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On Refuge

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In this month of holidays and holy days, we explore the spiritual theme of refuge. What does it mean to offer refuge—to ourselves and each other? Where do we find refuge?

Opening Words adapted from a prayer offered by Richard Trudeau.

O Spirit of life, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different. May this be a place where no experience is necessary—where people are encouraged to risk new things: where a university administrator can try her hand at plumbing, if she wants, or a plumber can help manage the finances, or a banker can teach five-year-olds.

O Spirit, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different. May this be a place where people are touched—if not by something said, then perhaps by something sung, or by the light coming through the windows, or by the sense that the people who come here support one another. May this be a place where everyone feels safe: safe to follow their thoughts wherever they lead, safe to believe whatever they must, and safe to share whatever is on their minds and whatever is in their hearts.

O Spirit, help us make this church a refuge from the world, a place where the rules are different—a place where our wells can fill up again, where we can be refreshed and renewed, so that, when we return to the world with our batteries recharged, we can help transform the world into a place where the rules are different.

Reading: Part 1

Today's readings are adapted from "Searching for Home" by Christian Schmidt:

This sense of finding a home, even a temporary one, is so human, isn't it? We all want to feel at home, somewhere, somehow. We want a space and a feeling that is ours—that we are safe—in a world that is often not safe, and where very little is ours.

On Refuge: Part 1

These past few years have been hard times for so many people. The global pandemic has affected us all, some more than others. Everything has changed: how we work and play, how we mourn and celebrate, how we gather and worship, how we live and die.

Early on in the pandemic when we knew so little and we were so scared, we sought refuge at home, those of us who have homes. We sought refuge in science, in isolation and online. We learned Zoom work, Zoom school and Zoom church. As the pandemic progressed, we sought refuge in masks and distance, moving outside when we could. Now we seek refuge in vaccines, boosters, and still masks, distancing, moving outside.

In a way, we are all Covid refugees. We left a previous time—"before-Covid"—moving through to a time that is yet to come, moving through unsettled and uncertainty to a time that is not clear yet. We've left what was known for the unknown and uncertain.

What was known, what we had before, didn't work for many people. It worked for some, and who it worked for and didn't work for is, of course, part of the learning of this time. Those of us who are progressive liberals learned that the progress we'd made wasn't as much as we'd hoped or wanted. Those of us who are black, indigenous, or people of color already knew that times were hard. Others of us had to be reminded or shown, the curtain pulled back to reveal the magnitude of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism.

Hard times for sure.

I had about 7 months as your minister before Covid. It was my first year here, listening and learning how things worked. I came to know this sanctuary—the chalice, the quilt, the chairs and carpet. The walls. I came to know the sound of the piano and the choir. The sound of our congregational singing.

As I heard your stories of finding Unitarian Universalism and finding OUUC, stories of building this place, I came to understand this place as a sanctuary, as a refuge.

At the beginning of Covid, I led worship from my home office. It was weird preaching to a small green dot on my desktop. But I could see your faces in Zoom boxes. We were still connected. Connection, not perfection. Before too long Troy and I returned to the OUUC building. Troy set up his studio in The Commons, leading choir rehearsals and voice class from there. I returned to the sanctuary to lead worship. I propped my laptop on the pulpit and logged into Zoom, seeing you once again in little boxes on my screen.

While I could see Troy as he sat at the piano through the sanctuary and Commons windows, I was in this space, the sanctuary, alone. Just me, and an echo when I spoke. And over the months, my experience of sanctuary shifted. I learned that sanctuary wasn't this space. It was you. This space wasn't a sanctuary until I logged into Zoom, and you were here with me. What makes this space a refuge, a sanctuary, a sacred space, is you, however you arrive here. Sanctuary, refuge, is us.

Reading: Part 2

Christian Schmidt continues:

That perfect home, perfectly safe or perfectly suited to us—that perfect theology—may not be possible in our lifetimes or even in this world. But we try.

So I look at the terrible mass shootings we've endured, or the tolls of various natural disasters in our nation and around the world, those turned into refugees from violence in their homelands, and I pray for those hurt, I grieve for those lost. I want to do better to make our world a little safer, a little more like a place where everyone feels at home.

On Refuge: Part 2

Buddhism teaches that by taking refuge, we are in some way acknowledging that we are refugees, we are homeless and seeking safety. There is a resignation in the awareness that we live in a world that is often unsafe and where very little is ours. In such uncertainty, what is it that we can trust?

There are three places that Buddhists go for refuge, for protection and shelter: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the sangha. These are called The Three Jewels because they offer spiritual wealth and are always present for us. Tara Brach teaches that taking refuge in the Buddha doesn't mean worshiping the Buddha as a god. It means noticing and honoring the Buddha nature in ourselves. It is seeking protection in understanding, loving kindness, and compassion.

As Unitarian Universalists we might name taking refuge in the Buddha as honoring what Ralph Waldo Emerson called "the divine spark" within us. This way of taking refuge is turning inward for our sacred wisdom. We find refuge within.

The second place of refuge in Buddhism is the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Dhamma means turning to teachings for guidance on the path to wisdom and compassion.

As UU's we draw from many sources on our spiritual journeys, so seeking refuge in the Dhamma could mean finding wisdom from the teachings of others, whether written or spoken. It may be listening to the experience of another or reflecting on an ancient text. In this way, we connect to something beyond ourselves. Some might call that "something" life experience or learning. Others might call it God or Spirit. We find refuge in the beyond.

The last of the Three Jewels is taking refuge in the sangha. Thich Nhat Hahn describes the sangha as the friends who support us on our spiritual journey. A sangha could be a faith community like this one, where we can learn and grow, try new things and practice new learning. We find refuge among and between us.

At the core, taking refuge is about trust. It requires that we recognize that we are lost, refugees, in search of safety and protection. When we turn within for an awareness of our own wisdom, we trust that we will find a spark of divinity. When we turn to teachings, either ancient or modern, we trust that we can open our minds, hearts and hands to what we are offered and will learn. When we turn to others, we trust that we will be seen, heard, cared for and accompanied on our journey.

The symbol of Unitarian Universalism is a flaming chalice. It was created for the Unitarian Service Committee working with refugees in Europe during World War II. The Committee asked for a symbol that would be recognized by refugees as indicating a place where they could find safety and protection. Our flaming chalice has two ancient symbols: the chalice for welcome and hospitality, and the flame for warmth and commitment. When we light our chalice each Sunday, we honor that this is a sanctuary. We send a beacon, a symbol to each other that we give and receive refuge here. Not because of this room, these walls, or this building, but because of who we are. We are a community and a faith built on connection. Connection, not perfection. We offer refuge for each other and, in our justice work, to others in our community.

This month we tell ancient stories of refuge, of trust. Long ago, a young traveler trusted that there would be a place for her to give birth to her child. Ancient Israelites lit the temple lamp trusting that the flame would burn for as long as needed. We enter the darkness of winter trusting that Spring will come once again.

As we explore the spiritual theme of refuge this month, I invite you to consider what you are willing to trust. Where do you find refuge? How do you offer refuge to others? How can we make our world a little safer, a little more like a place where everyone feels at home?

May we make this so.

Extinguishing the Chalice

"Glow Hope" By Mary Shelden

More than relic—

Living symbol:

Beacon to the bewildered illuminating refuge;

Light of love calling to community;

Signal of sacred mission.

Shine now in the world, Set being ablaze,

Kindle our courage, Ignite intuition.

Spark our hearts to service.

Glow hope.