**Monton Unitarian Church**

**22nd November 2020**

**Learning from the children**

# Welcome – with words by Marni Harmony, adapted

We, whose journeys are always beginning
We, whose mission always awaits us
We, whose visions are bent on loving,
We gather together here.

We gather as a community drawn together out of common need,
each toting our own carpetbag of treasures and dreams.

We gather together seeking meaning,
yearning to understand life in all its dimensions—
as it challenges and expands, as it burdens, as it consoles and heals.

We gather together with questions—
the kinds of questions that provoke us to the path of action.

We gather with hope,
the kind of hope that pulses on through uncertainty.

We gather with tenderness,
the kind of tenderness that can only be born from knowing
human capabilities as well as human imperfections.

We gather wanting certainty, and having none,
but we are wakeful to possibilities as we seek discernment and gentle judgment.

We gather, then, unbounded—but close.

# We gather, drawn to worship, drawn to fellowship.Prayer – An Alternative Lord’s Prayer, by Alex Jensen

Spirit of Life and Love, Holy God, Source Eternal, in our midst yet still ever so elusive:

To breathe your sacred name is a blessing.

Your world become, Your will be done here, on Earth, inspired by our aspirations to do and be better people.

May we have all that we need to survive, live, and thrive.

Remind us to be gentle; may we love mercy and kindness, recalling the times when we've fallen short ourselves.

Call us to be firm; may we not be tempted to follow selfish motivations or reside in our narrow privileges, unexamined and uninterrogated; move us to counter and overcome evil and injustice in ourselves, our lives, and institutions.

Yours is the Beloved Community, the fire of commitment in our hearts, and the spirit of generosity and abundance, now and always.

Amen.

# Hymn – We laugh, we cry, by Shelley Jackson Denham

We laugh, we cry, we live, we die, we dance, we sing our song.

We need to feel there’s something here to which we can belong.

We need to feel the freedom just to have some time alone.

But most of all we need close friends we can call our very own.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love,

And we have found a need to be together.

We have our hearts to give, we have our thoughts to receive,

And we believe that sharing is an answer.

A child is born amongst us and we feel a special glow.

We see time’s endless journey as we watch the baby grow.

We thrill to hear imagination freely running wild.

We dedicate our minds and hearts to the spirit of the child.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love,

And we have found a time to be together.

And with the grace of age, we share the wonder of youth,

And we believe that growing is an answer.

Our lives are full of wonder and our time is very brief.

The death of one amongst us fills us all with pain and grief.

But as we live so shall we die, and when our lives are done

The memories we shared with friends, they will linger on and on.

And we believe in life, and in the strength of love,

And we have found a place to be together.

We have the right to grow, we have the gift to believe

That peace within our living is an answer.

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.

# Story - Everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten, by Robert Fulghum

Each spring, for many years, I have set myself the task of writing a personal statement of belief; a Credo. When I was younger, the statement ran for many pages, trying to cover every base, with no loose ends. It sounded like a Supreme Court brief, as if words could resolve all conflicts about the meaning of existence.

The Credo has grown shorter in recent years – sometimes cynical, sometimes comical, sometimes bland – but I keep working at it. Recently I set out to get the statement of personal belief down to one page in simple terms, fully understanding the naïve idealism that implied.

The inspiration for brevity came to me at a gasoline station. I managed to fill an old car’s tank with super-deluxe high-octane go-juice. My old hoopy couldn’t handle it and got the willies – kept sputtering out at intersections and belching going downhill. I understood. My mind and my spirit get like that from time to time. Too much high-content information, and I get the existential willies – keep sputtering out at intersections where life choices must be made and I either know too much or not enough. The examined life is no picnic.

I realised then that I already know most of what’s necessary to live a meaningful life – that it isn’t all that complicated. I know it. And have known it for a long, long time. Living it – well, that’s another matter, yes? Here’s my Credo:

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned…

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don’t hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don’t take things that aren’t yours.

Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life – learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup – they all die. So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned – the biggest word of all. LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if we all – the whole world – had cookies and milk about three o’clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they came from and to clear up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are – when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

# Reading – Children Widen the Circle of Our Being, by Gary Kowalski

Children widen the circle of our being in ways that are limitless.

Every baby that’s born connects us to our history, our own parents, grandparents and unknown forbears who brought new life to the world in each successive generation.

Every baby that’s born links us to the future, to a world yet to come that belongs to our descendants and that we hold in trust for our posterity whom we will never know.

Each child connects us to nature, to the innocence and exuberance of a world always hatching newborns: kittens and pups and lambs and babes.

Each child reminds us of the kinship we share with people of other lands and races who love their young as purely and tenderly as we do.

Each child connects us to the universe, to the holy mysteries of birth and death and becoming from which we all emerge.

Children widen the circle of our being in ways that are limitless.

# Prayer – Sensory Reflection, by Claudene (Deane) Oliva, adapted

I invite each of you to take a deep breath into the present moment, and, realizing that not everyone will have the functions to enter into all of these movements, but grateful for the skills that we do have, I invite you, as you are willing and able, to participate in this interactive meditation.

Spirit of love, God of many names, we enter into this time of centering and sensory reflection. Let us shake out our arms and hands and rest them by our sides. Let us shake out our legs and feet and plant them on the floor. Let us stretch our heads high. Let us take a deep breath of thankfulness.

Let us touch our eyes, happy to have the beauty of colours, line and shapes. Let us imagine the beauty of the world, the flowers, the trees, the babies, the puppies, all of the things in which we delight.

Let us touch our ears. Through them we hear glorious sounds, happy ones and sad ones, beautiful songs and lonely cries. Let us listen well so that we may live fully.

Let us touch our lips, for through these lips we receive the food and drink that nourishes us and helps us grow, and we speak the words that express our thoughts and feelings.

Let us touch our hearts for it is with our hearts that we know and share love.

Let us feel the world around us; In our imagination, let us experience the wind that cools us, the sun that warms us, and the rain that nourishes the earth and cleanses us all.

The beauty of life is all around us. Let us softly say, each in our own way, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you—and may we smile in delight.

Amen.

**Reading – All This Talk of Saving Souls, by Linda M. Underwood**

All this talk of saving souls.
Souls weren’t made to save,
like Sunday clothes that
give out at the seams.

They’re made for wear; they
come with lifetime guarantees.

Don’t save your soul.
Pour it out like rain on
cracked, parched earth.

Give your soul away, or
pass it like a candle flame.
Sing it out, or
laugh it up the wind.

Souls were made for hearing
breaking hearts, for puzzling dreams,
remembering August flowers,
forgetting hurts.

These men who talk of saving souls!
They have the look of bullies
who blow out candles before
you sing happy birthday,
and want the world to be
in alphabetical order.

I will spend my soul,
playing it out like sticky string
into the world,
so I can catch every
last thing I touch.

**Reflection – Learning from children**

World Children’s Day was first established in 1954 as Universal Children's Day and was celebrated on 20 November each year to promote international togetherness, awareness among children worldwide, and improving children's welfare. November 20th is an important date as it is the date in 1959 when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. It is also the date in 1989 when the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since 1990, World Children's Day has marked both those anniversaries acknowledging and upholding the commitment to the rights of the child.

We talk a lot about the things we need to teach the children in our care – every time I lead a baptism service I have a whole reading that talks about teaching them respect, and self-worth, and the value of joy and pain, and courage. I’ve done services about treating each child as an individual, encouraging them to grow in the direction their skills and interests lead them rather than trying to mould each child into identical shapes (anyone remember the story of the animal school, with the ducks having to run, the squirrels swimming until their fur fell out, and the eagles just point blank refusing to do what they were told!).

Because we feel so responsible towards the children in our care, and the children around the world, it’s easy to get stuck into the rut of the ‘adult to child’ approach – we have stuff to teach them, we need to push them in certain directions, discourage some behaviours, instil discipline, offer ‘guidance’. And we want to show them all about responsible adulthood, and clever ways of thinking, and all the serious side of life. And it’s all well-meaning, I’m sure. But it’s very one way, don’t you think?

