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| **Monton Unitarian Church**  **16th August 2020**  **Following the yellow brick road!**  Let us begin our worship with words by Lyn Cox  Come you accidental pilgrims, you who find yourself on a journey of surprise and wonder.  Come you who emerge into this place as an act of liberation. Come you who seek a life of mindfulness and a place to test your thoughts.  Come you who bring hearts of all kinds: heavy hearts, rusty hearts, hearts broken open in revelation, hearts full of love to share.  Come you who seek courage, and you who have more courage than you realize.  Come you who stand behind the curtain, gathering up the resources to claim your truth.  Come you who have been in a bubble, you who are poised for transformation.  We begin our story again, gathering courage, love, mindfulness, and a sense of purpose. We gather as people of all ages, of different abilities, different backgrounds, and different perspectives. We share a covenant, a direction for our shared journey, and a commitment to encourage and challenge one another to spiritual growth.  This path will ask much from us. Let us move forward with love. Let us move forward with appreciation for one another. Let us move forward knowing we are not alone. Whoever you are, whatever your gifts, you are welcome to join this journey. |
| **Prayer**  Krista Taves wrote this beautiful prayer.  Spirit of Life and Love, God of grace and mercy, Source of all things that changes us as we cannot change ourselves,  We gather today as a covenanted community of spiritual seekers, coming together in a rainbow of diversity united by our conviction that the wounds of this world can be healed through compassion, forgiveness, acceptance, and courage.  This community is on a journey, indeed we know that each one of us is on a journey, and all our journeys place us before forks in the road.   These places ask us to make choices, saying yes to some things, saying no to others, grieving in what we must leave behind, rejoicing in the blessings, often unexpected, that come our way.  In these journeys, some will choose to walk with us for a distance, and some will choose another path. Some will pause for a while, withdrawing into their own places of transformation where we cannot follow.  Some of these partings happen gently and lovingly, others with judgment and disappointment.  It is our calling to accept these things as a testament to our strength and our fragility, and to trust in the process, even as we fear the unknown, even as whispers of beloved memories draw us deep into our own hearts, even when we see more clearly where we have come from than where we are going.  The journey asks us to keep walking.  Spirit of Life, we ask for patience and understanding, we ask for compassion, we ask for hope and gratitude so that we may welcome our collective and individual journeys with open hearts, open minds, and open hands.  Amen |
| **Story – Follow the yellow brick road!**  Apparently last week was the 81st anniversary of the first screening of the Wizard of Oz – it was one of those random bits of information at the bottom of the diary page. You probably know the story.  Dorothy is the girl who gets swept up in a tornado, and ends up in the Land of Oz, and faces a journey of challenges to defeat the witch and find her way home. She has three companions who help her on the way – the scarecrow, who sees himself as not very clever at all, the tin man who wants a heart as he believes he doesn’t have any emotion, and the lion who believes he is a coward.  They go with Dorothy to find the Wizard of Oz because they believe that along with getting Dorothy home, he will be able to give them the talents they so want.  But it’s one of those strange things about journeys – as they travel on together, they find that they already have the very talents they are looking for – the scarecrow is extremely resourceful and finds solutions to the problems they face, the tin man proves himself to be a kind and sensitive man, and the lion finds the courage to overcome the threats that face them.  And I believe that can be true for all of us – we all face challenges, we all need to be resourceful, and we all need to use our hearts as well as our heads as we walk along our path. But we all have the gifts we need – we just to find them within ourselves.  Which brings to mind this poem by Jean M Olson.  Go Boldly  May you be brave enough to expose your aching woundedness and reveal your vulnerability.  May you speak your deepest truths, knowing that they will change as you do.  May you sing the music within you, composing your own melody, playing your song with all your heart.  May you draw, paint, sculpt, and sew, showing the world your vision.  May you write letters, poetry, biography, slogans, graffiti, the great novel, laying bare your words to love and hate.  May you love even though your heart breaks again and again.  And until the end of your days, may your life be filled with possibilities and courage. |
