**Monton Unitarian Church**

**Re-orienting the Spirit – 21st June 2020**

**Opening words**

When the world is tilting and spinning around us, as dizzying as a fairground ride, how do we stay steady?

When words taken on new meanings daily, and what is ‘real’ and what is ‘fake’ seem almost interchangeable, how do we stay grounded?

When there are constant demands for our attention – hot topics, cool buys, the biggest, the best, the newest – how do we stay focused?

In the confusion and the chaos, we gather to re-orient ourselves – to stay steady, and grounded, and focused – and to find our spiritual centre.

**Hymn**

Number 21 is the perfect hymn for a service about finding our spiritual centre, and re-orienting ourselves. I’m hoping Shirley Erena Murray will forgive me for quoting all three verses.

Come and find the quiet centre

In the crowded life we lead,

Find the room for hope to enter,

Find the space where we are freed;

Clear the chaos and the clutter,

Clear our eyes that we can see

All the things that really matter,

Be at peace, and simply be.

Silence is a friend who claims us,

Cools the heat and slows the pace;

God it is who speaks and names us,

Knows our being, touches base,

Making space within our thinking,

Lifting shades to show the sun,

Raising courage when we’re shrinking,

Finding scope for faith begun.

In the Spirit let us travel,

Open to each other’s pain;

Let our lives and fears unravel,

Celebrate the space we gain.

There’s a place for deepest dreaming,

There’s a time for heart to care;

In the Spirit’s lively scheming

There is always room to spare.

**Prayer**

Spirit of Life and Love,

We have come together, looking once more to find that quiet centre, that place where we can take our foot off the pedal and our hands off the wheel, step out of the vehicle, and just be still, and breathe the free air.

Too often it feels as if we are on a treadmill, constantly trying to keep up but not actually going anywhere. So focused on running the race that we lose sight of the important things – like who we are, what we believe in and value, and what our purpose is.

Let us take this time now to pause, to quieten our restless bodies and racing minds, and bring our focus back to the centre. For it is in this centre that we will find peace, and comfort, and courage.

And it is here that we can look deeply at ourselves, search our souls and question our hearts. Are we allowing ourselves to be guided by compassion? Are we working to correct injustices? Are we living in right relationship with our neighbours and our planet?

Spirit of Life and Love, help us be honest with ourselves, help us see ourselves through clear, unbiased eyes. But equally let us not harshly condemn ourselves if we have not managed to live up to compassion’s standards, but pick ourselves up gently to try again, and again, as often as it takes.

May this time of centring allow us to reset, and begin afresh, as we travel on in this new world. And may we find our spiritual orientation, guided by compassion, with the destination of love.

Amen.

**Story – The Abandoned City**

In a land across the sea, there is an old city where no-one lives. Weeds grow on the rooftops of ruined houses, and the streets are overgrown with grass and nettles. But once, it was a thriving township.

Long ago, hundreds of people lived here. One afternoon, a wise and holy man was seen walking along the main street. His eyes were full of tears. He kept his head bowed low as he made his way through the town centre and out to the open countryside. The townspeople watched him, shocked. But no one dared to ask him the reason for his obvious distress.

Then one man made a guess. “Someone must have died at the other side of town,” he suggested.

A woman took up the story. “Could it be the plague?” she asked. A young woman began to weep, as she thought of how the plague might kill her little children. In no time, the town was in uproar, quite certain that the plague had struck. There was a frantic scramble to get away from the town before the infection spread. The people loaded up their donkeys and carts, and streamed out into the countryside. Within an hour, there was not a single soul remaining in the town.

Later that day, the holy man came back to his house. He couldn’t begin to understand the emptiness that he discovered. After all, only a short while before, he had been happily peeling onions for his dinner, and he had only gone out for a while to give his streaming eyes a little rest.

**Reading – Oriented Times Three, by Karen Hering**

The first time I saw the phrase “oriented x 3,” I was working in a hospital as a chaplain. The phrase was used frequently in patients’ charts, and at first I thought it might be shorthand for an extremely oriented patient. Like being oriented to the third power, or being *uber*-oriented. I imagined a patient who was aware on many levels – sharp, quick, responsive, cognizant of what’s going on inside her and around her.

A nurse then explained to me that the phrase refers to being oriented to “person, place, and time,” a determination commonly made by asking patients, “What is your name? Do you know where you are? Do you know what day it is?” And I began to wonder if we might ask similar questions to determine if a person is oriented spiritually. What would it mean to be “spiritually oriented x 3”? What questions might we ask to determine that?

What is your name? Do you know who you are? Do you know whose you are?

Do you know where you are? What is your place in the world, in your life, in your relationships?

What day is it today? What time is it in your life? What is it time for? What are you living for – today? Tomorrow? Yesterday?

These are not unrelated to other questions I ask all the time in hospital rooms, in the pulpit on Sunday, in long nights when I am alone. *What do I believe? Where do I belong? What does it all mean?*

Certainly, I know the questions better than the answers. But I also know this – we all have spiritual compasses inside us that help us to arrive at our own answers. Sometimes we can read our compasses more easily than others, but we all have something that spins toward north, an inner tug toward the holy. And in those times when our compass is impossible to find or to read, or when it points in a direction we don’t want to go, we can turn to one another, or to maps that help us get oriented, or to constellations that guide us to where we’re headed..

