

Facing our Fears with Courage, Gratitude, and Generosity

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

March 4, 2018

Rev Paul Beckel

Good morning. Before anything else let's settle our minds and our hearts. Let's get so settled that even if those around us are not settled, we'll be ok. Confident that our phone won't ring for the next hour... confident that even if we're here for two or three hours it will be fine because we are held here in a circle of empathy, goodwill, and loving kindness.

Melanie Rieck and Ruth Ann Hanlin have prepared a special chant for us as our prelude which, if it succeeds, will not elicit from us a rousing response, but simply a moment of grace as the final notes fade to silence.

PRELUDE *Homage to Kwan Yin*

Welcome to Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. One thing I can always count on at BUF is a great turnout like this when we do our canvass kickoff! Because we are a generous people. Thus our theme today of facing our fears with courage, gratitude, and generosity. Let's begin by lighting the flaming chalice, which connects us to Unitarian Universalists throughout the country... and sharing our covenant, words chosen by this particular congregation that connect us to one another... and to those no longer with us who for decades committed themselves to the good work of radical hospitality, fierce defense of social justice, gentle engagement around our enriching diversity, and fearless pursuit of the truth about ourselves, our imperfections, and this astonishing web of interdependence in which we live and die.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE / COVENANT

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG / CHILDREN'S FOCUS *I Whistle a Happy Tune*

The congregation sang this song in its original form while the kids came up to sit on the risers with the Phoenix Ensemble.

Then several members of the ensemble shared lyrics of their own. (Between each verse we got a few comments from the kids about facing fears.) Here are a few of the verses:

Carrie: Whenever I feel afraid / And things are looking bleak
I put on some happy tunes And Dance with Dominique / For awhile.

We swing and spin and whirl / And do our coolest moves
In spite of these crazy times / we get back in the groove / And we smile.

Kevin: Whenever I feel afraid / I run to Whatcom Falls
And find my healing stone / And touch it with this prayer, “make me whole”

Jayme: Whenever I feel afraid, / I clean the kitchen sink,
The countertop & the floor / And watch my worries shrink / ...til they're gone!

Jan K: I've written several stanzas, / It's been a useful quest,
But I am here to tell you I cannot meet the test, I'm afraid.

I cannot sing a solo, / I do not wish to stress,
I'd rather swallow acid, / I humbly must confess, I'm afraid.

Paul: So, if you're afraid or not / No matter if big or small
There's something we can do / When the scaries come to call, and say “boo”

First look right at that fear / And choose what next to do
Then tell yourself you're strong / Or say “how interesting, this is new”

ERACISM MINUTE

Courtney Lyons on Microaggression

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

For our meditation today I'm going to invite you into a moment of mindfulness, a moment of observing without judging. We've been talking about mindfulness all year, and I trust that you've found some opportunities to practice here and there on your own. Letting go of analysis, even letting go of emotional responses to what we see and hear, simply to observe and acknowledge the reality in any given moment... with all its particulars... and without the interference of reactivity or fear.

So, now that you are experienced mindfulness practitioners, let's take it to the next level. I invite you today to bring to mind a moment which was uncomfortable, a situation perhaps that you responded to with courage. Don't choose an experience that is still raw or upsetting.

When we begin, I invite you to simply observe that moment, not asking how or why it arose. See yourself, and your response, objectively, without shame or defensiveness or criticism. If this feels stressful, acknowledge to yourself that this is stressful. Don't start out, tho, with something that's going to be overwhelming. Today I encourage you to choose a situation in which you were courageous. I'll ring a chime after about 3 minutes.

MESSAGE

And now for something completely different. I was a high school cheerleader. So I look forward to this Sunday, this particular Sunday in March, once every seven years. The day we can yell at the top of our voices celebrating our collective power, celebrating our fearless determination... simply by noting the date. So, all together now, what day is it? [MARCH FOURTH!] x3....

My notes here say: “repeat ad nauseum....”

How can we feel afraid when we combine our strength on such a vital cause (as the day on the calendar)! And then to look ahead to know that in just a few weeks April Fools' Day will also fall on a Sunday. I must confess, actually, that however much I've enjoyed preaching once every seven years on an April Fools' Day, this year, for the first time since 1945, April Fools Day will also be Easter. So of that I am a little bit afraid. There may be some unbridgeable gaps in the expectations that day. And I'm having a hard time remembering what I preached about in '45.

Anyway, while I'm in confession mode, I guess I need to acknowledge that the amazing power of shouting out something as meaningless as today's date... well, that sense of collective strength fades pretty quickly. It doesn't exactly make us allies in a common cause.

