“Liberating Ourselves from Fear of Failure*”*

Worship Service for

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Tippecanoe County

West Lafayette, Indiana

January 21, 2024 – 10:30 a.m.

The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Settled Minister

Pianist: Richard Maddux;

Worship Associate: Don Gresham

Producer: Noemi Ybarra; Sound Technician: Larry Guentert

**Gathering Music Bibo No Aozora, by Ryuichi Sakamoto [Richard]**

**Prelude River Waltz, by Alexandre Desplat [Richard]**

**Opening Words** **by William Arthur Ward [Rev. Jennie]**

“To laugh is to risk appearing a fool,

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out to another is to risk involvement,

To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self.

To place your ideas and dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return,

To live is to risk dying,

To hope is to risk despair,

To try is to risk failure.

But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing.

They may avoid suffering and sorrow,

But they cannot learn, feel, change, grow, or live.”

**Chalice Lighting Words** **by the Rev. Telos Whitfield** **[Don]**

“With the kindling of our flame, we recognize the fragility of life and our own vulnerability as we navigate challenges that always seem to come. May this light remind us of the strength we possess as individuals, and collectively as a community, to lean into and respond, finding our way forward together.”

**Our Covenant** [Don]

Love is the Spirit of this Church,

And Service is its Law. This is our Covenant:

To Dwell Together in Peace,

To Seek the Truth in Love,

And to Help One Another.

[Don]: Let us sing! Our opening hymn, in the teal hymnal, is #1008 When Our Heart is in a Holy Place (Please rise if you are able or comfortable doing so).]

**Opening Hymn #1008 When Our Heart is in a Holy Place**

**Time For All Ages “The Boy Who was Afraid to Try” (A Story from Uganda) [Rev. Jennie]**

Once upon a time, in a village in Africa, there was a potter and his wife who had a son named Kumba. And Kumba just had a hard time learning to do new things well. And he was small for his age. And when he played with the other boys of the village, he was not able to do as many things as they could. So he often lost in games, and the other boys teased him. So Kumba began to play be himself. The more he kept away from the other boys, the more he started to feel afraid of them, and lonesome. He wanted so badly to be Somebody, and yet he could not do the things that would make other people notice him. Finally, he became afraid even to try to do things, lest someone might make fun of his awkwardness. He would not even try to make bowls and vases out of clay as his father did. Kumba was afraid his father might laugh at these bowls and say they were poorly done. Kumba would not even try to learn to dig in the garden. So he spent most of his days wandering idly around in the fields and woods alone, dreaming and wishing all the time that he might some day be very wise and great, and yet he was afraid to learn how.