Perhaps this is what it means to be spiritually oriented x 3; oriented to self, oriented to others, and oriented to the holy. Perhaps this is what we’re doing here together – reading our compasses, finding our way in a universe of shining stars, and making new maps to help one another.

**Reflection**

There’s a lot of disorientation at the moment – how many of us struggle to work out what day it is, or even what month it is? The loss of all our regular activities (Tuesday coffee morning, Thursday choir, Sunday service were my anchors), has left us feeling a bit washed up and stranded! Relationships too can feel rather strange, as we are missing that direct interaction, the eye contact and facial expressions and physical closeness that helps ground our relationships. It’s easy to ‘mis-hear’ a comment on a text, or a Facebook post, in a way that we wouldn’t do so easily if we were face to face. Some of us have lost our work, or the things that gave our life meaning because of the lockdown and are feeling set adrift, others have become swamped with extra work and are no longer able to find the space for ourselves, for self-care, for simple breathing!

Disorientation in any of these ways, just like in the medical way as explored in our reading, is unnerving, even frightening. Losing our landmarks, our bearings, our sense of direction, can have us feeling like we are losing our very selves, our very identity. Spiritual disorientation can have the same effect. Just as we would look for healing to solve disorientation caused by a medical matter (that proverbial knock on the head, for example!), so we need to look for healing to overcome disorientation of the soul.

Our reading talked about being ‘oriented x 3’ – and in spiritual terms, saw this as oriented to self, oriented to others, oriented to the holy. What might each of those mean, to us?

Oriented to self – finding answers to those questions that ask, “what is your name? Do you know who you are? Do you know whose you are?” What is your name sounds like a simple question to answer – I’m Anna Jarvis, job done. But as I sometimes say in baptism services, to call a thing – or a person – by its name, gives it power. Do you know who you are? Do you know what makes you, you – your character, your likes and dislikes, your pleasures and your fears – and your flaws? Are you willing to acknowledge all the aspects of who you are, those that you are proud of and, more challengingly, those that you are ashamed of? And lastly, do you know whose you are? Not just who do you belong to in terms of family, but in terms of community?

That question moves us on to the next aspect of orientation – “Do you know where you are? What is your place in the world, in your life, in your relationships?” For spiritual orientation, this does not involve geography, but society. Where are you on your path through life, and how does it relate to the people, the problems of the world around you? Knowing yourself means knowing how you stand with other people. Where are you making your stand – on the side of comfort, and ease, and ignorance, or on the side of love, with all its challenges and discomforts, but also all its honesty and compassion.

And oriented to the holy. What day is it today? What time is it in your life? What is it time for? What are you living for – today? Tomorrow? Yesterday? Those questions may not immediately sound particularly ‘holy’, but consider what it means for it to be the time for love, the time for prayer, the time for compassion, the time for faith, the time for a belief in the inherent goodness of humanity, the time for action to let that inherent goodness flourish and flower, and to make right all those hurtful, unjust situations that tarnish and damage the world. Is that not the time for the holy?

It is so easy for all three of those aspects of our lives to get twisted and out of kilter, for our souls to become disoriented. We lose our way, lose our focus, lose our self-belief time after time. We fall out of right relationship with others, whether our family and friends, or whole swathes of society. And we lose our connection to the very core of our being where divinity lies. Sometimes we react the way the city did in our story – we hear of one event, witness other people’s reactions, and instead of taking time to think, to inquire, to learn and to consider, we get swept away in the crowd. The mind of the mob takes over, and we can do things, say things, even feel things that if we were rightly oriented we would not normally feel. We react with anger, or contempt, or fear, without exploring what the other side of the story might be – we become truly disoriented.

But we do not have to stay disoriented. As our reading reminded us, “we all have spiritual compasses inside us that help us to arrive at our own answers. Sometimes we can read our compasses more easily than others, but we all have something that spins toward north, an inner tug toward the holy. And in those times when our compass is impossible to find or to read, or when it points in a direction we don’t want to go, we can turn to one another, or to maps that help us get oriented, or to constellations that guide us to where we’re headed”.

We can find our way again. There are treasure troves of wisdom all around us that can help, whether that’s the Bible, the Qu’ran, the Buddhist’s path, the Quaker’s silence, or Winnie the Pooh. And there are friends around us who will listen as we tell our tales of lostness and who will often be able to help us see our path lying right there at our feet when before it was hidden in fog.

But re-orienting the spirit is not a once-only task. Even the most experienced sailor needs to keep their eyes on the stars and their hands on the tiller, otherwise they drift off course – and that’s when the treacherous rocky shoals can cause havoc, and threaten us with shipwreck. Every day, we need to ask ourselves those questions – who am I? Where am I? What day is it? Do I truly know myself? Do I know where I am and where I’m going? Have I made this the time for love and justice? Only then will we be truly oriented to self, to others, and to the holy.

**Blessing**

May you find time each day to offer yourself the gift of quietness and peace.

May you find time each day to check the compass of your life and your soul.

May you find time each day to re-orient yourself back to love, back to right relationship, back to divinity.

And may you truly know who you are, where you stand, and that this is the time.

Amen.