**Monton Unitarian Church**

**Finding Strength 2nd August 2020**

**Welcome and chalice lighting**

It feels so long now since we last gathered – so many isolated days, fearful nights, aching hearts and worried minds.

It feels so long now since we last held each other – tightly in our arms, lightly in our smiles, yet always and forever in our souls.

It feels so long now since we were able to plan – for tomorrow, for next week, for next month, for next year.

It feels so long now since there was any sense of certainty, of groundedness, of comfort.

And yet we are still here, still standing, still holding each other in whatever way we can, still gathering in whatever way we can. And though planning may still be difficult, whether for us personally, or for us communally, one thing is certain – that we have the courage, and the strength, to keep walking through this strange, hurting land, knowing that we can face whatever arises, and can grow through our trials, and will find our centre, our groundedness, our comfort, once more. And it begins, as it always begins, by reaching out to each other, and to the strength that lies at the core of our being, and at the core of the universe. Whether we call it God, or Spirit, or Love, or Community – it is here, and we gather to honour it.

So let our worship begin.

**Hymn**

Number 23 in our purple hymn book is by Rev Andrew McKean Hill, who for many years was minister of Edinburgh Unitarians. These are the first three verses.

Come strong God, and walk beside us

From the start to journey’s end;

Come and guide our faltering footsteps

As a true and trusty friend.

Walk with us as our companion

And our lives at last transcend.

Come kind God and sleep beside us

So you may dispel our fears;

Come and live among our dwellings

As the drier of our tears.

Sleep with us through nights of sorrow

Till the new bright dawn appears.

Come warm God, burn strong within us;

Melt with fire our frozen hearts;

Come and stir our minds and spirits

While in life we play our parts.

Burn within us bright and freely

As the artist of our art.

**Prayer**

Spirit of Life and Love,

We are here once more, seeking strength, seeking courage, seeking comfort. While we may have shelter, food, warmth, and friends, yet we know that not all is well with the world, in so many ways, and despite our many blessings, we still live with constant fear and uncertainty and grief.

For all of us who face the threat of the virus as just one more unavoidable risk, who are already battling the effects of great poverty, homelessness, prejudice and discrimination, conflict and terror – our hearts go out to them, and we wish we could help.

For all of us, who must continue to grapple with all the problems of ill-health, difficult relationships, work worries, and so many other concerns, that have not gone away but continue to concern us – may we remember to keep holding on to each other, and remember that we are being held.

For all of us who are hurting, whether in body, mind or spirit, for all of us who are searching for some kind of reassurance, an escape from isolation, an end to frustration and helplessness, and a sense of hope and increasing light – may we hear that still small voice speaking through the storm, and know that peace will come.

Spirit of Life and Love, help us find the comfort we need to heal ourselves, and the courage and strength to reach out to hold and heal others. Amen.

# **Story – Amelia and Her Super Magical Powers, by Gail Sphar**

This is the story of a young girl named Amelia. Amelia was fascinated by tales of people with super powers, like Wonder Woman, or magic like Harry Potter. She yearned to have powers like that so she could help people. Like the boy she often saw sitting all alone at lunch, looking very sad. "If I had magic powers, I could make him smile," she said to herself. Or like the little kids who were being picked on in the school yard by an older girl. "Oooo...super powers would straighten her out fast!" she said. And whenever she walked past the old, run-down park near her house, she imagined how magic powers could fix it up so kids had a place to play.

One night, just as Amelia was about to fall asleep, a fairy godmother came into her room. "Hello Amelia," she said. "I'm here to help you. What have you been wishing for?" "Oh" said Amelia. "Please give me some super magic powers so I can make a difference!" "Well," said the fairy godmother, "I'm happy to give you some magic, Amelia, but my..." "Oh thank you, thank you," cried Amelia—and with that she fell right to sleep!

The next morning when Amelia woke up, she remembered what had happened the night before. She jumped out of bed, eager to get going and test out her new super powers. As she walked to school, she realized she'd forgotten to ask what she needed to do to release those powers--you know, say some secret words, give a high sign or something else--but she decided she'd figure it all out as she went along.

That day at lunch she saw that same sad boy sitting by himself at lunch again. "Let's try my magic," she said, as she wiggled her fingers at him from a distance. Nothing. "Maybe I need to be closer," she thought. So she walked closer to him and he looked up at her. She couldn't help but give him a friendly smile, and when she did, his face beamed with his own huge smile. "HA!" thought Amelia. "I really do have magic." "Can I join you for lunch?" she asked. "Sure!" he said, smiling even bigger. The two of them laughed and talked all during lunch time. She learned his name was Bobby, he'd lost his father earlier in the year, and he and his mother had moved here after that. He didn't know anyone and was too shy to go up to kids and talk. Well, Amelia and Bobby became good friends and Bobby smiled a lot from then on.