| **Hymn**  Number 186 in our purple hymn book is a beautiful song by Rev Andrew Hill about travelling – through space, through time, and through our inner self.  We are travellers on a journey  Which brought us from the sun,  When primal star exploded  And earth in orbit spun;  But now as human dwellers  Upon earth-planet’s crust,  We strive for living systems  Whose ways are kind and just.  We are travellers on a journey  Which grows from human seed,  And through our birth and childhood  Goes where life’s path may lead;  But now we are delving deeper  In quest of greater worth  And reaching unknown regions  And planets of new birth.  We are travellers on a journey  Through realms of inner space  Where joy and peace are planets  That circle stars of grace;  And when we find the stillness  Which comes at journey’s end,  There’ll be complete refreshment,  A resting place, a friend. |
| Reading – Map of the Journey in Progress, by Victoria E Safford All our lives, we are on a journey. We have highs and lows, smooth planes and rocky outcrops, places of refuge and places of danger. I’m going to share with you a reading by Victoria E Safford, entitled Map of the Journey in Progress, and afterwards you are invited to take some time to consider one or two of the significant parts of your journey.  Here is where I found my voice and chose to be brave.  Here’s a place where I forgave someone, against my better judgment, and I survived that, and unexpectedly, amazingly, I became wiser. Here’s where I was once forgiven, was ready for once in my life to receive forgiveness and to be transformed. And I survived that also. I lived to tell the tale.  This is the place where I said no, more loudly than I’d thought I ever could, and everybody stared, but I said no loudly anyway, because I knew it must be said, and those staring settled down into harmless, ineffective grumbling, and over me they had no power anymore.  Here’s a time, and here’s another, when I laid down my fear and walked right on into it, right up to my neck into that roiling water.  Here’s where cruelty taught me something. And here’s where I was first astonished by gratuitous compassion and knew it for the miracle it was, the requirement it is. It was a trembling time. And here, much later, is where I returned the blessing, clumsily. It wasn’t hard, but I was unaccustomed. It cycled round, and as best I could I sent it back on out, passed the gift along. This circular motion, around and around, has no apparent end.  Here’s a place, a murky puddle, where I have stumbled more than once and fallen. I don’t know yet what to learn there.  On this site I was outraged and the rage sustains me still; it clarifies my seeing.  And here’s where something caught me—a warm breeze in late winter, birdsong in late summer.  Here’s where I was told that something was wrong with my eyes, that I see the world strangely, and here’s where I said, “Yes, I know, I walk in beauty.”  Here is where I began to look with my own eyes and listen with my ears and sing my own song, shaky as it is.  Here is where, if by surgeon’s knife, my heart was opened up—and here, and here, and here, and here. These are the landmarks of conversion.  I invite you for a moment, to choose one significant part of your journey – a challenge, or a blessing, but a moment of significance either way. Remember it – who was there with you, how did you survive, what did you learn, and what blessings did you take with you. |
| **Prayer**  So as we think about the journeys undertaken by others, and by ourselves, let us pray.  Holy Spirit of Life and Love, You who are our source and our ultimate destiny, lead us this day on a crooked path. So often we are in so much of a hurry, taking the direct route to our goal, not allowing ourselves to be distracted, sometimes being too direct with each other In all that we seek to do, and to be.  But we can see that no river takes a direct path to the sea, your trees and bushes sprout crooked limbs, and birds, beasts and insects meander in their search for food, shelter, or a mate.  We lose so much when we take the direct route—the motorway which bypasses the quaint town, the arrow that misses the mark, the chance to stop and say hello, and how are you, and really listen to the reply.  So lead us on the crooked path, past wandering streams and crooked trees, following our hearts desire, not just duty’s demands, for the crooked path also leads us home.  Music – Somewhere over the rainbow, by Eva Cassidy |
