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| **Monton Unitarian Church**  **28 June 2020**  **Curiosity killed the cat???**  **Opening words**  Welcome to this community of seekers, of questioners, and of those open to the revelation that comes from experiences with one another and the Spirit of Life.  May we remember that while we have some answers, we don’t have all the answers; while we know some things, we don’t know everything; and while we have lived, others have experiences very different from our own.  Welcome to this community full of questions and possibilities. |
| **Prayer**  God of many names, the personal and mysterious, We have come to a quiet time, an interior place, a place for the deepening of spirit, the enrichment of soul. We seek to know ourselves by knowing you.   Let us have the courage to sit in the unknowing, To look for the answers even if they are to sit with our own questions, To be willing to be authentic with ourselves, To be ready to bring our face to the world.   Let us be willing to know others by welcoming their genuine features, By welcoming them into the world, By appreciating the beauty that comes from seeing wholeness and truth.  Much of our human struggle is with what we do not know or understand. It is often difficult not to want answers—or even more difficult, not to think we have them already. May we experience what we do not know not as an individual failure but as an invitation to community. May we seek not the true answers so much as the true questions, knowing that true questions make of our lives meaningful even if sometimes restless journeys. May we be grateful for the restless voices in our communities.  Let us take a few moments of silence to listen for the restless voices within ourselves. Let us be quiet together now.  May we be good company to one another in our questions and our journey. Amen  There’s a chant we often sing when we are in church, and I realised that those of us who love it haven’t sung it for three months now – so we are going to sing it today. It’s called Spirit of Life – if you don’t know it, just read the words, as you listen, if you do know it, feel free to sing along.  Spirit of Life, come unto me,  Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  Blow in the wind, rise in the sea,  Move in the hand giving life the shape of justice.  Roots hold me close, wings set me free.  Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me. |
| **Pandora’s Box, traditional Greek myth**  Once up a time, a long time ago, there were two brothers named Epimetheus and Prometheus. They were good gods. They had good hearts. They were good friends.  One day, Prometheus got in trouble with Zeus. Angry over something or other, Zeus had declared that human beings did not deserve fire. Because he had a kind heart, and he knew how much wed needed fire for food and warmth, Prometheus gave humans the secret of fire even though Zeus had told all the gods not to do that. Zeus was furious that his order had been ignored. As punishment, Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock for many years.  But that was not enough punishment, not for Zeus. Once Prometheus was chained to a rock, Zeus went after Prometheus' brother, the gentle, kind-hearted Epimetheus. Zeus did not chain Epimetheus to a rock. Zeus had a more sneaky punishment in mind.  First, Zeus ordered the gods' handyman, the maker of things - Hephaestus - to make Zeus a daughter. Hephaestus made a woman out of clay, a beautiful woman. He brought her to life, and then brought her to Zeus. Zeus named his lovely new daughter Pandora.  Zeus knew that Epimetheus was lonely. Zeus told Epimetheus that his brother, Prometheus, had to be punished and that's why he was chained to a rock, but he felt sorry that this punishment left Epimetheus without the company of his brother. That's why Zeus had decided to give Pandora in marriage to Epimetheus. It was not the truth of course, but then nearly everyone in the ancient Greek world knew better than to believe the mighty Zeus.  Epimetheus was kind-hearted and gentle and thoughtful, but he was no fool. He knew Zeus was up to something. But he loved Pandora at first sight.  Zeus gave the newlyweds a gift. Some say it was a jar. Some say it was a box. Whatever it was, it was locked. It came with a note. The note said: "DO NOT OPEN." Attached to the note was a key. It was all very curious.  You can guess what happened next. According to the story it was actually Pandora whose curiosity got the better of her. (Blame the woman, why not!!) One day, she used the key to open the box. As she raised the lid, out flew all the bad things in the world today - envy, sickness, hate, disease. Pandora slammed the lid closed, but it was too late.  Epimetheus heard her weeping. He came running. Pandora opened the lid to show him it was empty. Quickly, before she could slam the lid shut, one tiny bug flew out. He gave Pandora a big buggy smile in thanks for his freedom and flew away. That tiny bug was named Hope. And Hope made all the difference in the world.  Curiosity – it’s a risky business – and yet so so essential! |
