto that was agreed on was “E Pluribus Unum” — Latin for “out of many, one.” This is the motto on the Great Seal of the United States, adopted in 1782. It reflects the optimism and challenges of a new country striving for democracy.

The first decision-makers of this country were white men of education and means, and they disagreed on many things! As we have added people of other identities to the mix of power and decision-making, different perspectives and disagreements continue; they are an inherent part of a democratic process.

The national motto celebrating our diversity remained in place until 1956 when it was changed to “In God We Trust.”

Now, this theistic motto had been on US money since 1864. It was adopted as the national motto in 1956 during the Cold War in reaction to the feared secularization of communism. “Godless Communism” was the term I heard as I was growing up. This shift in the motto can be characterized as a legacy of the founders of the current political conservative movement, rather than of the founders of this country. It was more of a political statement than a theological one and has been a controversial decision since it was made. This motto about trust in God was reaffirmed in 2011 by a politically conservative congress during Obama’s presidency.

To declare that “In God We Trust” is to say that the prosperity of the nation is in the hands of God. It places trust outside of any human influence and outside the hands of the people. Our trust is placed elsewhere, not in ourselves or each other.

This month our spiritual theme is “trust.” It is a complex idea to explore in these socially and politically challenging times. Yet, it is during times of uncertainty that we might be most aware of what and in whom we place our trust.

In “The Thin Book of Trust” leadership coach Charles Feltman defines trust and distrust this way:

Trust is choosing to risk making something we value vulnerable to another person’s actions.

Distrust is the general assessment that what is important to us is not safe with this person or people in this situation, or any situation.

The first thing I notice in these definitions is that trust is a choice. When we trust, we choose to be vulnerable and to put something that we value at risk. When we choose to distrust, it’s based on our judgement that we or what we value are not safe. What makes trust a spiritual practice is that it takes a true, clear and calm connection with our values and inner power and wisdom to decide who and when to trust. We have some agency in a decision to trust.

The second thing I notice is that trust involves risk; it requires making ourselves vulnerable. Some of us learn young, when we are most vulnerable, that the people around us are trustworthy and that the world in general is a trustworthy place. Some of us learn that people and the world are not trustworthy. If we are lucky, those of us who did not learn trust early find people and communities with whom we can experience and learn trust. Some of us find trust in something greater than ourselves, God, Nature, the Universe. Some find trust in connection with people, some find trust in a cause or an ideal, some find trust in institutions.

To me, this feels like a risky time, and I notice that I feel very vulnerable as I watch long-standing institutions being dismantled. To me, it feels like a time of betrayal as the trust I placed in people and institutions is being violated. It’s Institutional betrayal; the infrastructure and supports that I trusted would be in place may not be, and this feeling of existential vulnerability at this level is new to me; it may be new to some of you, too.

It’s not new to everyone; there are many people for whom the current systems and structures don’t work and have never worked, they were never meant to be included. We call that oppression and injustice. I have privilege because many systems were made to work for me and people like me.

This time gives me the opportunity for more understanding and compassion for those who have felt vulnerable and betrayed by injustice all along. And I can draw strength and

courage from that in a time when we are called to work harder for more justice and inclusion. Living in this time also helps me affirm that I am unwilling to give up on trust altogether; although it feels risky and vulnerable, I know that trust is key to building the world that I want to live in.

The last thing I notice about trust is that it applies to our relationship with ourselves as well as to what is outside us. We not only trust or distrust others, but we also trust or distrust ourselves. Social worker and researcher Brené Brown says that “self-trust is often the first casualty of failure or mistakes; we stop trusting ourselves when we hurt others, get hurt, feel shame or question our worth.’ We learn to distrust ourselves rather than seeing ourselves as human, worthy, and with the agency to be accountable and make amends when possible. In this time of so much distrust, we may also be mistrusting ourselves.

It is possible to build trust and heal betrayal. It takes courage, vulnerability, and a willingness to risk. It calls us to lean on our spiritual practices and make a wise choice.

Reading 2

Our second reading is also from “Cultivating Trust as an Organizing Strategy: Lessons from Mycelium Mushrooms” by Adaku Utah.

This essay is part of an Online Zine titled “Let the Choir Say Wow,” writings collected to accompany Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds by adrienne maree brown.

Cultivating trust is an organizing strategy.

It illuminates the distinct potential to generate meaningful communication, yield collaboration grounded in sustenance, bolster collective commitment and acknowledge competence and worth. Trust intercepts blame and attack and invites care and compassion to take the lead. It takes the time to ensure that practices are aligned with values. In times of crisis, trust knows that you won’t be intentionally hurt by comrades. It relies on our imagination’s harvest and initiates possibility filled with hope and inspiration. It encourages us to delegate and share our work so imbalance dissolves and burnout fades. Trust invites us to come together for the sake of collective liberation.