Sometimes, Kumba overheard other people talking, wondering if he was not very smart. But Kumba himself did not think that it was true that he was not very smart. One evening, in a gloomy mood, Kumba wandered off into the woods alone. The sun was hanging low in the sky. He came to a hillside with a clearing beyond, from which he could watch the glowing clouds of evening. He sat down and covered his face with his hands; he felt discouraged enough to cry. Presently, a Lion came quietly out of the woods. He saw Kumba and walked over toward him. “What are you doing here?” asked the Lion. “I am feeling miserable,” said Kumba. “I wish so much to be wise and great, but I don’t know whether I am really bright, or whether it is true that I am not very smart.” “Is that all you are thinking about?” asked the Lion. “Yes,” said Kumba. “I think about it day and night.” “Then you are not very smart,” said the Lion. “Wise people think about what they can do for their country.” The Lion turned around and ran back into the woods. Presently, an Antelope came leaping over the hillside. “What are you doing here?” asked the Antelope. “I am feeling miserable,” said Kumba. “I wish so much to be wise and great, but I do not know whether it is true that I am not very smart.” “What do you eat?” asked the Antelope. “My mother cooks me two meals a day,” said Kumba, “and I eat them.” “Do you ever thank your mother?” “No, I don’t remember.” “Well, you are not very smart. All wise people thank those who are kind to them,” said the Antelope, and off he leaped across the clearing. Soon a Leopard came by and looked at Kumba suspiciously. “What are you doing here?” he asked. “I am feeling miserable,” said Kumba. “I wish so much to be wise and great. But I don’t know whether it is true that I am not very smart.” “Do the other boys in the village like you?” asked the Leopard. “No, I don’t think that they do. And I don’t care. I don’t like them either. They are mean to me.” “Then you are not very smart. Don’t you know that all people are worth getting acquainted with, and that a wise person tries to do things with others?” The Leopard then darted off into the woods. Soon an Elephant came shuffling along the grass and looked down upon the boy. “What are you doing here?” asked the Elephant. “I’m miserable,” said Kumba. I wish so much to be wise and great, but I do not know if it is true that I am not very smart. “What work do you do?” asked the Elephant. “I don’t do any work,” said Kumba. “Well, then you are not very smart,” said the Elephant. “All wise people work.” And the Elephant turned around, made a disgusted twist of his tail, and ambled down the hillside. By this time, Kumba was ready to cry. Presently, he heard a gentle little voice at his side. “What are you doing here?” asked a little grey Rabbit. “Oh, I am feeling miserable. I wish so much to be wise, and all the animals have told me that I am not very smart.” For a moment, the rabbit did not speak. He just let the boy cry. Then the little grey Rabbit scampered up very close to Kumba, and whispered: “Which animals said you were not very smart?” “Well,” said Kumba, “the Lion said I was not very smart because I spend all my time thinking about myself. The Antelope said I was not very smart because I have not been thanking my mother for the food she cooks for me. The Leopard said I was not very smart because I don’t play with the other children. The Elephant said I was not very smart because I don’t do any work.” The little grey Rabbit nodded her head. “No wonder you feel like crying, for the animals have told you the truth. Wise people do not think about themselves all the time. Wise people do say thank you when others do them favors. A Wise boy does play with the other children. And wise people do work.” No words passed between Kumba and the little grey Rabbit for a long time. Little by little, the darkness fell all around like a black mist. The little grey Rabbit invited Kumba to spend the night in the woods. He could lie down near the Rabbit’s hole and be safe. So Kumba and the little grey Rabbit walked away together. While Kumba lay on the grass in the dark he began to think more courageously about himself until finally he fell asleep. By the time morning came, Kumba decided that he had been not very smart, but he was not going to act like a fool any longer. Early in the morning, he walked back to his home. When he first saw his mother, he greeted her with a smile and a bright, “Good morning!” When she later started out to dig yams in the field, Kumba found another hoe so that he could help. When the children of the village began chasing one another, Kumba ran with them and didn’t give up when he fell behind. In the afternoon, Kumba even sat down beside his father as he molded clay into bowls and asked if he might try his hand at the work. He knew his first bowl would be poorly made, but Kumba was no longer afraid to try to learn. As the days passed, and Kumba felt less and less afraid, he began to ask questions. He asked his father how he made the dyes he used for painting his bowls. Kumba went to the fields with his father to gather the leaves and flowers which they later boiled to make the paints. So the days and the weeks and the years went by. Kumba grew to be a man. By the time his father was an old man, Kumba had become the famous potter of the village. People used to come from miles around to buy his bowls. They really were beautiful, too, and different from other bowls. Most of them were black with red or white designs painted on them. And what meant more to Kumba even than the praise given him for his beautiful pottery was that his neighbors liked him. They no longer thought that he was not very smart. His people called him wise and great.

**Singing the Children Out “Go Now in Peace,” by Natalie Sleeth**

*Go now in peace, Go now in peace.*

*May the love of God surround you*

*Everywhere, everywhere you may go.*

**Offering [Don]:** The “Reach In, Reach Out” recipient for January and February is: The LUM Westside Food Pantry, located right here at our church. The LUM Food Pantries feature proteins, produce, and paper products. Local families in need are able to select canned and frozen meats and fish, fresh fruits and vegetables, beans and legumes, peanut butter, paper products, and more. In grateful appreciation of our shared hopes and dreams, the morning offering will now be given and received.

**Offertory A Catalogue of Afternoons, by Max Richter** [Richard]

**Spoken Prayer and Moment of Silence by Thich Nhat Hanh [Rev. Jennie]**

“Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds.  
Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves.  
Let us be aware of the source of being,  
common to us all and to all living things.  
Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion,  
let us fill our hearts with our own compassion—  
towards ourselves and towards all living beings.  
Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be  
the cause of suffering to each other.  
With humility, with awareness of the existence of life,  
and of the sufferings that are going on around us,  
let us practice the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth.”

**First Reading the words of Father Theodore Hesburgh, from *The Sunflower – On Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness,* Edited by Simon Wiesenthal [Don]**

Who am I to advise a person of another religion, who has suffered incredibly more than I have? I would not ordinarily presume to do so, but I was requested to do so, so I do.

My whole instinct is to forgive. Perhaps that is because I am a Catholic priest. In a sense, I am in the forgiving business. I sit in a confessional for hours and forgive everyone who comes in, and confesses, and is sorry.

