**Monton Unitarian Church**

**13th September 2020**

**Learning to Live**

**Welcome**

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 – by Judith L Quarles**

Let us join our hearts and minds in the quiet of meditation and prayer. But how shall we pray?

First, let us be open to the silence. Let us hear the sounds in this room, sighing, and creaking chairs. The noises outside, the traffic, people’s voices calling out in friendship to each other. Let us begin to hear the soft beating of our hearts. And let us listen intently for messages from within.

Next, let us feel gratitude for our lives and for our beautiful earth. As hard as life gets, as sad or lonely as we sometimes feel, let us always be warmed by the gifts of this life.

Next, let us hold in our hearts all those, known or unknown who are in need. May we find in ourselves the energy and knowledge to bring care to the world.

And finally, let us be aware of the blessing that it is not ours alone to do the work of the world. Love and community work wonders that we by ourselves could never manage.

Amen.

## **Reading – An 87 Year Old College Student Named Rose**

The first day of school our professor introduced himself and challenged us to get to know someone we didn’t already know. I stood up to look around when a gentle hand touched my shoulder. I turned round to find a wrinkled, little old lady beaming up at me with a smile that lit up her entire being.

She said, “Hi handsome. My name is Rose. I’m eighty-seven years old. Can I give you a hug?”

I laughed and enthusiastically responded, “Of course you may!” and she gave me a giant squeeze.

“Why are you in college at such a young, innocent age?” I asked.

She jokingly replied, “I’m here to meet a rich husband, get married, and have a couple of kids…”

“No seriously,” I asked. I was curious what may have motivated her to be taking on this challenge at her age.

“I always dreamed of having a college education and now I’m getting one!” she told me.

After class we walked to the student union building and shared a chocolate milkshake. We became instant friends. Every day for the next three months, we would leave class together and talk nonstop. I was always mesmerized listening to this “time machine” as she shared her wisdom and experience with me.

Over the course of the year, Rose became a campus icon and she easily made friends wherever she went. She loved to dress up and she revelled in the attention bestowed upon her from the other students. She was living it up. At the end of the semester we invited Rose to speak at our football banquet. I’ll never forget what she taught us. She was introduced and stepped up to the podium.

As she began to deliver her prepared speech, she dropped her three by five cards on the floor. Frustrated and a little embarrassed she leaned into the microphone and simply said, “I’m sorry I’m so jittery. I gave up beer for Lent and this whiskey is killing me! I’ll never get my speech back in order so let me just tell you what I know.”

As we laughed she cleared her throat and began.

“We do not stop playing because we are old; we grow old because we stop playing. There are only four secrets to staying young, being happy, and achieving success.

You have to laugh and find humor every day.

You’ve got to have a dream. When you lose your dreams, you die. We have so many people walking around who are dead and don’t even know it! There is a huge difference between growing older and growing up.

If you are nineteen years old and lie in bed for one full year and don’t do one productive thing, you will turn twenty years old. If I am eighty-seven years old and stay in bed for a year and never do anything I will turn eighty-eight.

Anybody can grow older. That doesn’t take any talent or ability. The idea is to grow up by always finding opportunity in change. Have no regrets.”

She concluded her speech by courageously singing “The Rose.” She challenged each of us to study the lyrics and live them out in our daily lives.

At the year’s end Rose finished the college degree she had dreamed of all those years ago. One week after graduation Rose died peacefully in her sleep. Over two thousand college students attended her funeral in tribute to the wonderful woman who taught by example that it’s never too late to be all you can possibly be.

**Reading – Try to Love the Questions Themselves, by Rainer Maria Rilke**

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves

as if they were locked rooms
or books written in a very foreign language.

Don't search for the answers,
which could not be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live them.

And the point is, to live everything.

Live the questions now.

Perhaps then, someday far in the future,

you will gradually, without even noticing it,
live your way into the answer.