| Reflection – Follow the yellow brick road! Life is a journey for all of us. And each of us face challenges, and threats, and unnerving times as we travel. Just like Dorothy did. And sometimes, I can’t speak for you but I suspect that like me, you sometimes feel that you just aren’t equipped for the journey. Think of all those landmarks that we’ve made it through – going to school for the first time, how on earth were we ever going to survive – our first job – relationships – first major health problem. I can still remember my dad, when he first got his cancer diagnosis, saying no way can I cope with this, I’m an absolute wimp, it’s your mother who’s the strong one. And yet within a year, he was giving himself his own injections, coping with bone marrow extractions and horrible chemotherapy. He had the strength to get through.  Those three characters from the Wizard of Oz encompass all that we need to walk the yellow brick road.  The scarecrow believed that he was a complete fool, with no intelligence, no cleverness. But when push came to shove, he was the one who found the solutions to the problems that faced the travelers. And within each of us, if we let it bubble to the surface, is a problem solver. We might not be the academic types – but then life isn’t a series of essay questions, it’s about real situations, real dilemmas and conflicts, and all of us have that sort of problem solver within us, if only we can learn to trust our own judgement.  The lion thought he was a coward – frightened of everything, too scared to be of any use. But when his friends were threatened, he found the courage within him to go forward and stand his ground, to protect the people he loved. We too have boundless courage within us if only we would recognise it as such. After all, just getting out of bed in the morning is a brave thing to do in my mind – and I don’t mean that facetiously. The uncertainty of this world, the potential for disaster, or hurt, is huge, even more so now than usual – and I don’t blame anyone for wanting just to stay under the duvet, I frequently do myself. And yet look – here we are – every day we get up and face the unknown!  And then there was the tin man – he believed he had no feelings, and yet it turned out he had a heart of gold all along – he knew how to care, he knew how to show compassion – and he found the love within himself, there all along.  Our path at the moment is very unclear – you could say it’s less of a nice, bright yellow, and more of a murky grey, if it’s visible at all. Because over all the usual questions there’s the whole extra layer of obscurity brought by the pandemic – are we going back to the old normal, or finding a new normal, or will there never be such a thing as normal ever again? Some of us are racing to rejoin society again, others are finding the thought of venturing outside too terrifying at the moment. Some want to come back into church as soon as possible, others want to stay ‘online’ or ‘on paper’ for a while longer. The challenge for us is to find a path forward that keeps us together in heart even while allowing for different experiences and preferences. But we have the scarecrow’s mind – we will find a solution, because that’s what we do. We have the tin man’s heart – we will keep carrying each other and walking alongside each other with love and compassion – because that’s what we do. And we have the lion’s courage – we’ll face the challenges and the scary bits and the downright terrifying bits and reach the other side – because that’s what we do.  Brains, courage and heart – and we all have them. But there’s a bit of the Wizard of Oz that I have mixed feelings about. The story goes that they have to follow the yellow brick road at all costs – if they leave the road they will head into danger. And part of me wants to agree, and say you have to follow the path that is meant for you – but the other half of me wants to say, don’t be restricted – you don’t have to follow the path laid down by society, or by your parents, or even by a younger you. You have the freedom to make your own path. Go off road – go exploring – do things you’ve never thought you’d end up doing. Do what your heart calls you to do.  But then I wonder if I’m actually saying the same thing. The path your heart calls you to is your yellow brick road, and it will change direction over time, and sometimes it will seem so faint and indistinct you’ll hardly know it’s there. So follow your heart – use what my dad always called your nouse, your brains, and take your courage in both hands – and walk your path. And rest assured, you’ll always have companions along the way. Amen. |
| **Blessing – by Andrew Pakula**  There are miles behind you And many more ahead As you journey on toward wholeness May all that is good and true guide your way May the joy of love lighten every step And the miracle that is life be ever in your sight |