One day soon after that, Amelia and Bobby were in the playground when they saw Karen bullying two younger kids by the swings. She'd read what to do about bullies, but she had never tried any of it before because she wasn't really sure she could do it. But now with her super powers she was ready. "Come on, Bobby. Let's go help those kids." So they walked up to where Karen stood over the two children and Amelia wiggled her fingers at her and said loudly, "Karen, stop it right now! Come on, Dodie and Lou. Come with Bobby and me. You're safe with us." After they four of them had left, Amelia told the two, "If she bothers you again, just turn around and walk away. Act like you don't hear her. Don't show any emotion. And if she keeps on trying to hurt you, let Mr. Crenshaw in the office know. I'll go with you if you need me to." They did just as Amelia said and Karen never bothered those kids again.

Well, by now Amelia was feeling pretty good about her super magic powers. "How can I use them to fix up our old park?" she wondered. Wiggling her fingers didn't work. She still didn't know any magic words. "Maybe if I start working to clean it, something will occur to me." And so she did.

She took bin bags to the park and started picking up rubbish that had been left there. Before long a couple of friends came by and asked what she was doing. "I'm fixing our park so we can play in it again." That sounded like a great idea to her friends and they began to help. Soon other kids joined them. They picked up rubbish, pulled weeds, and cleared out dead shrubbery. Little by little the park began to look better.

When some of the parents saw the improvement they decided to help. Some mowed the grass, others built picnic tables, and still others convinced the council to buy some new equipment. It was hard work and it took a long time, but they got their new park. When it was all done, the whole neighbourhood had a picnic in their new park to celebrate it.

After the picnic, Amelia fell exhausted into bed. She was just about asleep when the fairy godmother came back. "Oh, I'm so happy to see you," said Amelia. "I want to thank you for giving me all those super magic powers!"

"But I tried to tell you my wand was broken. I didn't give you any," said the fairy godmother.

"You must have given me powers," protested Amelia. "How else could I have made Bobby happy, stopped a bully and given our neighbourhood a wonderful park?!"

The fairy godmother just smiled. "My dear, you did that because you possess three powers that you developed yourself: kindness, bravery, and determination. With those three things, you are making a difference."

And with that, Amelia fell fast asleep.

**Address**

One of the benefits of being a mother is that of watching a lot of films with your kids. I love all the Disney cartoons, and the coming of age films, the classics like Swallows and Amazons and the more serious ones – Dead Poet Society, Good Will Hunting, for example, that I am looking forward to showing them when they are just a little bit older. And sometimes you have to steel yourself to watch films that they want to, but you aren’t quite so sure about.

Recently, for me, that was the Avengers movies. Nathan had always been into superheroes, with superman costumes, and Batman posters on his wall, but suddenly, for some reason, the girls announced they wanted to start watching the Avengers in the Marvel Cinematic Universe – starting with Captain America. Lots of not so nice things about Avengers – violent, America-centric, etc, but there’s also some good humour and likeable characters.

One of my favourite characters, for better or for worse, is Thor. Son of the God Odin, and thereby a god himself, much of his strength and power comes from his hammer. But in the first film where we meet Thor, he is thrown out of Asgard, his home planet, because of his recklessness, pride and arrogance that put all the people of Asgard in danger. He is banished to earth, and his hammer is also lost to him. As the film reaches its climax, and the Destroyer is sent by his half-brother to – yeah, you guessed, destroy him and his friends, Thor tells his friends to leave, and turns to face the Destroyer on his own – no hammer, no weapon, no defense, nothing, in the hope that by allowing his own destruction he can give the others chance to escape. He gets almost killed (he’s a god, come on, he can’t die, there’s umpteen more movies yet), but his standing firm and defending his friends in the face of almost certain death prove him to be finally worthy of his hammer again, which returns to him so that he can, obviously, save the day.

It's corny, but it’s hardly a new story. How many other times and places have we seen that sort of strength? Jesus, telling Peter and his followers not to fight back when soldiers come to arrest him, knowing full well that there is no way out of the painful death to come. Rachel Corrie, a British activist trying to prevent Palestinian homes being bulldozed, who stood in front of a bulldozer knowing the risk, and who died when it ran over her. Mahatma Gandhi and his followers who walked arm in arm up to the salt works in protest, knowing that they would be severely punished, maybe killed, by the soldiers in their way. The protestors in the Stonewall Riots, standing up for their right to be who and what they are. The protestors in the Black Lives Matter marches, fully aware that tear gas, batons, rubber bullets may be used against them.