I think of God as the great forgiver of sinful humanity. The greatest story of Jesus is the Prodigal Son. Can we aspire to be as forgiving of each other as God is of us?

…If asked to forgive, by anyone for anything, I would forgive because God would forgive. If I had suffered as so many had, it might be much more difficult, but I hope I would still be forgiving, not from my own small position, but as a surrogate for our almighty and all-forgiving God.

**Second Reading “The Kindness of Lo Mein,” by Kaaren Anderson [Rev. Jennie]**

My friend Marcy and her boyfriend Brian recently ate dinner at a local Chinese restaurant. As they enjoyed a plate of lo mein, engrossed in conversation, a hand reached down and ushered away their platter of noodles. A voice quick and agitated mumbled "Sorry!" and a thin, poorly dressed woman left the restaurant with their plate of lo mein.

In astonishment, they watched her walk down the street, holding the plate with the flat of her hand as she stuffed noodles into her mouth, slapping sharply against her face. The owner realized what had happened and darted out the front door, chasing after the noodle thief. He stood firmly in front of her, blocking her way and grabbing a side of the plate. A struggle ensued, noodles slid uneasily from one side to the other, slopping over the edge. He surged forward and pulled with a heroic strong-arm attempt to retrieve his plate. The woman's fingers slid from the plate. Noodles flew, then flopped pathetically on the sidewalk.

Left empty-handed, with soggy, contaminated noodles at her feet, the woman stood with arms hung dejectedly at her side. The owner walked victoriously back to the restaurant with the soiled plate in hand. My friends were given a new heaping plate of lo mein, although they had already consumed half of the stolen plate. A stream of apology in Chinese came from the proprietor. Unable to eat anymore, they asked to have the noodles wrapped up and set off to see their movie.

A block later, they happened upon the lo mein thief. The woman was hyper charged. She simultaneously cried, convulsed, and shouted at a man, who rapidly retreated from her side. My friend, unsure about what to do, listened to her boyfriend's plea to just walk away. But she didn't. Instead, she walked over to the thief and said, "Ah, we haven't formally met, but about ten minutes ago, you were interested in our noodles. They gave us some new ones, are you still hungry?" The woman nodded and extended her bony arms. She took the Styrofoam container in her hands, bowed ever so slightly, and murmured, "Thank you, you're very kind."

What makes us walk away from discomfort? Or stay? You could say a lot about my friend's story—a lot about generosity, kindness, attention, and thievery. I'm more interested in what motivates us to confront that which makes us uncomfortable and makes us look at the guts and grit of decisions, the choices to not address things that are uncomfortable, uneasy, unbalanced, unnatural, unbelievable. When our foundations start to shake, we can feel the tremors move up our legs and into our torsos. And we want more than anything to make it stop. Any how. Any way.

My friend Marcy could feel herself shake. I know because she told me so. But she chose not to walk away, she dealt with uncomfortableness. She held firm in the muck. Sometimes, that's all we need or can do to get to the other side—the side where generosity, comfort, and kindness reside, the side where foundations are firm and stable. Where one's shaking walks back to the other side.

**Special Music “Solace,” by Scott Joplin [Richard]**

**Sermon “Liberating Ourselves from Fear of Failure” [Rev. Jennie]**

A recent Hallmark holiday movie that I loved was about, not Christmas, but Hanukkah. It’s called, “Round and Round.” In it, Rachel, a millennial age woman, is caught in a time loop, similar to in the movie, “Groundhog Day.” Every morning when she wakes up it is still December 13th, the morning of the seventh day of Hanukkah. Her new friend, Zach, is visiting her parents’ house. They are moving old boxes of her yearbooks and other memorabilia. Zach finds a typed manuscript called, “The Elixir Quest.” Rachel says it is a draft of her Young Adult novel. It’s about a band of misfits on a quest to find the elixir of youth. She does not want Zach to read it. She says it is a work in progress. Zach calls his friend, Adam, at a store called, “Hero Worship Comics,” for expert advice on how Rachel might be able to get out of her time loop. Their friend, Andy, is there, and he suggests that a person who is stuck in a time loop has some personal development that they need to do. Rather than being offended, Rachel asks him to say more. Andy asks, “Is there something else you would rather by doing in your life? Something you perhaps lack the courage to pursue?” Rachel tells him about her draft novel, saying that it has always been a dream of hers to get it published. “What’s stopping you, then?” Andy asks. Rachel replies, “Oh, you know, the usual: fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of feedback.” [And when I heard that, I thought: How much, that we would like to do, in and for our church, are we not doing because of fear of rejection, fear of failure, or fear of feedback?] Andy then says, “Well, it’s crystal clear. You just need to learn to take feedback. And who better than the three of us?”