**Reading – On Teaching – by Kahlil Gibran**

No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.

The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding.

The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it.

And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weight and measure, but he cannot conduct you thither.

For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man.

And even as each one of you stands alone in God's knowledge, so must each one of you be alone in his knowledge of God and in his understanding of the earth.

**Prayer**

So let’s join together in a time of prayer – as we remember the horrors of the 9/11 attacks; as we are aware of the Black Lives Matters protests still trying to be properly heard; as people around the world still fight for the right to love who they want to love, and to live as the gender they want to live as; as our industrialised consumerism continues to herald environmental catastrophe; and as we know that violence and discrimination on the grounds of religion, or ethnicity, or colour, or politics, are as present as ever, we pray to the Spirit of Life and Love.

May all earth’s people learn that their minds and their bodies are worthy of worship, and should be nurtured, fed with living waters and spiritual nourishment.

May all earth’s people learn to feel the joy of belonging to a community of living, loving souls, connecting at the very root of their being.

May all earth’s people learn how to grow into strong, independent people, living in honesty and integrity, but always aware that they are surrounded and supported by friends.

May all earth’s people learn to feel the pain of the earth when we hurt it, and to dance with joy for each opening flower, and each newborn life.

May all earth’s people learn to live respectfully towards others, but never to feel diminished by others - if we claim equality for everybody else, we must be strong enough to claim it for ourselves also.

May all earth’s people learn that life will bring pain and sorrow as well as pleasure and joy, but that both good times and bad times should be valued for what they can teach us.

Most of all may all earth’s people learn to live and to love with every fibre of their being, and to know, beyond all doubt, that they are loved.

So let us spend a moment in quietness as we remember just how much we have learned along our journey, and give thanks for those special people who have inspired us to learn, to explore and to expand our horizons, and to become the people we are today. Let us be quiet together now.

May all earth’s people learn to live and to love with every fibre of their being, and to know, beyond all doubt, that they are loved. Amen.

**Reflection**

Schools went back, if you hadn’t noticed! It’s been rather central to my life at home this past few days, as you can imagine. So ‘learning’ and ‘education’ have been on my mind a lot, including remembering some of the highs and lows of my own time in school. We could probably spend hours, if not weeks, reminiscing about our school days – the best teachers, the worst teachers, the ones who helped us through bad times, or opened our minds to something special. The friends – and the enemies – the jokers and the hard workers. But we’d be wrong to think our learning stopped when we left.

There’s a whole host of sayings about learning, some of them directly contradictory – from the “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” to “you’re never too old to learn”. And clearly, I believe the second one of those! I remember my grandfather-in-law, at the age of 80 odd, announce that he was getting a computer and learning how to use the internet – within a month or so he was skyping his son in Germany, and wafting emails all over the place. My dad when he retired, announced he was doing a second history degree as his previous one was now 25 years out of date.

But we all do keep learning – or need to. If we stop, if we close our minds, believe that we know everything we need to know, then we will stagnate, cease to truly be alive. And that would be such a waste of the life we have been given. But learning is a complicated thing. When our children go to school, much of what they are expected to learn is concrete stuff – reading, writing, doing sums, learning facts about our world and its history. And all of that is important stuff, don’t get me wrong. But there’s another side of learning which has nothing to do with facts, and everything to do with attitude. It’s the attitude that acknowledges that no matter how much we learn, there will be so much more to discover – it’s an attitude of humility, curiosity.

Teachers – and we are all teachers, not just the people who stand in front of children in a classroom – teachers can offer their wisdom and knowledge and skills, but Khalil Gibran, in his book the Prophet, suggests that you will only learn from them if the wisdom and skill is already dormant within you. It’s a poetic way of saying that each of us need to find our own talents, our own field of wisdom, but that we can be guided and helped by others as we seek that inner knowledge. So he would argue that my music teacher helped hone the musician that was already inside of me – but my physics and chemistry teacher, sadly, never had a cat in hell’s chance of turning me into a scientist because that is not a language that I speak.