There’s actually quite a lot that we need to learn from children themselves, and from the simplicity of childhood. That reading from Robert Fulghum, I think has to be one of my favourite ever readings – and he’s right, if we only used those lessons as our guide in all our adult interactions and decision makings, then the world would indeed be a much nice, cleaner, friendlier place! It goes right alongside Baz Luhrmann’s Wear Sunscreen (although admittedly that’s written from an adult’s point of view talking to college kids! Still got some very wise advice though.)

Simplicity is one of the lessons I wish more of us remembered – remember those very early Christmases or birthdays, when often it was the simplest, smallest presents that made the most impact on us? I was too young to remember, but my sister tells the story of one Christmas when we were little, getting ready to go to church on Christmas morning, where the minister always invited the children to go up and show their favourite present – despite having been given some wonderful toys, she took a tiny plastic pram from a doll’s set with her as the one thing she wanted to show everyone! As children grow older, we feel we have to keep upping the ante, getting more and more complicated, expensive presents – we lose the simplicity of the magic of a chocolate orange side by side with a real orange, or the fun of post-it notes, or the excitement of a book or a CD (do people even buy CDs anymore, is that just me?).

Honesty is another. “Out of the mouths of babes” is that wise old saying – and while a child’s honest and blunt speech can bring cringy embarrassment, if not actual humiliation sometimes, there’s also some wisdom in actually just saying what you mean. As adults, we can often beat around the bush, avoid saying what we mean, be somewhat sparing with the truth, or even just downright lie to avoid an unpleasant situation. And while I’m not advocating saying exactly what we think purely to hurt or upset someone, there’s a lot to be said for being more honest about what we really do feel or think. I remember as a teenager going to stay with my Great Aunt Nancy. She made some cold cucumber soup one lunch – afterwards, when I said it was “very nice”, she laughed and said, “ah yes, your grandma told me, if you say something’s “very nice” that means you don’t like it!” That’s about a very minor issue, but saying what we really mean about little things also helps us learn to stand up for ourselves, to acknowledge that our opinion counts, that we do have a voice – though it is of course always important to use our voice respectfully!

Playfulness is one of the best things we can learn from children. So much of adult life these days feels so serious, and heavy, if not downright grim at times, and it can be so easy to be completely overwhelmed by it all. But taking time to find opportunities for play, and fun, and laughter, and silliness is so important. Alongside this is physicality – because of all the serious crises we are facing (and I’m not denying any of the serious crises), we can get stuck ‘in our heads’, worrying and puzzling and imagining horrific futures. But the sensory reflection we did together earlier is one way of reminding ourselves of the blessings that are quite literally all around us, that we can touch and hear and smell and taste and see. Children find that so much easier than adults, who are taught to be restrained and controlled, taught that the mind is ‘better’ or ‘higher’ than the body – or even that the pleasures and joys of the body are sinful.

That’s why I like Linda Underwood’s poem so much – the encouragement not to be stingy with your soul, but to love this world with your whole being – “to sing it out, or laugh it up the wind”, and with that sense of playfulness, to “spend my soul, playing it out like sticky string into the world, so I can catch every last thing I touch.”

Yes, there are many things that we as adults need to teach the children around us. Yes, we need to work to make sure that each child is safe, and secure, and happy – learning and growing and discovering. Yes, we need to prepare the children in our community to be ready to take over the reins and lead us forward into what will hopefully be a better world than the one we managed to make. But we also need to learn from the children around us – to value simplicity, and honesty, and playfulness, and the joys that our body can bring us. And if we can learn respectfully from each other, across the age differences, and grow together as we do so, then there is yet hope for our children’s children.

**Blessing**

This blessing is adapted slightly from one written by the Rev Celia Cartwright, and I use it to end all my baptism services, as a blessing for the whole community.

Let us go in peace –

May we live together in harmony,

May we see beauty in everything,

May we find wonder in each passing moment

And may we learn to walk gently on this earth. Amen.