So they put on a mix tape of 80s alternative rock music. [Remember mix tapes?] They pour snacks into bowls, including Cheese-its and Cheetos, and they start passing around the pages of Rachel’s manuscript. It’s my favorite scene in the movie. They are intrigued, respectful, and bouncing ideas off each other. Andy holds up a sheet of paper on which he has written, “More Dragons!” There are post-it notes on a bulletin board that, taken together, make a storyboard. The post-its say things like:

-The Ordinary World;

-Enter the Antagonist;

the Inciting Incident;

-the Call to Adventure;

-Refusal of the Call;

-Enter Wise Elder / Mentor;

-the Unmovable Object;

-the Point of No Return;

-What Sparks Hope? and

-the Leap of Faith.

And red yarn connects some of the characters to others.

When they have completed the storyboard, they feel jubilant. They each read the edited version. Rachel asks Adam, “What do you think?” He replies, “Dry, cheesy, somewhat stale.” But Rachel knows he is teasing her. He is talking about the cheese-its he is eating. Their honest reaction is: one character could be a bit more nuanced, and it could use a bit of pacing in Act One. But other than that, It’s great! A solid read, and inspiring. They love it.

Anxiety about failure can lead to any of us feeling like we are personally stuck in a loop of doing the same things over and over again, unable to move forward with our lives. And anxiety about failure is also bigger and broader than that. At this time when the start of the pandemic was just short of four years ago, we have experienced many things that have failed or fallen apart: businesses, non-profits, agencies, groups that provide child care, therapy, or other support groups, restaurants. Witnessing that can be sad and discouraging. Yet new things can be birthed if we do not shy away from looking at what went wrong and why, and how new things can be achieved in better ways.

An author who has been very helpful to me for years in processing emotions around things that have failed is contemporary Buddhist teacher, Ms. Pema Chodron. One of her best-known books is called, *When Things Fall Apart – Heartfelt Advice for Hard Times.* The life event that caused Ms. Chodron to really immerse herself in Buddhist teachings and practices was that her husband told her he had been having an affair, and he wanted a divorce. But in writing about times “when things fall apart,” Ms. Chodron is really writing about feelings of fear, anxiety, and stress. Such fundamentally unsettling emotions are part of every human being’s life, sometimes every day, for long periods of time. Buddhist teachings can be very helpful in such times. But such teachings are not easy to grasp, accept, and practice. Many of you know that central to Buddhism are the truths that “all life is suffering” and that everything is actually impermanent. Ms. Chodron acknowledges that human being’s inclination is to sidestep and avoid fear, anxiety, and stress. Yet her application of those Buddhist teachings is to advise us to be as present as we possibly can be to our fear, anxiety, and stress. Those things are not going to go away by our avoiding them, are they? She writes that paying attention to that which is immediately right around us and within us will, over time, strengthen us for whatever life throws at us, and will bring us closer to enlightenment. This is an excerpt from Ms. Chodron’s book, *The Wisdom of No Escape*:

“If you want to attain enlightenment, you have to do it now… the more you open your heart, the more you make friends with your body, speech, mind, and the world that’s inside of your circle --your domestic situation, the people you live with, the house you find yourself eating breakfast in every day-- the more you appreciate the fact that when you turn on the tap, water comes out. If you have ever lived without water, you really appreciate that. There are all kinds of miracles. Everything is like that, absolutely wonderful… Our life’s work is to use what we have been given to wake up. If there were two people who were exactly the same --same body, same speech, same mind, same mother, same father, same house, same food, everything the same-- one of them could use what he has to wake up and the other could use it to become more resentful, bitter, and sour. It doesn’t matter what you’re given, whether it’s ugliness, mental stability or mental instability, life in the middle of a madhouse or life in the middle of a peaceful, silent desert. Whatever you’re given can wake you up or put you to sleep. That’s the challenge of now: What are you going to do with what you have already-- your body, your speech, your mind?”