| **Hymn – We sing the joy of living**  This are two verses of a hymn by Deane Starr, celebrating the joys of discovery.  We sing the joy of living  We sing the mystery,  Of knowledge, lore and science,  Of truth that is to be;  Of searching, doubting, testing,  Of deeper insights gained,  Of freedom claimed and honoured,  Of minds that are unchained.  We sing the joy of living,  We sing of harmony,  Of textures, sounds and colours,  To touch, to hear, to see;  Of order, rhythm, meaning,  Of chaos and of strife,  Of richness of sensation,  Of the creating life. |
| **Becoming ourselves, by Rev Amanda Poppei**  “Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real... It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time." ― Margery Williams Bianco, The Velveteen Rabbit  When I was pregnant with my second child, one of the things I was most curious (and anxious!) about was telling my first child the news of her expected sibling. She was three at the time, and I wasn't sure how much she would be able to grasp about the major change her life was about to undergo.  I was ready to answer any question she might have, honestly and age-appropriately. I started off by being as literal as possible. "Guess what?" I said. “You're going to have a sibling! There’s a baby growing in my tummy!" That seemed like a good start, though I was ready to switch over to the anatomically correct *uterus* if needed.  But my older child isn't a scientist, it turns out. She’s a philosopher, and so she asked the one question I hadn't prepared for. "Oh!" she said. "Who is it going to be?"  "I don't know!" I said. "We're going to have to wait and see."  Isn't that always the way? We’re still waiting to see who that second child is going to be, although she's been with us for seven years now and is very much her own person. But she’s also changing and growing, becoming someone new all the time — as her older sister is, and as I am, and as you are.  Sometimes our becomings are dramatic: we realize that the gender we thought we were, or others thought we were, isn't correct after all; or we discover that the career we had planned or the marriage we had begun isn't really who we are, or is no longer right for who we have become.  Sometimes, though, our becoming is gradual, a kind of unfolding and changing and shifting over time. Always, it is lifelong. Which isn't to say we aren't already who we are—we are that, too. We are already ourselves, the minute we are born, and every minute thereafter. However long our lives end up being, even when they are cut painfully and tragically short, we are our full selves for every second, every month, every year of those lives. And we are also becoming ourselves, growing and stretching.  In the “growing” time of my life, my soul experienced something like the growing pains I remembered in my legs as a child. I became a minister; a mother; a middle-aged person. It’s usually been uncomfortable, and almost always inconvenient. The old me seemed fine, the one I was just yesterday; why bother with all this shifting? And yet when I come out the other side, I invariably think, Ah yes: this is the me I was supposed to become. This is who I am. Until next time. Who is it going to be?  Who are you going to be, today? And tomorrow? Who are we all becoming, together? |
| **Reflection – Encouraging Curiosity**  We’ve got a number of babies and toddlers and young people in our congregation these days – Ella, Olivia, Barnaby, George, Sorrel, Freddie, bigger Olivia, Hollie, Nathan, Sophie, Amy. Now I’ll let Ella off, because to be fair, the only things on her mind at the moment are milk and sleep and cuddles, but all the others are definitely part of the curiosity movement by now. Curiosity, that wish to explore, discover, push boundaries of knowledge is how children develop, of course – how they find out what’s good to eat (bananas, carrots – chocolate) and what’s not (that lego brick that just won’t be crunched no matter how hard you try), what feels nice (the fleece on your bed) and what doesn’t (gravel when you fall on it), and so on, on to bigger things as you grow up – what activities you enjoy, how things work, how societies function etc etc. And actually, that questioning never stops – we are in fact each of us bundles of living questions – big ones and little ones, every day. From our desire to learn about other planets in other solar systems, to how we can learn to live together on this one.  From our questions about whether vitamin C tablets really will prevent that oncoming cold to the questions we have about how to stay well and live well in our everyday lives. From our questions about how we can help the children we love become the people they can be, to whether your neighbor will ever stop playing such loud music so late at night.  We may not always even be aware of whether we’re living big questions or little ones or how they connect to the threads of our lives, we just know we’re drawn in by this or by that and we want to explore or know more.  