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Brene Brown talks about a similarly superficial kind of connection. She calls it "common-enemy intimacy." It's the kind of relationship we have when all that we have in common with one another is that we hate the same people or have contempt for the same ideas. (Or, maybe we do have more in common but we haven't bothered to discover it.) Common enemy intimacy can be *energizing* — a very quick bonding experience that we achieve *by talking about other people*. But being energized is not always the best way to face our fears.

Brown writes: "When I was interviewing people for my [research, many] talked about the pain of overhearing people talking about them or the pain of learning what the 'gossip' was about them. It was so heart-wrenching that I started working on a no-gossip practice [for myself]... It was only a matter of weeks [then] before I realized that several of my connections, what I thought of as real friendships, were founded entirely on talking about other people. Once that was gone, we had nothing in common to talk about."

So she calls "common enemy intimacy" a counterfeit connection — which can push us into behaving as abominably as the people we criticize — it's the opposite of true belonging.

When we all hide together behind the same barriers of ideology, we can still be quite alone. In fact, we may even be more anxious as we huddle together because we know that we dare not change our minds or challenge the collective dogma, or we'll be pushed out to the wolves. Clearly the religious left is as susceptible to this as anyone else.

This weakens us not just as individuals. If our organizations or social movements are founded in the hatred of common enemies, our organizations and social movements themselves can become weak and even *irrelevant*.

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Rev Susan Frederick-Gray, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association mentioned irrelevance in her commentary this week in UU World magazine. I don't even remember what she was writing about — but one sentence struck me hard (she's a preacher, she's totally cool with people just remembering one sentence). Susan wrote: "Irrelevance is a form of complicity."

"Irrelevance is a form of complicity." That strikes me, I imagine, because "complicity" is a word

I've been heaving, lately, at others. So wait a minute... *I may be complicit* in some kind of foolishness, wastefulness, or betrayal of our shared values?! I may be undermining my own values... simply by doing nothing? Or nothing that matters?

Burying my talents? Locking down my strengths? Succumbing to fears that I truly do have the wherewithal to overcome? ...Not that we can overcome all fears and all barriers, but really, who are we to play small, deny our true creative capacities, our extraordinary potential for courage, gratitude, and generosity?

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Do you ever feel like quitting? I sure do. And then I feel guilty because I have no excuses to feel that way. And you know what? The guilt doesn't help at all. It doesn't motivate me at all to be reminded, by myself or anyone else, that I have nothing to whine about and I just need to get up and take responsibility.

What does help, what does motivate me is working with allies. Making plans with allies. Even disagreeing with allies, at times, because coming up with different approaches to the work often is the work. But then after a period of deliberation, the motivation fades, or turns to disillusion, if we end up going nowhere. If we work hard and end up being thwarted not by real barriers, but by more and more and more deliberation.

So it's good to hang around people who have a variety of ways to stay fired up. Maybe what motivates you and enables you to face your fears is a grand vision of how things could be, or maybe it's a practical step by step plan, or direct action, or a mentor or hero who has been knocked down and come back up again, tripped over her own feet, and come back up again, mocked and humiliated, and come back up again.

There are some pretty extraordinary folks around us today. Adventurous daring folks — not fearless, but tenacious. Those active in anti-racist activities decades before I was born. Those badgered for their race, religion, or sexual orientation for decades before I was born. Those who were told, are still being told, that certain jobs are only for men. Those who have lost family and friends to fights over politics or religion. Those who have lost family and friends for no reason at all. But haven't given up on a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Haven't given up on equality, reason, and the transforming power of love.

Carl Nyblade has been canvassing or leading BUF's spring pledge drive for 30 years now. I hope he hasn't lost any friends over this. He seems to enjoy it quite a bit. Asking for money: now there's a fear a lot of us have... *and this place, this program, this beloved community is evidence that that fear can be survived.*

Melanie Rieck has been playing piano through the highs and lows of 30 pledge drives too. Our next most senior staff member after Melanie has been with us through 6 or 7. Having your livelihood depend on an annual fund drive is not for the faint of heart.

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A couple of weeks ago I spoke about mindfulness and denial. Denial is certainly not a means of

overcoming fear. When I first heard the song, *I Whistle a Happy Tune*, I was taken aback. Was this song celebrating denial? But then I listened more closely and understood its message: that learning how to be courageous is not the same as learning how to deny our fears.

Whether we're fearing personal or social or environmental problems... Or fearing the solutions: solutions that may involve seeing and acknowledging things that we've not wanted to see and acknowledge.... Solutions that may involve sacrifice.... Solutions that accompany a loss of our sense of grounding — but are really just a matter of acknowledging that that ground, so vital to us in the past, no longer exists.