I know that, in these anxious times, many of you have felt shaken up by the ways our lives feel so unsettled and disrupted. Ms. Chodron would advise you not to sidestep the fact that you are feeling that way. It’s simply how you are feeling: sad, frustrated, and shaken up, all mixed up with many other emotions, too. Ms. Chodron would say that all of those feelings are understandable and valid and an opportunity to grow, spiritually, if we allow ourselves to be present to them. In her book, *When Things Fall Apart,* she writes:

“Reaching our limit is not some kind of punishment. It’s actually a sign of health that when we meet the place where we [feel like we] are about to die, we feel fear and trembling. A further sign of health is that we don’t become undone by fear and trembling, but we take it as a message that it’s time to stop struggling and look directly at what’s threatening us. Things like disappointment and anxiety are messengers telling us that we’re about to go into unknown territory. Our bedroom closet can be unknown territory for some of us. For others it’s going into outer space. What evokes hope and fear for me is different from what brings it up for you. [She says] My aunt reaches her limit when I move a lamp in her living room. My friend completely loses it when she has to move to a new apartment. My neighbor is afraid of heights. It doesn’t really matter what causes us to reach our limit. The point is that sooner or later, it happens to all of us.” [pp. 16 – 17]

I hope that those words from such a wise and spiritually evolved religious teacher help you feel validated and empathized with, in your many emotional reactions to the unprecedented times we are living through.

Personally, I have my own fears and anxieties around failure. I feel that I have to be, not just on time, but early, and very well-prepared in advance. And I have felt very intimidated by the idea of teaching a class; academia used to really intimidate me; I could not envision myself as a college professor. Several years ago, shortly after I began serving a UU congregation in Virginia, A college professor at a local Community College called me, asking if I would teach a class session for a course he was teaching on different religions of the world. He wanted me to teach the class about Unitarian Universalism. His name is Rick Mitchell, and I remember him fondly to this day. He is very strong in his Christian faith. But rather than primarily preaching doctrine to others, he lives his faith. He is the head of an organization that provides relief to people all over the world who are living in poverty, in the aftermath of war, and through famines and droughts. I so admire and appreciate what his organization does.

He really wanted me to tell his class about Unitarian Universalism. So even though I felt intimidated, I agreed. Well, I am terrible about navigating to somewhere I’ve never been before, and though I had MapQuest directions, I had underestimated the driving time, and I realized on my way that I was going to be significantly late. I was so upset. I was really mad at myself. I called him as I was driving [that would have been from my old Go-Phone] and apologized and said I wasn’t going to be able to do what he had asked me to do. He was so kind and supportive and encouraging. He said, “Just come—We will start whenever you get here. I will meet you at the door. I know you will do a very good job. You will be fine.” When I arrive, I still felt so upset. I said I wouldn’t be able to do the whole presentation from the beginning. He said, “Then just start in the middle! I know that you can do this.” So I did the presentation, and I answered the students’ questions. They asked excellent questions! I did not feel happy nor proud of how I had done, but I had gotten through it.

A few months later, believe it or not, Rick Mitchell called me again. He was teaching another class, as it was a new semester, and he wanted me to come back and do a similar presentation, with a slightly different focus. “But, Rick, I really messed up! You don’t really want me to do this again, do you?” “I do [he said]. You did a fine job. The students were engaged, and you helped them learn about religious beliefs that are different than what they grew up with.” So I went back to the Community College. This time I arrived so early, and so well-prepared. Though teaching a class is never going to be what I am most comfortable with, I will always feel some anxiety about it, I felt much better about how the second time went. I drove home feeling proud that I had done something that had scared me so much. Whenever I think of Rick Mitchell, I still feel a sense of awe. If I am to be honest, I really messed up on my first try. But he gave me a second chance. And that has made all the difference.

The African story that was our Time For All Ages today, charmingly, tells us what we need to do to overcome our fear of failure. As the Lion said: Don’t just think about ourselves all the time; think of what we can do for others in our community. As the Antelope said: Express gratitude for all the ways others are making our lives easier. As the Leopard said: become acquainted with others, collaborate with them and play with them. And as the Elephant said: find some task to apply ourselves to, and make ourselves useful. And as the little gray Rabbit did, when we encounter someone who is feeling miserable, simply be with them, in a non-judgmental and supportive way. Following that guidance, Kumba grew and matured in his personal and spiritual development. We all can do that, too. And we can companion others in doing the same.

**Closing Hymn** #1021 Lean On Me

**Chalice Extinguishing by Tim Atkins [Don]**

**“**May we all take the time to fully immerse in our creative potential, no matter the medium. May we all be reminded that the process matters, not just the final outcome.”

**Postlude Muir Woods, by Michael R. Hicks** [Richard]

**Benediction by Wendell Berry [Rev. Jennie]**

“It may be that when we no longer know what to do,

we have come to our real work,

and that when we no longer know which way to go,

we have come to our real journey.

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.”