



Longing

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.

In 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher proclaimed that religion was “a sense and taste for the infinite in the finite.” He believed we could sense the wholeness of the world, even if we ourselves are a tiny, circumscribed part of it. Schleiermacher was an eighteenth-century German theologian, so his writing is often dense and sometimes confusing, but his assertion that religion emerges from a desire to sense and taste something more than the finite resonates across the centuries. We long to find a wholeness amidst a fragmented, incomplete world and search for “the feeling and intuition of the universe.”

In a more modern context, former Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor claims that when people talk about being “spiritual but not religious,” what spiritual often means is “the name for a longing — for more meaning, more feeling, more connection, more life.” Taylor notes that even people who rest comfortably inside the institutional church and consider themselves religious feel this longing and “harbor the sense that there is more to life than they are being shown.”

When UUs sing about there being “more love somewhere,” this may be the feeling we are trying to express. We know there is *more*, and we are going to “keep on ‘til we find it.” For many of us, longing is a critical part of our relationship with the holy, however we define the meaning of holiness. We long to recognize the holy within ourselves and in the people around us. We look for the holy in nature. Our religious longing stems from a desire to be part of something greater than ourselves, to be *more*.

In other words, longing is part of the human condition. In the late capitalist society we live in, however, we are constantly being sold the lie that material goods will satisfy our longings and provide fulfillment. Bombarded

by messages linking happiness with consumption, we get lost amidst the promise of easy solutions to our longing for more. Our yearning for connection and depth get repackaged and expressed as a craving for stuff. Advertisers promise we can “super-size” our fries, “taste the rainbow” with our candy, and know that for “everything else, there’s Mastercard.” The dominant message blares: we need to do more, spend more, own more.

Our longing deserves better.

One answer? The Irish priest and poet John O’Donohue asks that each of us “come to accept your longing as divine urgency” and to bless “the longing that brought you here and quickens your soul with wonder.” Similarly, every Sunday at Unity our common prayer calls us to “live into our longing to embody and help to build the Beloved Community.” The plea that we might “live into our longing” is a countercultural understanding of longing. This is not longing as acquisition, as unfulfilled sexual desire, as yearning for lost youth. Instead, our weekly prayer calls us to stay awake to new possibilities and keep moving toward our better selves. Living into longing creates a divine urgency that pulls us toward the holy and helps us move from isolation into community.

But for all the theological implications of longing leading us toward wholeness, it is a bittersweet feeling. The sound of oboes and a bow pulled taut across violin strings, an aching desire for a former love, melancholic memories of childhood homes: all those embody longing. We long for people who were once part of our lives, but are now gone. Longing is imbued with emptiness, a sense of something lost, cravings that refuse to be satisfied. As William Blake wrote, “joy and woe are woven fine, clothing for the soul divine: under every grief and pine runs a joy with silken

twine.” Longing contains the potential for heartbreak.

Indeed, Buddhist teachings name longing and desire as the *cause* of suffering, cautioning that we need to give up “grasping desire” and instead bring loving awareness to our needs. Too often, unhealthy longing impedes our ability to be mindful, causes us pain. Learning to embrace the incompleteness of life, to accept longing and realize it is not meant to be solved but instead lived with in a companionable way, shifts how we understand our desires. While longing never disappears, it can become our friend, a pathway toward openness. One answer to the longing for *more* comes in noticing the everyday miracles that happen when we pay attention. What we long for surrounds us.

So singing loudly from the grey hymnal (#209), let’s “come, you longing thirsty souls, drink freely from the spring. And come, you weary, famished folk, and end your hungering. Why spend yourself on empty air? Why not be satisfied? For everywhere a feast is spread that’s always at our side.”

Hallman Ministerial Intern

Kathryn Jay with this month's theme team: Drew Danielson,

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Longing Theme Resources

BOOKS

The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History by Mircea Eliade (1954)

100 Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez (1967)

CHILDREN'S BOOK

Zen Shorts by Jon Muth (2005)

MOVIES

Coco (2017)

The Visitor (2007)