It's totally understandable that we'd fear solutions like this.

And it's essential that think about them carefully. And then, if we determine that they are in fact the solutions that we have been called to enact, that we press on with gratitude. With allies. With curiosity and humility... with awareness of our vulnerabilities, and moral courage... with respect for, and commitment to a foundation for all of the above, which we can find in some basic guiding principles.

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The principles that guide this congregation, through which we embrace our larger movement and our living tradition, are woven into the responsive reading printed in today's order of service. Let's remind ourselves now:

RESPONSIVE READING by Rev Scott Alexander, adapted

In a world filled with both hostility... and empathy,

We need a beloved community that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In a world of brutality and fear... kindness and goodwill,

We need a beloved community that seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

In a world of dogmatism and falsehood... critical thinking and new discoveries,

We need a beloved community that challenges us to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

In a world filled with tyranny, oppression... and hard-won wisdom about social progress,

We need a beloved community that affirms the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.

In a world with so much inequality and strife... generosity and understanding,

We need a beloved community that strives toward the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

In a world with so much environmental degradation... along with gifts of sustenance, and breathtaking beauty,

We need a beloved community that advocates respect for the interdependent web of all existence — of which we are a part.

In a world of uncertainty and despair... courage and love,

We need a beloved community that helps us to live within it all — giving over our hearts to hope, and our hands to service.

CANVASS KICKOFF

If we need beloved community... how do we get one, and sustain one?

Written by Roz Reynolds, performed by Roz, Rick Steele, and Jesse Reynolds as your narrator

Narrator: Good morning. Today marks the official beginning of BUF's annual pledge drive, otherwise known as our spring canvass. Starting today, a friendly canvasser should be getting in touch with you to set up a time to get together. In the course of this conversation, the canvasser may ask you what brought you to BUF, and why BUF remains important to you. They may ask for your feedback on how we're doing, both positive and negative. And for sure they will give you your pledge card and ask you to fill it out. Easy-peasy.

Now, for some of us, especially people who have never experienced a canvass before, this can be a time of mild anxiety. You may be wondering, What is it like to be canvassed? How is this not awkward and uncomfortable? Will the canvasser give me the hard sell? Will they judge me based on how much I give? Maybe you're imagining a scenario something like this:

Canvasser: [knocks on door. Member opens door.] Hi!

Member: Hi! You must be Roz.

Canvasser: Yes! And you must be...[consults notes]...Rich.

Member: Rick, actually.

Canvasser: Rick, sorry! Thanks for taking the time to meet with me tonight.

Member: Oh, sure. Come on in.

Canvasser: Thank you.

Member: Let's just go through to the kitchen...

Canvasser: Hey, nice floors!

Member: Thanks. We just had those done.

Canvasser: Yeah, they look great! [Pauses.] You might want to do your walls next.

Member: Er...yes, come to think of it, I probably should. Here, have a seat. [They sit down. Member shifts nervously.]

Canvasser: So, Rich...

Member: Rick.

Canvasser: Rick. Tell me why BUF is so important to you.

Member: Well, I enjoy the Sunday services, and I've recently joined the choir, and I've really been enjoying that, too. Also I appreciate all the things that BUF stands for in the community.

Canvasser: Oh, good. Yes, it is wonderful, isn't it? BUF does just so much for us, doesn't it. And of course none of it is possible without generous annual pledges from our members and friends.

Member: Uh...right.

Canvasser: Well, here is your pledge card. Feel free to fill it out. Let me know if you have any questions. Take your time. I'll just be waiting right here.

Member: Okay. Thanks. [Leans over to fill out form. Canvasser leans over to see what they're writing. Member looks up and sees them watching. Canvasser looks away. Member tries to shift position so canvasser can't see. And so on. Member gets more and more nervous. Maybe can't get pen to work? Finally finishes. Hands form to canvasser.] Here you go. [Sighs.]

Canvasser: Thank you! [Glances at form. Face falls.] Oh. Is that it.

Member: Is that okay?

Canvasser: [Snippy.] Oh, it's not up to me to say. If BUF is only worth this much to you, that's entirely your decision.

Member: I mean, I really **wish** I could give more...

Canvasser: Oh, say no more, I'm sure you'd give more if you could. Especially if you thought about how we have to pay the music director to lead this choir that you claim to enjoy so

much. Not to mention the project to expand the stage. But who really cares, I mean, I'm sure it's fine if a choir member falls off the stage now and then...