It takes courage to stand up in the face of that sort of opposition, within limited or no defense, fully aware of how much this protest could cost you.

Those are extreme examples – real examples, yes, but in extreme circumstances. Courage and strength, however, aren’t just needed for those type of situations, but for everyday situations too. Our story showed Amelia finding her courage and strength to break through a child’s loneliness, to rescue other children from bullying, and to return a playground to its proper purpose. Small things – and yet oh so large. And for a person who has struggled to speak up before, a hugely brave thing.

We all face those moments where we need to dig deep to find our ‘superpowers’, our courage and strength. Whether it’s stepping into the supermarket for the first time in months, armed only with a facemask and sanitizer gel. Whether its daring to invite a friend round, when no-one has stepped into our houses for weeks on end. Whether it’s finding our voice to enter a Facebook argument about Black Lives Matter, knowing that we might not say things quite right, and we might be verbally abused in the process, but knowing it’s important to speak up. Whether it’s reaching out to someone who frightens us but who clearly needs someone’s help, without knowing if we will know the right thing to do, or the best way to help, but knowing that walking past on the other side of the road is not an option. Whether it’s simply crawling out of bed in the morning, to face another day of pain and isolation and frustration and loneliness – for that too can take a huge amount of courage.

Superheroes don’t always wear capes, or suits, or wield weapons with extraterrestrial powers, or have bodies altered by chemicals or magic to be able to go above and beyond the normal human response, like the Avengers do. Sometimes they are people just like you and me, who somehow manage to dig deep inside themselves to find the strength to do the things that need to be done in that moment. Like Thor, we don’t always have it – sometimes we act for the wrong reasons (though we aren’t all trying to wipe out the Frost Giants), and sometimes we don’t act at all, finding ourselves frozen with fear, or uncertainty – but just because we don’t manage it one time, doesn’t mean we never will find that strength.

Where does that strength come from? What is the source of that courage, that bravery? We may each have different answers to that question. Some will say, God. Others will say, the Love of their families and friends. Others will say it comes from deep within themselves, a compunction to6+3 do the right thing, no matter how hard. It’s difficult, in one way, because it’s also possible that the people doing the wrong things – the people who go into battle on the ‘wrong’ side but who are still willing to sacrifice their lives for their cause, the people who stand up and say the offensive, discriminatory statements because they truly believe it – are equally finding strength from somewhere. But here too we need to find strength to hope that by answering the call of compassion, as opposed to competitiveness, of prayer rather than power, of selflessness rather than selfishness, of justice rather than injustice, that we are doing the work of the Spirit of Love.

We dig deep for our strength. Sometimes we find it, sometimes we don’t. Sometimes our capes can be clearly seen – sometimes we operate under cover and in the shadows. But always we try to do what’s right when and where we can, in big ways or small ways. Hoping that something will make a difference. Hoping that we can make the world just a slightly better place. Hoping that we will make that one person happy, or help show someone that kindness is better than bullying, or making that change in our environment that will bring joy to those that come after us.

We can all be superheroes – just by being human, and finding our strength, and showing our love.

**Benediction**

As we go forward in this world that is full of uncertainty and fear, confusion and anxiety, pain and loss – and yet also beauty and joy and friendship and caring – may we find our strength, our courage, our resolve and determination, and keep living lives of compassion.

And may the Spirit of Life hold us all in the strength of its Love.

PTO for the words to “Something Inside So Strong”, by Labi Siffre.

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| (Something Inside) So Strong[Labi Siffre](https://www.bing.com/search?q=Labi+Siffre&filters=ufn%3a%22Labi+Siffre%22+sid%3a%2293b8fc88-2e8c-03a6-4150-5bbaf6204cb8%22&FORM=SNAPST)The higher you build your barriersThe taller I becomeThe further you take my rights awayThe faster I will runYou can deny me, you can decideTo turn your face awayNo matter 'cause there'sSomething inside so strongI know that I can make itThough you're doing me wrong, so wrongYou thought that my pride was gone, oh noThere's something inside so strongOh, something inside so strong.The more you refuse to hear my voiceThe louder I will singYou hide behind walls of Jericho Your lies will come tumblingDeny my place in time, you squander wealth that's mineMy light will shine so brightly it will blind youBecause there's | Something inside so strong, I know that I can make itThough you're doing me wrong, so wrongYou thought that my pride was gone, oh noThere's something inside so strongOh, something inside so strongBrothers and sistersWhen they insist we're just not good enoughWell we know betterJust look him in his eyes and sayWe're gonna do it anywayWe're gonna do it anywayThere's something inside so strongAnd I know that I can make itThough you're doing me wrong, so wrongYou thought that my pride was gone, oh noThere's something inside so strong, ohSomething inside so strong |