There’s a lot that we are having to learn, as individuals and as a society, in these modern times. There’s the “how to live in a pandemic” class for starters! How to keep loving and caring from a two metre distance, not holding our friends and laughing with them and singing with them like we’d normally do. And in my case, how to remember to take my mask when I go to the shops!

There’s learning about the diversity of genders and identities and sexualities. For many of us, life originally seemed very ‘simple’ – you are either male or female, and you match up with the opposite of yourself. But now we are realising and rejoicing in the fact that there is a whole kaleidoscope of identities and relationships – that no-one has to be defined, or confined, or labelled with any label that they do not choose for themselves.

There’s learning about our attitudes to race – the historical crimes against humanity passed off as norms; the exploitation that lies behind so many of the cultural landmarks of our country – maybe even some of our own churches; the blindness towards white privilege – the complete lack of understanding that so many white people have about how their lives are privileged, how certain difficulties can be smoothed out of the way just because of the colour of our skin; that racism is systemic throughout the world to some degree or another and that we are part of that system, and can choose to perpetuate the discrimination or fight against it.

Can we be taught our humanity from scratch, or does it come from within, and just need drawing out by life’s teachers? Very young children do not care whether another child is black or white or brown, what biological body parts they were born with, whether when they are older they will want to be known as he or she or they, and whether they will fall in love with a he or a she or a they if they fall in love at all – children just see another playmate. It is society’s lessons that cause us to make those distinctions, or notice skin tone, to classify and label and sanction and disapprove – is then that prejudice innate within us that gets drawn out by society? Or is there also something in us that sees the injustice and pushes back – finding ways to subvert society’s divisions, to relearn our reactions and our attitudes, to remind ourselves of that time when we were children and all we saw was another human being to love and play with.

Do you remember the words to Bette Midler’s The Rose? The one the Rose in our story sang?

Some say love, it is a river that drowns the tender reed.

Some say love, it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed.

Some say love, it is a hunger, an endless aching need.

I say love, it is a flower, and you its only seed.

It’s the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance.

It’s the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance.

It’s the one who won’t be taken, who cannot seem to give.

And the soul afraid of dyin’ that never learns to live.

When the night has been too lonely, and the road has been too long,

And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong,

Just remember in the winter far beneath the bitter snows

Lies the seed that with the sun’s love in the spring becomes the rose.

They are beautiful words. Though I confess I’m waiting for our gardener friends to point out that that ain’t really how roses grow! But the message is clear – no matter the fear, or the hesitation, within the coarsest husk of a seed can lie the most beautiful flower – but it can only bloom when warmed by love.

I know that sometimes there seem to be people whose goodness just can’t be reached, whose compassion seems to have melted away entirely, whose souls have been too badly damaged to be saved. Maybe they need a teacher greater than any of us. But for most of us, I do believe that the love is within us, that compassion may be half asleep, or afraid, or hurt, but is still there and can be awakened, and re-learnt. And we can help teach that lesson through our own actions and our conversations and our ways of being within each other – we can teach it to the children growing up in our community, to the strangers we pass on the street, even to each other here and now, as there will always be times when we forget our lessons and need to be reminded.

And so I pray again…

May all earth’s people learn that their minds and their bodies are worthy of worship, and should be nurtured, fed with living waters and spiritual nourishment.

May all earth’s people learn to feel the joy of belonging to a community of living, loving souls, connecting at the very root of their being.

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Most of all may all earth’s people learn to live and to love with every fibre of their being, and to know, beyond all doubt, that they are loved.

**Blessing (by Rev Amy Zucker Morgenstern)**

May all our hours together and apart be blessed as this one has been: by open-hearted sharing, learning from one another, and making beautiful harmonies together.
And may we greet everyone we encounter with the same acceptance and grateful kinship, until we meet again. Blessed be.