But while we never lose it completely, there is a way our natural, child-like, curiosity gets curtailed as we grow up. We absorb a whole host of messages about how we’re supposed to be and think and what we’re supposed to do – we don’t even always notice the sight-limiting blinkers we acquire over time. Don’t even notice the range of topics we’ve lost interest in. Or the number of things we think we fully understand, that we’ve ceased to question or wonder much about. By the time we are adults, we’ve learned a particular set of viewpoints from the people around us or experiences we’ve had and we’re frequently inclined to just stick with that. Curiosity killed the cat, we’re told – best not to ask questions that might get us into trouble.  And in our society these days, where the model is one of: have an opinion, voice it with conviction, and then voice it again just louder (and maybe again and again)… In that environment, leading with curiosity, exploring questions, wondering if maybe we don’t know as much as we think we do, this kind of attitude can feel out of step.  But to be curious, genuinely curious, we have to let go of certainty, let go of conviction, let go of the ways we’ve always perceived things, or how others do things, or the way things have just always been. And that takes courage.  In her meditation, called Open Eyes, Victoria Safford puts it this way: “The awakened eye is a conscious eye, a willful eye, and brave, because to see things as they are, each in its own truth, will make you very vulnerable.”  That unselfconscious vulnerability, that openness that is characteristic of youth – it’s part and parcel of being able to see without preconceived notions, to be able to be openly curious.  “To see, [in this way],” Safford also writes, “simply to look and to see, is an ethical act and intentional choice; to see, with open eyes, is a spiritual practice and thus a risk, for it can open you to ways of knowing the world and loving it that will lead to inevitable consequences.”  In other words, like young children who learn and grow by what they do and see and experience, by the way they push and pull objects and people and everything around them, adults, too, at any ages, can push & pull and try things and learn and be changed by our curiosity. Some of you may remember the words of Jesus – those who do not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it!  How can I, how can we, find that childlike place – where we know we’re going to stumble while we learn, but trust in an unfolding future. Where we can know there will be things that are too big for each of us, but we don’t have to fix them all alone. Where we have every reason to be confident in the joy of this moment, where we can remember our playfulness, connect with the people around us and have one heck of a blast of an adventure as we go.  Yes, curiosity can get us into trouble from time to time – Pandora opened up a world of hurt when she opened up Zeus’s nasty bag of tricks. But she let out hope into the world at the same time. And sometimes we have to go through difficult learning curves in order to come out the other side. As our second reading said,  In the “growing” time of my life, my soul experienced something like the growing pains I remembered in my legs as a child. I became a minister; a mother; a middle-aged person. It’s usually been uncomfortable, and almost always inconvenient. The old me seemed fine, the one I was just yesterday; why bother with all this shifting? And yet when I come out the other side, I invariably think, Ah yes: this is the me I was supposed to become. This is who I am. Until next time. Who is it going to be?  Learning curves are hard at times – some discoveries can be unpleasant, painful, even dangerous. But not to ask, not to be courageous, not to question, not to search, not to be vulnerable – is to deny our very humanity, the very gift that makes us who we are. We should never stifle that wonderful question, Why, that children ask so often – because that Why, and the what, who, where, when and how that goes with it, is their curiosity bringing their world to life for them.  We are called to be persistent, courageous, and curious. We are called to live the questions, to sail the unknown seas, within and outside ourselves, seeking, and sometimes even finding the lands we seek.  As the final verse of that fabulous hymn by Shelley Jackson Denham says:  We seek elusive answers to the questions of this life.  We seek to put an end to all the waste of human strife.  We search for truth, equality, and blessed peace of mind,  And then we come together here, to make sense of what we find.  And we believe in life, and in the strength of love;  And we have found a joy to be together.  And in our search for peace, maybe we’ll finally see;  Even to question truly is an answer. |
| **A blessing by Antonia Bell-Delgado**  May we find the courage to revel in the experience of the mystery.  May we approach the unknown with excitement (even if we can only muster a tiny bit). May we celebrate the curiosity that leads to searching. May we meet ourselves along the way and love ourselves, unapologetically.  Amen. |