Member: [Looking pained.] I know, I really would give more, I just don't have all that much money kicking around at the moment. My income hasn't gone up this year, and yet there have been all these unforeseen expenses...

Canvasser: Please, you don't need to explain yourself to me. [Pauses.] You did find the money to refinish your floors, though.

Member: Oh...Well...The floors were in pretty bad shape...

Canvasser: You know what, it's fine. Everyone's allowed to set their own priorities. Some of us care about sustaining a warm, welcoming liberal religious community that helps us realize our values in the world. And others care about their floors. It's fine.

Member: [Looking desperate.] It's not that I don't care...

Canvasser: I mean, some of our staff don't have health insurance, but you know, I'm sure they'd understand about your floors.

Member: [Groans miserably.] I feel so bad...

Canvasser: Oh, don't feel bad! I'm sure it will be fine. I'm sure someone else will be able to make up for it. [Begins to get tearful.] I could probably cash out my retirement fund early... I'm sure the penalty won't be too much...

Member: Aaugh! Here! [Grabs pledge card and adjusts it.] Take it all! Just take it!

Canvasser: Oh, how generous, thank you! I'll be sure to pass along your feedback, Rich. Bye!

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Narrator: If you think it's awkward to be canvassed, think what it's like to be the canvasser. First-time canvassers, especially, may have some worries about what these canvass meetings might be like. I mean, they might be like this:

Canvasser: [Knocks. Member opens the door just a crack.] Uh...Hi! Vlad?

Vlad: That is not my name.

Canvasser: Oh, I'm sorry. [consults notes.] Gosh, I must have made a mistake, I really thought your name was Vlad.

Vlad: Not "Vlad." Vlad.

Canvasser: Vlad?

Vlad: Vlad.

Canvasser: Vlad??

Vlad: Vlaaaaad.

Canvasser: Vlaaaaad.

Vlad: Close enough.

Canvasser: Whew! Well, uh, can I come in?

Vlad: Who are you?

Canvasser: Oh, I'm sorry, I'm Roz, from BUF. [No response.] I'm your canvasser. [No response.] I'm here to talk with you about your thoughts about BUF, and to have you fill out your pledge card...?

Vlad: I know nothing of this.

Canvasser: Well, we spoke on the phone yesterday. You told me to come by now.

Vlad: That seems highly unlikely.

Canvasser: Yes, I really did speak with you, and you said to come by tonight at 7.

Vlad: A-ha! It is not 7 yet!

Canvasser: Are you sure? Because...

Vlad: [Holds up hand to interrupt. Stares at his watch for five seconds, then looks up.] It is now 7.

Canvasser: Oh...good. Sorry for coming early, haha. Can I come in now?

Vlad: [Pause.] If you must. [Slowly opens the door.]

Canvasser: [Enters house.] Wow, your decor is really...interesting. Is that a coffin?

Vlad: It is my bed. Don't touch.

Canvasser: Right. Well, um, you seem like someone who likes to just get down to things, so let's launch right in. Tell me, what is it that you appreciate about BUF?

Vlad: Hardly anything.

Canvasser: Really? That's...that's...You know, I'm pretty sure I've seen you at every Sunday service this year.

Vlad: I'm always disappointed.

Canvasser: And coffee hour.

Vlad: Never enough food.

Canvasser: Well, you know, all the food is donated, so maybe next week you should bake some cookies and bring them in, haha...

Vlad: [Scathing look.] Vlad does not bake cookies.

Canvasser: [Clears throat.] Right. Sorry. Well, tell you what, I'll be sure to pass along your feedback.

Vlad: Tell them they should do a better job of accommodating my food restrictions.

Canvasser: Okay, what are those?

Vlad: I only drink blood.

Canvasser: Ooookay.

Vlad: Also, the lights, they are too bright. And all those mirrors in the restrooms. They are so ableist. You should keep in mind how it might feel for those of us who have no reflection.

Canvasser: Oh, gosh, I never thought about that. That's...important feedback, thank you. [Writes, pauses.] You didn't really mean that about drinking blood, did you?

Vlad: No, of course not. [Pause.] I suck blood. And speaking of which, you know what else sucks? Paul's sermons! Make sure you tell him that!

Canvasser: [Pauses, writes.] "Vlad says Paul's sermons..."

Vlad: No, no, don't use my name!

Canvasser: Tell you what, Vlad, I'll pass along the feedback about the bright lights, the mirrors, and the lack of suitable snacks at coffee hour. But if you don't like Paul's sermons, I'm going to let you tell him that yourself.

Vlad: But I don't want to hurt his feelings!

Canvasser: You know, I think maybe now's a good time for you to fill out your pledge card. Here you go.