Part 2: Trust

We are in a time of extreme distrust of government, institutions, leaders, and each other. For decades, there has been a determined and continual effort to erode trust in government institutions so that their destruction would be celebrated. For centuries we have cultivated a culture of supremacy that defines “the other” as less-than, inhuman, dangerous, unworthy. Who is the focus of “the other” may depend on the times, in the 1950s it was communists, now it is trans individuals, but the culture and strategy is the same; define an ideal and demonize anyone who doesn’t meet it. Distrust fuels autocracy and authoritarianism because it makes it easier to sow division.

“Waging Nonviolence” is a website dedicated to “People Powered News & Analysis.” On November 4, 2024, they ran an article titled: “10 ways to be prepared and grounded now that Trump has won.” The first two steps offered by author Daniel Hunter are: trust yourself and find people that you trust. Before we can get anything else done, we have to build trust, and we start with ourselves.

In her research on trust, Brené Brown has identified seven behaviors that build trust, and they spell out the word BRAVING.

Seven Elements/Behaviors of Trust:

Boundaries

Reliability

Accountability

Vault

Integrity

Nonjudgment

Generosity

= **BRAVING**

from Brené Brown in Atlas of the Heart

The first is **Boundaries**, which means we respect our boundaries and those of others, we ask when we are not clear, and we are willing to say no.

The second behavior is **Reliability**, doing what we say we’ll do.

The third, **Accountability**, is owning our mistakes, apologizing and making amends. It also means asking others to hold themselves accountable and holding community boundaries when they are unable to do so.

Vault means confidentiality- we don’t share what isn’t ours to share. To risk trust, we have to know that our confidences will be kept.

Integrity means that we practice our values. We choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy. When we choose courage over comfort, we uphold our Integrity.

Nonjudgment means that we can ask for what we need and share our feelings without fear that we will be judged.

Last, **Generosity** means that we give the most generous interpretation possible to other people's actions and words. This coupled with accountability allows us to acknowledge intent and impact.

These are behaviors that we can use to build trust in ourselves as well as with others. I believe we are all longing to experience trust, it's a courageous leap of faith to follow that longing. It's these behaviors and practices that help us get close.

What's nice about these behaviors is that we can take stock of how we are doing in our relationships. For example, as I have reflected on this in terms of my relationship to you as your minister, I feel pretty good about how I'm doing with reliability, keeping confidences, and integrity, and I continue to work on boundaries and nonjudgement.

In fact, congregational consultant Dan Hotchkiss, an expert on policy-based governance in churches, says that the first and most important work product of the minister is "building trust by keeping promises and setting a good example." Trusting and being trustworthy is the most important thing I do.

Building trust isn't just my #1 job, it's yours too. As in any group of people, trust had been broken here, trust in ministers, trust in the board, trust in each other. We must rebuild trust to move forward into the justice work we are called to do, because what we do in here is what we take out there. To rebuild trust, we can ask ourselves what areas we are strong in as a congregation and what areas we might want to work on.

In our reading, Utah says, "Trust intercepts blame and attack and invites care and compassion to take the lead. It takes the time to ensure that practices are aligned with values."

This is the spiritual practice of trust; taking time to ensure that our practices are aligned with our values, inviting care and compassion.

In today's after-service forum, Rev. Sara will invite us into some spiritual practices to help with the discernment required for justice work. These practices can help us build trust in ourselves and others and strengthen our connection to and trust in something greater than us. Living our values is countercultural right now, and we need each other to stay strong and grounded.

My 5 ½ year ministry with you has been about rebuilding; rebuilding an organizational structure, rebuilding systems, and most of all, rebuilding trust. Building an institution and trust in this time of mistrust is daunting. And I know it is crucial. With so much crumbling around us, with so much mistrust intentionally created, it is a counter cultural act to build trust and build up the institution of a faith community. I am honored to share this ministry with you.

This month I invite you to notice where there is trust in your life and how you can build even more. The upside of a time of transition and uncertainty is that nothing is inevitable. Trust invites us to come together for the sake of collective liberation; it invites us to build a nation that is truly out of many, one. Together we have the power to build a world that is more loving, just, and healthy. By our words and our actions, may we make this so.

Chalice Extinguishing by Rev. Angeline C. Jackson

May we remember that trust, like love, grows in small moments:

In promises kept and confidences held,

In boundaries respected and amends made,

In showing up again and again.

May we be brave enough to risk trust,

Patient enough to build it slowly,

And gentle with ourselves and others when it breaks.