Vlad: [Examines card.] I need time to think about this.

Canvasser: Sure. I can hang out a few minutes. Let me know if you have any questions.

Vlad: I cannot decide tonight. I need to sleep on it. In my coffin. I mean, bed.

Canvasser: Well, okay. If you really can't make a commitment tonight, I guess I could come back, what, next week?

Vlad: If you must.

Canvasser: Okay. A week from today, 7 o'clock. I'll just take that card back now and we'll try again next week.

Vlad: I keep card.

Canvasser: Oh, well, I'm really not supposed to let anyone keep their pledge cards. I'll need to bring it away with me, but I promise to bring it back next week.

Vlad: No.

Canvasser: Yes.

Vlad: Nope.

Canvasser: Yes!

Vlad: What's the magic word?

Canvasser: [Losing patience.] Please?

[Vlad holds out card, then pulls it out of canvasser's reach. This goes on a few times.]

Canvasser: You know what? Forget it! Keep the card! [Gets up to leave in a huff.]

Vlad: You'll come back next week, right?

Canvasser: Will you fill out the card next week?

Vlad: Maaaybe...

Canvasser: Aaugh! [Leaves.]

Vlad: But wait! I have more feedback!

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Narrator: But never fear. Your actual canvass meeting is going to look a lot more like this:

[Canvasser knocks. Member opens door.]

Member: Roz!

Canvasser: Hi, Rick!

Member: Welcome! Come on in.

Canvasser: Thanks!

Member: I've just made some tea. Would you like some?

Canvasser: That sounds great, thanks. And thanks for making the time to meet, I know it's a busy time of year for you.

Member: Well, I know that you're busy too, and I appreciate that you're taking time to work on the canvass.

Canvasser: Oh, sure. It's fun, I enjoy it. By the way, how is your rotator cuff these days?

Member: Well...

Narrator: Five minutes later...

Member: ...and now I have to be careful not to bench press more than 400 pounds. But what about your shoulder?

Canvasser: Oh, it's so much better...

Narrator: Five minutes later...

Canvasser: ...with suction cups.

Member: Wow.

Canvasser: Well, I better not forget why I'm here, after all. So tell me, Rick, why is BUF important to you?

Member: Well, let me start with the music program...

Narrator: This goes on...

Member: ...and in the youth group we built our own lightsabers...

Narrator: ...and on...

Member: ...the service was so moving...

Narrator: ...for about ten minutes.

Member: ...and then she said to let her know if we ever needed any more help.

Canvasser: Wow, I am so happy to hear that. That is great positive feedback. Do you have any suggestions of things you wish were different?

Member: Well... [Thinks.] Well, to be honest...

Canvasser: Yes?

Member: Never mind, it's silly.

Canvasser: Don't say that, I want to know.

Member: Well, in that strip of yard at the back of the building, I think we should build a zip-line.

Canvasser: You're kidding! I've been saying that for years! I am so glad to hear that someone else feels the same way, and I am totally going to pass that along. [Looks at watch.] Oh my gosh, I didn't mean to keep you so long! Listen, I'll get out of your hair, and I'll see you on Sunday!

Member: Don't forget the pledge card...

Canvasser: Oh, silly me. Here it is.

[Members fills it out quickly.]

Member: Here you go!

Canvasser: Thank you! [Stashes card in folder without even glancing at it.] And thanks for the tea!

Member: You bet! See you Sunday!

Narrator: As you can see, there is nothing to fear about a canvass meeting. So when your canvasser gets in touch, please, respond promptly. Go easy on them. If at all possible, be prepared to fill out your form then and there. Remember, we're all in this together!

BLESSING of the CANVASSERS

Will the 2018 canvass leaders and canvassers please stand.

We want to thank you for your work, and for approaching it with integrity. It is a blessing to this congregation that you are willing to model your own gratitude for and dedication to our shared covenant by inviting newcomers and re-inviting so many others. May your joy be in the meeting and forging new connections, which is the heart of this fellowship.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SURPRISE: Carl Nyblade presented a check to Melanie Rieck, Keyboard Artist and Choir Assistant from a collection taken by the congregation — for \$5,670. We took this opportunity to acknowledge her over 30 years of service to BUF. Then the Phoenix Ensemble sang a song they wrote to the tune of *Matchmaker, Matchmaker* entitled, *Melanie, Melanie*.

SENDING SONG #404 *What Gift Can We Bring?*

BENEDICTION

Marianne Williamson writes: “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Let us be so fearless and so free. And as I extinguish the chalice, let's join hands, and circle 'round for freedom.

CIRCLE 'ROUND